How Current Rural Superintendents Believe Aspiring Superintendents Can Best Prepare for the Position

Jeremy Alan Burmeister

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HOW CURRENT RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS BELIEVE ASPIRING SUPERINTENDENTS CAN BEST PREPARE FOR THE POSITION

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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This Dissertation by Jeremy Burmeister

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Has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development Higher Education and P-12 Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

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ABSTRACT

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The demands and challenges placed upon individuals starting a new career as a school superintendent can be daunting. As the chief education officer (CEO) of the school district, the superintendent faces a tremendous number of dynamic issues and complex problems (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). At a time of increasing complexity with the role of the superintendency, approximately 49% of the individuals in the position that participated in an AASA survey in 2010 stated they planned to retire by 2015 and an additional 33% responded in an AASA survey taken in 2014 that they planned to retire by 2020, suggesting the probability of increased turnover for individuals currently employed as a school superintendent (Finnan, McCord, Stream, Mattocks, Petersen, & Ellerson, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011).

Approximately 80% of surveyed superintendents rated their academic preparation as “good” or “excellent” (Kowalski et al., 2011). However, that has not stopped politicians, business leaders, and media from writing scathing reports on the quality of university-based preparation programs for superintendents (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2002, 2007; Orr, 2006). Not surprisingly, administrators attribute their sources of leadership models to preparation programs for school leaders (Bjork & Lindle, 2001, p.87). While there are discrepancies
in the research about the quality of the superintendent preparation programs, Kowalski (2008) identified the potential need for additional research to understand the extent practitioners and professors agree that the existing knowledge base on the superintendency is valid.

Through a qualitative research design data were collected to identify what current rural superintendents believe that those aspiring to the position must do to prepare for the position. The researcher in this phenomenological study interviewed six practicing rural superintendents that were employed in at least their fifth year in a rural or small rural school district in Colorado. Four themes were identified and included past experiences and aspects of the rural superintendency. The significance of the research highlights the common lived experiences of the six participating rural superintendents and what they believe aspiring rural superintendents can do to best prepare for the position.

The findings provide in-depth qualitative responses that may provide guidance to individuals interested in entering the rural superintendency. Specifically, the author revealed through the data the importance for aspiring rural superintendents to find the right fit in both the position they are seeking and the individuals they seek to hire. Additionally, the importance of understanding school finance, human resources, communication, and working with the board are identified. Implications for the research include suggestions for aspiring rural superintendents and a recommendation for policy makers to adopt the AASA standards for superintendent educational programs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, a special thank you to all of my committee for your guidance in working with me through the dissertation process. I could not have completed this work without their time, effort, and dedication. I believe a special thank you is needed for Dr. Cohen and Dr. Vogel--your feedback, questioning, and leadership have helped me to reflect and self-critique my research. Additionally, thank you Dr. Vogel for taking me on to your caseload and guiding me through the doctoral process when my prior advisor retired.

Thank you to the individuals that have guided me and have had a positive influence on my professional life. Mr. Ring and Dr. McClain for taking a chance on me and your mentorship and patience. Randy Zila for taking the time to work with me and your wisdom. Randy Ward, Randy Yaussi, and Coach Altergott for your support and showing me how to be a better person and educator. Finally, thank you to the participants for taking the time to share your insight and expertise in contributing to this study as it would not have happened without you.

My doctoral program has been a long journey over the past four years. Through this process, I have heard the advice to make sure you do not move or take on a new job while working on your doctorate, as those are sure fire ways to ensure not finishing. I have started two new jobs and moved twice since starting mine. This journey has required some perseverance, for which I can thank my parents for showing and giving me. They have fought through a lot in their lives in their own respective way. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my wife Lyndsey and son Owen. You have supported
me through this crazy time in our lives through many late nights and weekends away when I attended class and focused on finishing my dissertation. Thank you. I am coming home.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Leadership matters (Collins, 2005; Dungy, 2010; Henwood, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Welch, 2005). This statement has been a commonly held belief in a wide array of fields ranging from politics, military, business, sports, and education. Books on leadership have been written in the form of trade books by individuals sharing lessons learned (Burke, 2014). Jack Welch’s (2005) Winning from the business sector, Tony Dungy’s (2010) The Mentor Leader from professional sports, and The Superintendent’s Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005) in education are all examples of trade books on leadership that use the experiences of others to inform people about the concept of leadership. Specifically in education, researchers have begun to study the role leadership at the building and district levels has in academic student success (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, current research about the role leadership plays specifically at the district level has been limited (Thomas, 2001, p. 6).

In public education, the superintendent is commonly viewed as the chief education officer (CEO) of the school district, the individual leading the entire district (Callahan, 1966; Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005; Thomas, 2001; Sternke, 2011). The role of the superintendency has evolved over the years. It is a position at the forefront of education dating back to 1837 when the city of Buffalo, New York appointed what is
believed to be the first superintendent (Callahan, 1966). The superintendent’s role has evolved from an individual originally viewed as a teacher-scholar to an individual judged on his or her communicative behavior and ability (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). The transition to the role of superintendent as communicator means the chief education officer is now responsible for initiating and leading school improvement through collaboration with all stakeholders.

As the chief education officer (CEO) of the school district, the superintendent faces a tremendous number of dynamic issues and complex problems (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011). The superintendent’s job varies based on school district size, the district’s culture, the size of the school board, the board’s expectations, and governance and policy style of the school board (DiPaola, 2010). While these variations exist, there are commonalities to the superintendent’s position. These commonalities are best identified through the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) superintendent standards which reflect a broad range of competencies and technical skills needed by superintendents (Hoyle, 1993). The standards and key descriptors may be viewed below in Table 1:
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The AASA standards were written in the early 1990s when questions were being raised about how best to prepare aspiring superintendents (Hoyle, 1993).

Corporate leaders, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), and practicing superintendents were criticizing traditional universities and state certification programs for a perceived lack of focus on superintendent
roles, knowledge, and necessary skill base (Hoyle). Stakeholder input was obtained by governors, business executives, national and state level education agency officials, practicing superintendents, professors, principals, and classroom teachers (Hoyle). The AASA standards provide context for aspiring superintendents to obtain an understanding of the job expectations. Additionally, the standards provide state departments of education, certification agencies, accrediting organizations, professional associations, and preparation programs a framework to design superintendent expectations, course work, and curriculum around (Hoyle).

“The complexity of the role of school superintendent has undergone significant changes over the past century” (Bredeson & Kose, 2007, p. 2). Most recently, the work of superintendents has increasingly been defined by their responses to political pressures and conflicting interests, unpredictable and inadequate state funding, standards-based reform, and greater demands for accountability of increased student performance through state and federal legislation (Bredeson & Kose). Superintendents have been challenged to take on larger responsibilities without substantial redefinition of superintendents’ preparation, training, or authority or recognition of the changes in the broader social, cultural, and political context in which schools and districts operate. Even though both professional educators and citizens view politics in public education negatively, the historical foundation of public education in the United States ensures a political implication in nearly every activity that takes place within schools (Bjork & Lindle, 2001). Schooling’s purpose is contested at local, state,
and national levels among many different segments. Rights between individuals and the collective are routinely contested. At the center of public education is the school board which is the political arena provided to hear these contests at the local level (Bjork & Lindle,). As the United States has become more diverse, the makeup and expectations for schooling have increased in complexity. Paralleling the increased diversity are the demands for accountability and school achievement, making the superintendent’s job increasingly complex, more political, and even more demanding in nature.

At a time of increasing complexity within the role of the superintendency, approximately 49% of the individuals in the position that were surveyed by AASA in 2010 stated they planned to retire by 2015 and an additional 33% that were surveyed by AASA in 2014 planned to retire by 2020, suggesting the probability of increased turnover (Finnan et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011). Research conducted by Grissom and Andersen (2012) found superintendent turnover rates in California urban, suburban, and rural districts of 43% over a three-year period. With an increasingly complex and politically demanding position and data reflecting the potential for a high turnover and retirement rate of current superintendents, there is a need for aspiring superintendents to be prepared to assume the position of the superintendent.

**Importance of the School Superintendent**

Leadership in schools is widely regarded as a key factor to improving student learning. (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006).
The importance of the role of the school superintendent goes back decades, as referenced by Callahan (1966) stating:

I think that anyone who is familiar with the American public schools will agree that at the present time the superintendent of schools is the most crucial person in any school system. This is so because he, more than any other single individual, is in a position to influence the quality of education that each child receives. He either appoints and promotes teachers directly or he chooses the person who does (p.1).

In addition to the superintendent being in the position to influence the quality of education a child receives, the chief education officer of a school district is also the top individual responsible for a multi-million-dollar entity with often hundreds or thousands of employees (Bridges, 1982).

While the traditional effectiveness of the superintendent revolved around the notion of managing the fiscal condition of the school district and personnel, the accountability era of the early 2000’s brought about a focus on student achievement (Callahan, 1966; DiPaola, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). A 2006 meta-analysis conducted by Mid-Continent Research for Education (McRel) reported “the long-held, but previously undocumented, belief that sound leadership at the district level adds value to an education system” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 8). Specifically, the correlation between district leadership and student achievement was .24 with a 95% confidence interval (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The contribution of effective leadership is likely largest when it is needed most; there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Impact of Turnover**

Superintendent turnover has a negative impact on school programing, student achievement, school reform initiatives, staff morale, and district culture (Fullan 2000, p.
Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 4) were able to quantify the impact of superintendent turnover. The researchers found a weighted average correlation between superintendent tenure and student achievement of .19 at the .05 significance level. Superintendent turnover can be perceived to be a continuous cycle with detrimental consequences for all stakeholders.

Grissom and Andersen (2012) highlighted this predicament best:

The story of school superintendent turnover is a well-known one: Energetic new leader assumes position with plans for revitalization, only to clash with a dysfunctional school board or impatient community and move on to greener pastures before the plans can be fully carried out, leaving the district once again searching for the next great leader bearing the requisite comprehensive reform plans (p. 1146).

The above statement illustrates a reason why building level administration, instructional staff, school board members, and community stakeholders may eventually come to a “this too shall pass” attitude, leading to organizational stakeholders either not willing to implement change or not doing so with fidelity.

Research has shown successful execution of central office operations such as recruiting quality staff, fiscal management, instructional leadership, and strategic planning may indirectly impact student achievement (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1147; Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 13). A disruption to these operations, such as through the turnover of the superintendent, has shown to possibly have a negative impact at minimum in the short-term and upwards of five years (Fullan, 2000). Beyond the disruption that may take place in the district office, superintendent turnover may also have a “trickle down” effect that negatively impacts building level administration and instructional staff (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1148). The superintendent of schools can have an impact on the entire educational organization and, when constant turnover
occurs, can have a detrimental impact on the direction of the learning organization.

Superintendent turnover can negatively impact a school district’s operations and community at large (Henwood, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). With approximately 49% of superintendents having planned to step away from the position in 2015 and an additional 33% by the year 2020, the probability of increased turnover is likely (Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015).

Beyond retirements, research has also noted the turnover rate for superintendents across the country (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass, Bjork, Brunner, 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Tekniepe, 2015; Thomas, 2001). The 2000 AASA survey sampled 2,262 superintendents; average tenure of superintendents was estimated to be between five and six years, slightly lower than the previous survey in 1992 (Glass et al., 2000). This data differs slightly from research conducted by Grissom and Andersen (2012) who noted that 43% of superintendents had turned over within a three-year period. One of the reasons for increased turnover may be due to the onset of the accountability era which put a heightened focus on assessing the performance of all public K-12 educators, including the superintendent of schools (DiPaola, 2010). Given the turnover rate that currently takes place in the superintendency and the anticipated retirements expected to take place across the country, it is important to prepare aspiring future superintendents.

Aspiring to the Superintendency

Aspiring superintendents have two sets of standards to be aware of when working toward the superintendency. The roles of superintendents as defined by the AASA superintendent standards serve as the standards for superintendents as specified by the group’s national organization (Hoyle, 1993). The Council for the Accreditation for
Educational Preparation (CAEP) accredits 49% of the superintendent preparation programs across the country (CAEP, 2017). In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) developed new standards to guide superintendent preparation programs across the country that are accredited by the CAEP (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, pp. 7). The following table provides a side-by-side view of the different groups’ set of standards:

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Superintendent Standards: AASA & NPBEA*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AASA Standard</th>
<th>NPBEA Standards</th>
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<td>Standard 1: <em>Leadership and District Culture</em></td>
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The AASA and NPBEA standards provided above offer a framework for preparing aspiring educational leaders. The NPBEA standards were written in an effort to “ensure educational leaders are ready to meet effectively the challenges and opportunities of the job today and in the future as education, schools and society continue to transform” and were updated to reflect a global economy and 21st century workplace (NPBEA, 2015, p. 1). These standards provide a framework for educational leadership in 45 states and the District of Columbia (NPBEA). An analysis of the AASA and NPBEA standards side-by-side shows some overlap between the two organizations’ standards. However, a closer look reveals a potential difference in focus between a district-level focus and school-level focus respectively. According to the NPBEA, the standards are geared more toward school-level leadership than district-level leadership (2015, p. 2). With this in mind, does the implementation of these standards by CAEP accredited universities across the country provide the wrong framework to follow for preparing aspiring district level leadership? This could be a reason for superintendent programs being treated more like principal preparation programs which has been noted as an issue by Glass et al. (2000) and Kowalski (2008).

**The Role of the Rural School Superintendent**

As noted by DiPaoloa (2010), the superintendent’s job varies based on school district size, the district’s culture, the size of the school board, the board’s expectations, and governance and policy style of the school board. While rural superintendents have the same responsibility as their larger school district peers to shape district culture and lead school reform, rural superintendents are also more likely to be more responsible for the daily operations of the district (Jones & Howley, 2009). For example, superintendents
in large districts may have assistant superintendents, a human resources department, risk management, and numerous other specialized departments. Superintendents working in a rural school district are more likely to be involved in the daily activities in some or all of these operations.

While rural superintendents are more likely to be engaged in the daily operations of the district, they are also still ultimately responsible for student achievement. However, rural students achieve below the U.S. average on national tests, dropout rates are higher in rural areas, percentages of low socio-economic students tend to be higher than in larger urban areas, and recruiting and retaining high quality staff is difficult (NASBE, 2014, p. 1). The impact of leadership on student achievement at the district level has been noted (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Looking specifically at rural school superintendents, Wilson (2010) wrote a dissertation in Missouri and noted the importance of leadership in the school superintendency. Four general findings were identified in the qualitative study and categorized as: (a) importance of communication; (b) necessity to demonstrate ethics and moral leadership; (c) need to be effective managers of administrative tasks; and (d) an ability to be able to reflect (Wilson, 2010). In a dissertation focused specifically on rural superintendents in Colorado, Henwood (2016) also identified the importance of communication in connection to being a successful superintendent. While identification of general leadership practices related to communication are noted, the studies do not note what practicing rural superintendents believe aspiring rural superintendents can do to best prepare for the position. The need for increased research on the rural superintendency was identified as an area of emphasis in research conducted by Garn (2003) and
Henwood (2016). With approximately 80% of school districts in Colorado designated as rural or small rural by the Colorado Department of Education (2016b), it will be important to have individuals prepared to take on the specialized nuances of the rural superintendent.

**Significance of the Problem**

John Hefty, former executive director of the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), believes the position and importance of the school superintendent will continue to evolve due to the volatile political and cultural environment school district leaders are currently in (personal communication, Hefty, 9/1/2015). In the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) 2010 Decennial Study on the American School Superintendent, Kowalski et al. (2011) also noted the superintendent faces a tremendous number of dynamic issues and complex problems. While all superintendents have specific commonalities that exist within the position as identified by the AASA superintendent standards, the work of superintendents has increasingly been defined by their responses to political pressures and conflicting interests, unpredictable and inadequate state funding, standards-based reform, and greater demands for accountability of increased student performance through state and federal legislation (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Finally, looking specifically at the rural superintendent, commonalities exist with their larger school district peers in the responsibility to shape district culture and lead school reform. However, rural superintendents are also more likely to be more responsible for the daily operations of the of the district (Jones & Howley, 2009).
Approximately 80% of surveyed superintendents rated their academic preparation as “good” or “excellent” in the 2010 AASA study (Kowalski et al., 2011). However, that has not stopped politicians, business leaders, and media from writing scathing reports on the quality of university-based preparation programs for superintendents (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2007). Administrators attribute their sources of leadership models to preparation programs for school leaders (Bjork & Lindle, 2001). Although superintendents may rate their academic preparation in a positive manner, individuals should be cognizant of the concept of positive response bias which occurs when survey respondents are asked about views about desirable or popular alternatives and respondents rate all alternatives equally or favorably (Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012, p. 150). Related to the 2010 AASA study, superintendents were asked to rate their overall evaluation of their academic preparation for the superintendency using a Likert scale with four response options: (a) excellent, (b) good, (c) fair, and (d) poor (Kowalski et al., 2011). While positive response bias was not indicated to having taken place in this study, it is a noteworthy concept to bear in mind.

What are the potential issues that currently exist with university preparation programs for superintendents? Some critics argued that such programs were grounded in and emphasize too much theory while holding minimal relevance in the real world (Hoyle, 2007, p. 148). Murphy (2006, p. 489) wrote that “schools of education are held in low regard in many circles” and are perceived to be part of the problem with public education instead of the solution. Levine (2005, p. 23) believed the overall quality of administration education programs were inadequate. This assertion was made based upon a nine-point criteria which included a program’s purpose, curriculum coherence and
balance, composition of faculty, admissions criteria, criteria in awarding degrees, conducted research, financial support, and self-assessment. While there is debate about the quality of university-based school administration programs, the accountability era in public education requires better prepared leaders in our public schools (Murphy, 2006). Additionally, with 33% of superintendents across the country indicating they plan to retire by the year 2020, it is important to have aspiring superintendents prepared to take on this important leadership position (Finnan et al., 2015). In conjunction with the concerns regarding turnover, retirement, and preparation, there are also concerns specific to the rural superintendent. The complexity and intricacies of the rural superintendent are noteworthy (Henwood, 2016). As identified by Garn (2003), there is a need for increased research specific to the rural superintendent. Henwood (2016) noted the need to have ongoing research to identify the critical roles necessary for effective rural Colorado superintendents.

**Purpose of the Study**

It appears as though universities accredited by CAEP are following guidelines to prepare school level leadership in-lieu of district level leadership. Furthermore, it may be assumed that universities following NPBEA guidelines, regardless of CAEP accreditation, are also using standards dedicated more towards school level leadership in-lieu of standards geared towards district level leadership. Accordingly, one of the goals of this study was to better understand how practicing rural superintendents have been successful navigating through the many demands of the rural superintendency. This research was undertaken in order to provide data that may be useful for preparation programs and aspiring future rural superintendents.
Kowalski (2008, p. 255) noted a potential need for additional research in order to understand the extent practitioners and professors agree that the existing knowledge base on superintendents is valid. Garn (2003) identified a need to specifically look at increased research around the rural school superintendent. Henwood (2016) identified a need to have ongoing research to identify the critical roles necessary for effective rural Colorado superintendents. The research provided valuable information to beginning to address that need. For the purpose of this research, a successful superintendent was defined as an individual that is serving as superintendent of schools in his or her current school district in their fifth year and works in a school district with a rating of accredited or higher based on the 2014 CDE District Performance Framework (CDE, 2017b).

**Research Question**

The central question of this phenomenological study was: What do current rural superintendents believe that those aspiring to the position must do to prepare?

**Study Overview**

This study took place, when possible, in the respective participants’ workplaces. Conducting face-to-face interviews in the natural setting is conducive for qualitative research because it allows the researcher to see the participants in their actual context (Briggs et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One follow-up interview took place in my office because the participant was coming through my community on his way to a meeting, and we agreed it would be more convenient for both of us to conduct the second interview at that time. I interviewed six rural superintendents that currently practice in a small rural or rural setting as designated by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2016b). Full Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval
was obtained (see appendix A). Participants were asked to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The data was compiled and analyzed using open and axial coding in order to identify themes. The schools, districts, and respective rural superintendents were assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality as much as possible.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following terms are defined in the context of this study:

*Successful Superintendent.* For the purposes of this study, this term will mean a practicing superintendent is serving as superintendent at least in their fifth year in the district in which the individual is currently employed and is working in a school district designated as accredited or higher based on the 2014 Colorado Department of Education District Performance Framework.

*Rural.* According to the Colorado Department of Education, rural school districts are designated based on the size of the district, the distance from the nearest large urban/urbanized area, and having a student enrollment range of approximately 1,000-6,500 students.

*Small rural.* Small rural districts, as defined by the Colorado Department of Education, are those districts meeting the same criteria as the Rural category and having a student population of less than 1,000 students.

*Prepared.* Preparation for the superintendency may mean a multitude of things based upon the state’s requirements or what the local school board is looking for. However, for the purposes of this study, prepared will be defined to include any
professional or personal experience that helps one learn the knowledge and skills needed to step into the role of a superintendent successfully.

**Conclusion**

The superintendent’s role has become increasingly difficult and complex. The work of superintendents has increasingly been defined by their responses to political pressures and conflicting interests, unpredictable and inadequate state funding, standards-based reform, and greater demands for accountability of increased student performance through state and federal legislation (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). With approximately 50% of superintendents having planned to retire by 2015, an additional third by 2020, and high turnover rates across the country it may appear as though superintendents are entering roles unprepared for the position (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2011; Tekniepe, 2015; Thomas, 2001). A deeper analysis of the literature on the superintendent can provide some answers to why the position of superintendent has high turnover rates across the country and what is currently being done to prepare the future chief executive officers of our school districts.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Analysis of the Superintendency

A review of the literature supports the importance of ensuring aspiring superintendents are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Beginning with the initial role of the school superintendent, it is clear the position has evolved since its inception in 1837 (Callahan, 1966). A brief analysis of leadership theory ensues, from its initial beginnings as we think about the concept of leadership today through the end of the 21st century and leading into a meta-analysis on the impact of district level leadership on student achievement. An in-depth look at turnover in the superintendent position with an analysis of the types of turnover that take place show the impact of turnover in the top leadership position in school districts as well as the importance of having aspiring superintendents prepared for a difficult position. Finally, the challenges that future leaders can expect to overcome in the 21st century are discussed before an investigation into what is currently being done to prepare aspiring superintendents for education’s top school district leadership position.

American Superintendency, An Evolving Position

Historian Raymond Callahan (1966) identified four roles that defined the school superintendence from the position’s inception through the 1960s. These roles included the teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, and social scientist. As the United
States has shifted away from a manufacturing-based economy, Kowalski et al. (2011) analyzed how districts were affected and identified the role of communicator as a fifth and current role superintendents are now defined by. While each role has been preeminent during respective points in history, the emergence of a new role has not rendered prior roles irrelevant. In fact, the addition of each role has added to the demands and complexity of the position (Kowalski). In order to better understand the superintendency, we must know the roles the position has encompassed. The following is an analysis of the five role conceptualizations of the superintendency.

**Teacher-Scholar.** The creation of the American superintendent began and flourished in the United States due to the increasing complexity and the decentralized nature of the education system, as well as the increased number of schools, staff, and students that occurred as the United States transitioned from an agrarian society to an industrial economy (Callahan, 1966; Candoli, 1995; Cuban, 1976). As the education system expanded and became more complex, it became increasingly difficult for a board of volunteers to make the necessary decisions to run the school (Callahan). The initial intent of the position of superintendent was to “have a person work full time supervising classroom instruction and assuring uniformity of curriculum” (Spring, 1990, p. 141).

The first superintendents were typically individuals that were considered effective teachers and did not have an advanced degree or additional coursework in education administration (Callahan, 1966; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski et al., 2011). Therefore, individuals in this position were typically lead educators who were employees of the school board but directly or indirectly supervised all other employees of the school district (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents saw themselves as scholarly educational
leaders, as students of education, and as teachers of teachers (Callahan, 1966, p. 188). This mindset may have been in part due to school boards’ desire to maintain power when the first superintendents were appointed and the tendency for superintendents to speak about the position in scholarly journals and professional meetings (Callahan, 1966; Wheeler, 2012). While there were some who believed the superintendent should be more concerned with the business operations of the school, the prevailing thought of this period was of superintendent as scholar (Callahan). However, this role began to change beginning around 1900, and 1910 ushered in an era which brought about the superintendent’s role as business manager (Callahan).

**Business Manager.** The conceptualized role of superintendent as business manager was fully established by 1910 and was the dominant focus of the position for approximately 30 years (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 2). This change did not come about due to alterations in the nature of the superintendent’s work but instead was a result of the Industrial Revolution, and the theories and principles that became commonplace during that era that helped to fortify the role of superintendent as business manager (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011 Tyack, 1972). Frederick Taylor and his system of scientific management swept across the country and had major implications for public education (Callahan, 1966). Taylor (1911) initially wrote his paper at a time when it was recognized the United States as a country needed to conserve material resources, leading to “the larger question of increasing national efficiency” (p. 5). The result was a national focus directing criticism towards institutions, especially large organizations perceived as being “grossly inefficient” (Callahan, 1966, pg. 201). Taylor’s system of scientific management and the national concern around the inefficient use of resources led to superintendents
focusing on administration with an emphasis on the financial aspects of education
(Callahan). Furthermore, the idea of scientific management led to an increased belief in
centralized authority, reducing “workers to automations and placed heavy responsibility
for production on management” (Callahan, 1966, pg. 205). Scientific management
became the prevailing theme across the country, leading the public at large and boards of
education to the belief that school systems were grossly inefficient.

It was during this time that university courses were created for individuals to
specialize in educational administration in order to provide students with the necessary
skills to do the job (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Additionally, an authoritative,
impersonal, and task-oriented culture set in (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski et al., 2011). This
culture is best exemplified as stated in the following quote: “Taking initiative, exercising
authority, scientific planning of instruction and curriculum, and careful management were
themes that vibrated resonantly in speeches and reports of urban schoolmen in these
years” (Cuban, 1976, p. 16). As the 1920s came to a close, another social event occurred
in the United States giving rise to the third conceptualization role, superintendent as
statesman.

**Statesman.** The Great Depression brought an end to the emphasis on the business
manager role and was a key event to bring in the superintendent as statesman (Kowalski
et al., 2011). The transition from business manager to statesman was a gradual process
prompted by the stock market crash, leading citizens to embrace a populist society and a
belief that schools should prepare citizens for work and life in a democratic society
(Bjork & Gurley, 2005). This role was attached to the belief in democratic administration
and saw a rise of school chief executives becoming involved in community organizations
such as Kiwanis, Chambers of Commerce, and other similar organizations (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski et al., 2011). Through these developments, it became expected that superintendents work to gather the public’s support for education, leading to possible political implications (Bjork & Gurley, 2005). At the conclusion of World War II, the conceptualization of the superintendent’s role was beginning to shift away from the notion of a statesmen as critics argued it was an overly idealistic concept and that public administration had become too complex for most citizens to devote the time or have the expertise necessary to engage in policy work (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011).

**Social Scientist.** Following the superintendent as statesmen role, educational leadership became more realistic and less idealistic with an emphasis on discovering what educational leadership was in practice, not what it should be (Callahan, 1966). As the nation’s demographics changed with an increase in school-age children and the creation of new school districts as a result of newly established suburbs, the superintendent’s role as applied social scientist emerged (Callahan).

The superintendent as applied social scientist worked to understand human beings and organizations, using that understanding and knowledge to effectively run the school organization. The implications might best be explained as stated by Candoli (1995): “This approach led to a shift from democratic prescription to analytic formulation, from a field orientation to a discipline orientation, and from a narrow conception to one focused on multidisciplinary research and theory in the field of administration” (p. 339). As this role gained traction, so too did professional preparation for superintendents with an emphasis on theory and less on practice-based studies (Kowalski et al., 2011).
While the transition to superintendent as applied social scientist led to superintendents working to understand organizational systems and the people operating within them, researchers began looking at the effectiveness of communication in the 1980s. This research, in conjunction with the realities of a new information-based society, have changed the role of the superintendent once again (Kowalski et al.).

**Communicator.** While the school district’s chief education officer is still responsible for administrative and instructional supervision, the role of today’s superintendent has broadened yet again (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). Drucker (1999) concluded that all organizations have entered into the Information Age, and based upon this research, Kowalski et al. (2011) stated the role of effective communicator has now been established as part of the position of the superintendency (p. 2). Superintendents are now charged with shaping the mission and culture of the learning organization, facilitating school improvement through collaboration with all stakeholders, and building and maintaining positive relationships with a variety of individuals and groups (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005). This changing role, as well as research around the effective use of communication, has created a change from a situational communication model to one that is relational and focused on consistent, two-way, and open communication that has minimized formal authority (Kowalski et al., 2011). Henwood (2016) identified a connection to the superintendent as communicator, finding superintendents working in school districts that were ranked effective based on the Colorado District Performance Framework were more likely to rank communications and community relations as substantial or moderate in terms of time spent and perceived
importance when compared to those superintendents who worked in school districts ranked as ineffective (p. 76).

Kowalski et al. (2011) shared that, to “fully appreciate the complexity of this pivotal position and its evolution over more than 100 years, one must understand how roles and responsibilities have waxed and waned over time” (p. 1). The four conceptualized roles as identified by Callahan (1966) and the addition of a fifth by Kowalski et al. (2011) provide us with a background of how the position of superintendent was created and its evolution to today’s leadership position. While the prominence of each role has varied based upon the social conditions of the time, all are currently a part of the superintendent’s duties.

**Today’s Superintendent—It Is About Leadership**

In public education, the superintendent is looked at as the chief education officer (CEO) of the school district, the individual leading the entire district (Callahan, 1966; Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005; Sternke, 2011; Thomas, 2001). Leadership is an important aspect of any school superintendent’s position, a transition that has unfolded from superintendent as teacher-scholar to today’s superintendent as communicator. Tony Dungy (2010) offered an explanation of the importance of leadership stating: “Leadership is necessary in any human society; thus, a leadership void will not exist for very long before someone steps up to lead, either by popular acclaim, selection, or self-appointment” (p. XIV).

**Leadership Theory.** Researchers and scholars have proposed a number of ideas which start to explain and define leadership and different leadership styles such as transformational, democratic, and servant to name a few (Lehman, 2015; Leithwood et
al., 2004). The concept of studying leadership theory as we know today can be traced back to the early 1900s (Hoffman, 2008). The pursuit to define leadership has taken researchers in a variety of directions (Lehman, 2015). The following is a look at where leadership theory began, its evolution, and the way researchers defined it in the United States.

Thomas Carlyle is credited with the development of the great man theory which was a commonly accepted theory of influence in the 1900s (Hoffman, 2008). Carlyle (1907) believed that strong leadership qualities were inherent abilities that men were born with as opposed to being a product of one’s environment. Great man theory focuses on an individual that leads and changes history, eventually leading to the individual being considered a hero (Lehman, 2015). This theory was the dominant leadership philosophy of its time and helped lead to more dialogue and research about leadership (Hoffman, 2008).

Heredity as the main factor in leadership continued to be the focus of leadership theory through the 1920s. Researchers began to emphasize looking at how people lead and the importance of specific situations in determining the leadership traits needed within those conditions (Hoffman, 2008). During the 1940s, the great man theory lived out its lifecycle as theorists continued to look at how people lead and began to focus more on the leader-follower relationship. Leadership was looked at as the interactions of an individual and followers while directing group activities (Hoffman, 2008; Northouse, 2015). Group focus in leadership studies was prevalent through the 1960s before giving way to an organizational behavior approach (Northouse, 2015). Scholars focused on the process that took place when people organized groups in order to accomplish
organizational goals. It was during this time that Burns’s (1978) definition of leadership emerged. Burns identified the process of mobilizing people with certain motives and values in order to realize goals independently or collectively held by leaders and followers. Burns’s work ultimately lead to the transformational leadership theory (Hoffman, 2008).

The 1980s saw a dramatic increase in scholarly works on the topic of leadership (Northouse, 2015). This increase led to a substantial variety of leadership definitions. Northouse (2015) identified four themes which were the most common place at the time: (a) Do as the leader wishes, which was simply about getting followers to do what the leader would like accomplished; (b) Influence, where researchers looked at how leaders influenced followers in a noncoercive manner; (c) Traits, which was brought back to the spotlight due to the leadership-as-excellence movement; and (d) Transformation as written and researched by Burns.

During the 1990s and early 21st century, authentic and servant leadership models emerged and led to an increased emphasis on the role of the follower (Hoffman, 2008). These models place an emphasis on the leader being authentic, faithful, and trustworthy as a way to motivate followers. Additionally, researchers and scholars concentrating on leadership have continued to focus research around the leadership process (Northouse, 2015). Burns’s (1978) leadership definition, which I elaborate on in the next section, continues to be widely used as a way to evaluate the leadership process researchers continue to study.

**Leadership Process.** Burns (1978) believed leaders are those who influence their followers to act in ways that will enhance both the leaders’ and the followers’ values and
motivation to reach a certain goal. Northouse (2013, p. 5) utilized a similar definition identifying leadership as an act or behavior, the actions leaders take to bring about change of an individual or group. Both of these definitions focus on a process in which an individual or individuals act in a way that generates change. A variety of adjectives have been used to try and define a stylistic approach to leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004). Examples have included democratic, instructional, servant, and collaborative to name a few (Lehman, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004). Whatever the approach, the desired result of leadership is the ability to get an individual or group of people to achieve a common goal (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2013).

By definition, the leadership process implies a two-way relationship in which effective communication takes place. Northouse (2013) noted that leadership is a “phenomenon that resides in the context of the interactions between leaders and followers and makes leadership available to everyone” (p. 8). The context of leadership fits the conceptualized role of a superintendent as communicator as explained by Kowalski et al. (2011). The success of the leader’s communication can and is often gauged by the interest and actions of the followers toward working and collaborating in developing and achieving the common goals of the organization (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). The leader is ultimately responsible for communicating the “big picture” framework, designing, identifying, and adapting to the challenges that occur, regulating distress, maintaining disciplined attention to the issues, and protecting the leadership voices of other stakeholders in the organization (Heifetz & Laurie).

**Importance of Leadership.** While much is said, written, and emphasized about leadership, the question of its importance needs to be asked. Can the quality of leadership
be demonstrated to have an impact? Leadership has been studied in numerous organizations. Collins (2001) utilized a case study approach which led to his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don’t*. Collins sought to examine factors influencing how an average to good organization transforms into an exceptional organization by answering the research question: Can a good company become great and, if so, how?

Collins (2001) began his list by analyzing companies’ stock return that had appeared on the Fortune 500 rankings every year from 1965 to 1995. Financial performance trends were used to narrow the initial list of 1,435 companies that had appeared on the Fortune 500 every year during that time period to 19 companies that fit the financial criteria that had been established defining good companies and great companies. Next, the researchers made the determination to study 11 companies from the final group of 19, all 11 of which were companies that operated in a single business field as opposed to companies that were in a wide variety of business sectors. An additional 11 comparison companies were also selected which were a corresponding and direct comparison of the 11 firms selected that were identified as good-to-great companies. Finally, six more comparison firms were selected that had not demonstrated sustained earnings.

First, the researchers utilized document coding from articles and published materials of the 28 companies (Collins, 2001). Items were coded into 11 different categories which included areas such as leadership, organizing arrangements, and vision. Next, the researchers did an extensive financial analysis of each company which included items such as the financial strength of the firm, acquisitions and divestures, industry
performance, and the role of lay-offs. Finally, the research culminated with interviews of senior management and members of the board. Collins (2001) utilized the empirical data to build a theory from the ground up as a result of the evidence that was collected (p. 10). The findings that were presented by Collins were apparent in 100% of the good-to-great firms and only were demonstrated 30% of the time in the comparison companies. Based upon the data, Collins created a framework which summarized his findings. In all good-to-great companies, there was a build-up and then a breakthrough to greatness in three phases: disciplined people, disciplined thoughts, and disciplined action. In each good-to-great company, Collins identified a Level 5 Leader, an individual that possessed unique traits and performed specific and identifiable behaviors that propelled companies to financial success.

While Collins (2001) specifically focused on the private sector and for profit business, Collins (2005) offered a companion follow-up monograph to his original book focused on the social sectors. In the monograph, Collins noted that the primary notion of creating great social sectors was to treat them more like a business was false (p. 1). Additionally, Collins noted that the framework identified in his original book was a framework of greatness, not of business principles, and that it was applicable to the social sectors. Finally, Collins concluded that there may be more true leadership in the social sector than the private sector (p. 12). Despite this belief, Collins (2005) has yet to demonstrate that leadership matters in the social sector, specifically in education.

Research conducted in a dissertation by Henwood (2016) utilized an explanatory mixed methods approach to identify what roles practicing rural superintendents perceived as being the most important to lead effective rural Colorado school districts as defined by
the Colorado District Performance Framework. Quantitative survey data was collected from 70 rural schools across Colorado and followed up by structured interviews with four superintendents from effective school districts and four superintendents from ineffective school districts. Results of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed differences in the identified critical roles among effective and ineffective rural Colorado superintendents, as specified by the Colorado School District Performance Framework, with effective superintendents significantly more likely to rank communication and community relations as the top critical role in comparison to the ineffective superintendents (Henwood, p. 71). This finding corresponds with research from Kowalski et al. (2011) that identified the current conceptual role of the superintendent as communicator. Furthermore, superintendents from effective school districts focused roles which placed a high value on people and relationships in contrast to superintendents from ineffective school districts who identified roles which were more technical in nature (Henwood, 2016).

While Henwood (2016) focused on research specifically related to leadership within rural Colorado superintendents, the book *School District Leadership that Works* was a meta-analysis of 27 studies dating from 1970 until 2005 involving 2,817 school districts and 3.4 million students’ achievement scores (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Marzano and Waters sought to determine what influence district superintendents had on student achievement and the characteristics of effective superintendents. The authors identified four major findings through their research.

The first key finding from Marzano and Waters (2009) affirmed the previously unconfirmed belief that leadership at the district level makes a difference on student
achievement. The meta-analysis conducted by the authors identified 14 reports containing information about the relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement. The correlation between district leadership and student achievement was .24 with a 95% confidence interval. Marzano and Waters analyzed these findings by identifying the independent and dependent variables which were district-level leadership and student achievement respectively. The findings suggested that a change in superintendent leadership ability of one standard deviation would see an increase in student achievement of 9.5 percentile points (Marzano & Waters).

The second research question asked by Marzano and Waters (2009) examined what specific district leadership responsibilities correlated with student achievement. The authors identified five district-level leadership characteristics with a statistically significant correlation to student academic achievement: (a) goal-setting process, (b) non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) board alignment and support of district goals, (d) monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and (e) the use of resources to support goals (Marzano & Waters).

The next research question Marzano and Waters (2009) addressed involved school autonomy. The findings in this section were interesting in that a positive correlation of .28 with school-level leadership autonomy and student achievement was discovered. However, when the researchers analyzed student achievement with the concept of site-based management, a negative correlation was found indicating a decrease in student achievement (Marzano & Waters). The researchers then proceeded to try and ascertain how school-level leadership autonomy could lead to an increase in student achievement while site-based management actually leads to a decrease in student achievement.
achievement. Marzano and Waters attempted to answer this conundrum by relating the
data back to the two prior findings. The authors’ belief was that a superintendent should
work with building-level administration and the board of education in the development of
student achievement goals. While collaboration with the building-level administration is
important, the authors continued on to state that buy-in for the goals should occur at all
levels and the way to accomplish those goals is left up to the building-level
administration (Marzano & Waters).

The final finding came from an examination of two reports in which the authors
examined the superintendent’s tenure and student academic achievement. Waters and
Marzano (2006) identified a weighted average correlation of .19 from the studies at the
.05 significance level. This implied a positive correlation associated with longevity of the
superintendent and student academic achievement. In order to help explain this finding,
Marzano and Waters referenced the book Crash Course (2005) in which the author, Chris
Whittle, contrasted the publicly held corporation leadership of General Electric, Federal
Express, Microsoft, and Dell and the superintendency. Whittle (2005) noted the stability
in the urban districts of Kansas City, Washington D.C., and New York City in
comparison to the corporations mentioned above. The average superintendent tenure in
the three cities was 1.4, 2.2, and 2.5 years whereas the average tenure of the generally
acknowledged successful company leaders listed was 11, 35, 30, and 21 years
respectively. Whittle believed much of the companies’ success was a result of their
stability.

In conclusion, the authors of this meta-analysis have been able to statistically
demonstrate what was once a widely held but unverified belief--leadership matters.
Marzano and Waters (2009) used a meta-analysis methodology to statistically show that leadership at the district level, more specifically the superintendency, has a positive impact on student academic achievement. Studies ranging from the private sector to local mixed methods research conducted in Colorado to large meta-analysis have demonstrated that leadership does indeed make a difference.

**Turnover and the Superintendency**

Research has shown us that leadership at the district level does indeed matter in the success of our schools (Collins, 2005; Henwood 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). It is then important to understand the impact superintendent turnover has on school districts. Grissom and Andresen (2012) noted the importance of superintendent turnover by stating: “The importance of the district superintendent and the potential consequences of superintendent exits make understanding the factors that drive superintendent turnover a key topic for empirical research” (p. 1148). Marzano and Waters (2009) identified a weighted average correlation between student achievement and the length of a superintendent’s tenure. However, the typical longevity for a school superintendent based on studies conducted through AASA in 2000, 2010, and 2015 was approximately five to six years (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011) while Grissom and Andersen (2012) noted that 43% of superintendents had turned over within a three-year period.

Even though research supports the notion of high superintendent turnover rates, there are a variety of reasons that superintendents leave the position. Kowalski et al. (2011) identified superintendents’ desire to assume a new challenge and school board conflict as the top reasons superintendents left their prior position. Research conducted
by Grissom and Andersen (2012) used a labor market framework in which a superintendent’s employment with a district was chosen by both the superintendent and the school board. The researchers used data collected from a survey questionnaire sent to board members, a separate survey sent to superintendents, and data obtained from the California Department of Education. Among the 99 superintendents identified as having left their position, 40% left due to retirement, 2% were terminated, 27% resigned to take another position, and 18% resigned for other reasons (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). More specifically, superintendent turnover was associated with other characteristics of a challenging district environment, such as a greater incidence of student poverty. The inverse relationship between wealth of a district’s community and turnover is potentially troubling, showing that turnover is higher in districts that might benefit most from stability at the top and the opportunities for sustained reform that come with it (Grissom & Andresen).

Tekniepe (2015) conducted research specifically looking into job-related factors that increased the probability of a rural superintendent experiencing an involuntary departure, otherwise known as “push factors.” Push factors may include conflict with the school board, pressures inside the organization or within the community, or simply negative perceptions of the superintendent’s ability to adequately manage the fiscal affairs of the district. Tekniepe identified four broad factors which were attributed to push turnover: political conflict, internal pressures, external (community) pressures, and fiscal stress (p. 2).

In examining the research taking place between 2000 and 2015, it is evident that superintendent turnover is frequent with the typical tenure lasting approximately
anywhere from three to six years (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2011). The reasons for superintendent turnover have been looked at through both a labor market perspective and push-pull perspective. Both perspectives identified superintendents choosing to leave in order to pursue professional advancement opportunities such as larger school districts, going to a district with a lower percent of students from a poverty background, and increased pay and benefits (Grissom & Andersen; Tekniepe, 2015). It was also evident that there are a number of reasons superintendents left involuntarily, or were pushed, from their previous position. These included conflicts with the school board, financial constraints, internal strife, and conflict with the external community (Tekniepe).

Superintendent instability and frequent turnover is an important factor in determining both district and superintendent effectiveness (Henwood, 2016). The impact of turnover can have a negative impact on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). These findings can help aspiring superintendents and boards of education understand the typical turnover that exists with the position, the variety of reasons that exist for superintendent turnover, and the impact turnover may have on student achievement.

21st Century Challenges

As the chief education officer of the school district, the superintendent answers to a local school board comprised of individuals from a variety of backgrounds and educational upbringing, political pressures, and conflicting interests. “Social sector leaders face a complex and diffuse power map” (Collins, 2005, p. 10). The dynamics of dealing with tenured faculty, a board of education, volunteers, and a variety of other
stakeholders present a challenging, complex, and important system for superintendents to navigate (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005).

As we have progressed through the early part of the 21st century, school superintendents have an ever-changing set of issues that they will be confronted with.

The truth is that the high-minded pursuit of what’s best for children often runs into the rough realities of budget catastrophes, interest-group politics, human folly, and the residue and by-products of the nation’s racial past. School superintendents have to be prepared to confront and deal with these challenges (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005, p. 2).

All of these issues are current realities superintendents face and are broken down into social issues, education issues, and professional issues.

Social Issues. Kowalski et al. (2011, p. 5) identified social issues as a combination of philosophical, demographic, economic, and fiscal issues which simultaneously create a need for services from public schools as well as resistance to change. Schools can be seen as a microcosm of society, and accordingly, society’s problems may be thrust into our schools. Examples of these issues include but are not limited to gender identity and sexual orientation, race, and socio-economic issues.

One of the most contentious political issues involving U.S. public education has been gender and sexual orientation (Lugg, 2003). Conflict between school districts that had historically prevented noncurricular Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) groups from organizing at school and advocates for promoting curriculum that is “queer-infused” (Lugg, 2003, p. 120) may put school superintendents in conflict with the district’s constituents and ultimately the board of education. While GSA groups have been provided legal protection when other noncurricular groups are provided opportunities to
convene at school, it does not necessarily provide political protection for the superintendent of schools.

In March, 2016, the state of North Carolina took an unprecedented step in passing a bill specifying individuals must use the restroom associated with the individual’s sex at birth (Single-Sex, 2016). Due to this legislation, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and U.S. Department of Education (ED), under the Obama administration, issued a “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students Notice of Language Assistance” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1) which provided an expectation that school districts across the country ensure nondiscriminatory practices as stated in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (2016). Despite the “Dear Colleague” letter, leaders at the local level were dealing with transgender-rights disputes which turned into hotly contested debates over school policies for bathroom and locker room use (Crary, 2016). For example, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick demanded the resignation of a Fort Worth school superintendent, Kent Scribner, who helped draft restroom guidelines accommodating transgender students (Cary).

The transgender bathroom debate carried itself into the 2016 presidential election. Upon winning the presidency, Donald Trump revoked the federal guidelines that had been previously written by the Obama administration (Somashekhar, Brown, & Balingit, 2017). Additionally, in March 2017 the United States Supreme Court rejected to hear a case involving Gavin Grimm, a transgender student from Virginia seeking the legal right to use the boys’ bathroom at his school (Brown and Balingit, 2017). The Supreme Court acted after the decision from the Trump administration to revoke the Obama
administration’s federal guidance and sent the case back to the 4th Circuit to reconsider the case because of the change in federal position (Brown and Balingit).

At issue is the prevailing right for individuals to choose who they are as individuals and how they would like to be treated while at the same time ensuring the safety of all students. In the middle of recently issued federal guidelines and expectations and the diverse local constituents lies the superintendent of schools, left to navigate through local politics and legal interpretations of what may be ultimately settled in court.

Issues of race are also a social issue confronting school districts and superintendents alike across the country. The passage of No Child Left Behind brought attention to an “unpleasant secret” in public education; schools had not done a good job serving minority students (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005, p. 144). An overview of the 2014-2015 school year graduation rates for the state of Colorado provided data demonstrating the inequities that exist between white students and those from a minority background. According to Colorado Department of Education (CDE) data, just over 77% of all students from the graduating class of 2015 graduated on time. However, when broken down by ethnicity, students of an Asian descent had an 88% graduation rate, followed by Caucasian students with an 83% graduation rate, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Island descent 74.5%, Black or African American 69.8%, Hispanic 67.6%, and American Indian or Alaskan native 64% (CDE, 2016a).

Social issues involving race and public education do not just appear in test scores and graduation rates. Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) conducted an exploratory study utilizing focus groups to obtain superintendent perceptions of issues related to three themes: school improvement and accountability, democratic voice, and social justice.
Specifically related to social justice, Alsbury and Whitaker sought superintendent responses by having them reflect on “doing what is best for kids” (p. 166). Frequently, superintendents spoke in generalities and about working to provide opportunities for students in order to improve their lives in the long-term. As participants became more comfortable in the focus groups, superintendents began to share conflicts regarding personal beliefs held around what is best for kids and the community’s beliefs about what is best for kids. Regarding value systems, one superintendent noted an intent to start a K-12 foreign language program and knowing the large amount of grief she would incur “because that foreign language is Spanish and some members of the community will ask, why are we doing that because the kids need to speak English” (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007, p. 167). Echoing issues of community values, another superintendent stated “Where I struggle in the community, which has a large number of Hispanics, is how can you take an Anglo middle class value system and force it on everyone and say that is best for kids” (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007, p. 167). Another superintendent noted the changes that were going to be made to the school’s schedule in order to accommodate a large Hispanic population:

Our district is 84 percent Hispanic and the biggest issue for us is language opposition. The kids go to Mexico for three weeks at Christmas, so we’re going to close for three weeks during that time. Instead of fighting with the parents and insisting that they bring them back, we’re closing down. We’re also going to be open during summer except for a couple of weeks in July so that the kids don’t come back from Mexico in August having lost their English over the summer (p. 168).

As school districts across the country have become more racially diverse, students’ needs have changed and communities have become more complex (Kowalski et al., 2011). The trend of an increasingly diverse nation is likely to continue as the
enrollment percent of minority children outpace the percent of white children (Finnan et al., 2015). Now the superintendent is expected to play a leadership role in determining the diverse needs of local schools through engaging a broad constituency (Kowalski, 2006).

Diversity in socio-economic standing is another social-issue superintendents will contend with in the 21st Century (Kowalski et al., 2011). Ellerson (2015, p.4) noted a continued increase in students that received free/reduced price lunch (FRPL) eligibility dating from the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis. While the accountability era has placed increased pressure on school districts to close the achievement gap (Kowalski et al.), superintendents are also left determining how best to allocate resources in order to continue advanced programs while also “raising achievement for poor children more quickly” (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005, p. 180). The pressure to improve academic scores through testing has led schools to use homework more frequently, however parents from differing social-classes may supervise student homework differently and ultimately inadvertently increase the social class achievement gap (Rothstein, 2004, p. 27).

**Issues Facing Superintendents.** One of the biggest issues facing superintendents today involves funding (Ellerson, 2015). As the United States has recovered from the 2008 great economic recession, education budgets have yet to return to pre-recession levels (Ellerson). Ellerson found that 83% of superintendents responding to a survey described their district’s economic situation as inadequate, an increase from 67% in 2008. Additionally, 44% of respondents anticipated a cut in state funding between the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years (Ellerson).
Another key issue that has been a focus for school superintendents is school reform. Most recently, the school reform movement has sought change to school climate and a reexamination of how schools are built and structured (Kowalski et al., 2011). Fullan (2000) noted the importance of upgrading the system in order to have sustained school improvement. Parts of the system identified included a need to revamp policies, incentives, standards, compensation and the overall requirements for administrative leadership. Furthermore, there has been a belief that low-performing schools will not sufficiently improve unless educational restructuring takes place (Fullan, 2001), and in order to improve low-performing schools, incentives need to be provided to bring top talent educators to those schools (Fullan, 2009). While school reform in the early 2000s has been a case of “failed hope but desperate want” (Fullan, 2009, p. 110), some aspects of school reform through No Child Left Behind put a spotlight on failing schools. Moving forward, superintendents have further identified the Common Core, teacher evaluation, and testing as areas where school reform may be focused (Finnan et al., 2015). However, as with any reform movement or change initiative, the question is raised about who holds the power—teachers, parents, school board members, or a variety of other stakeholders who are likely to challenge or undermine any or all efforts (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005).

An additional education issue that appears to possibly be catching the attention of the school district’s chief education officer is that of the State Departments of Education and United States Department of Education (Finnan et al., 2015). The common perception is that school superintendents struggle with and may view the school board of education as a hindrance to the superintendent to effectively serve as the executive of the
organization (Glass et al., 2000). However, a recent survey conducted by Finnan et al. (2015) reported that 69% of superintendents viewed their local school board as an asset, while 42% of superintendents viewed their respective State Departments of Education as a liability and 54% of superintendents viewed the United States Department of Education as a liability. Because of the relatively new data that has been presented, further research is needed to ascertain the reasons behind this new perception.

**Professional Issues.** Most of today’s public and private educators are intelligent, devoted professionals doing everything they can to help today’s students be prepared to succeed in school and in life (Vollmer, 2010, p. 5). Professions are “occupations with special power and prestige” and are granted because professions have “special competence and esoteric bodies of knowledge linked to central needs and values of the social system (Larson, 1977, p. x). The school superintendent is typically the most highly educated and compensated individual in public education. The profession of superintendent has perceived and actual problems including underrepresentation of women and minority populations and a declining pipeline (Finnan et al., 2015; Keedy et al., 2007).

Throughout the 20th century, the percent of women employed as superintendents fluctuated between approximately 1.2% in 1971 and a high of 13.2% in 2000 (Glass et al., 2000). Similar numbers were also found for minority populations, although staying below 10% of the population (Glass et al.). While women and minorities were employed as the CEO of schools, the percentages demonstrate they are underrepresented. However, it is evident the percent of women employed as superintendents has increased substantially since the turn of the century. Finnan et al. (2015) found that over 26% of
respondents were female, an increase of two percent from the AASA 2010 study. With the ever-changing demographics of our country’s schools, the trend of increasing female leadership may be needed in order to have the most qualified people in educational leadership positions and possibly better align with the desired characteristics and aptitudes of the 21st century superintendency (Finnan et al., 2015).

As school districts across the country have progressed through the early stages of the 21st century, superintendents have grown older and begun to reach retirement age. In a survey conducted through AASA, nearly half of all 1,867 superintendents surveyed identified their intent to retire in the year 2015 (Kowalski et al., 2011) and an additional 33% of the 845 respondents indicated their intent to retire by the year 2020 (Finnan et al., 2015). With 65% of current surveyed superintendents between the ages of 50-69, and the high percentage of superintendents indicating their intent to retire, “such an aging pattern has implications for the pipeline of replacements” (Finnan et al., pg. 2).

While numerous studies have shown that superintendents obtain great satisfaction in their career choice (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015), there has also been documented concern about filling the future leadership roles in our country’s school districts (Cooper et al., 2000; Howley, Pendarvis, & Gibbs, 2002; Nussbaum, 2007; Finnan et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2007). Cooper et al. (2000) conducted a random sample of 2,979 school superintendents in conjunction with the AASA in hopes of trying to determine if the school superintendency was still “an attractive, workable profession” (pg. 6). Respondents were asked to rate their statements related to the career crisis using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Their findings reported a mean
response rate of 4.35, indicating that practicing superintendents were concerned about a shortage of applicants for the superintendency and that there was a crisis in American education (Cooper et al.). Nussbaum (2007) wrote that large numbers of baby boomers were retiring in New Jersey and a decreasing number of individuals were coming into the position to replace them. Noting prior studies that had identified concerns around recruiting qualified personnel to fill superintendent vacancies, Winter et al. (2007) conducted a study that looked at a statewide assessment of principal attraction to the superintendency. Five hundred eighty-seven practicing school principals from Kentucky responded to the state-wide survey, a 58.8% response rate. The findings indicated 87.7% of principals had not worked to earn superintendent certification and that 79% did not intend to do so. Furthermore, the principals that responded to the survey rated their ability and likelihood of pursuing the superintendency as moderate and low respectively (Winter et al.). Reasons for a potential declining pipeline may include a superintendent’s increased responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates; anticipated low levels of board support or conflict with the board; excessive work hours; and increased levels of stress (Howley et al., 2002; Nussbaum, 2007; Finnan et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2007).

Despite the numerous studies that have demonstrated a possible concern for the superintendent pipeline, there have been studies that have questioned the idea of a superintendency shortage. In a dissertation looking at the talent pool of superintendents in Southeast Pennsylvania, Masgai (2016) noted concerns about low response rates used by AASA to glean results for the superintendency, specifically noting the superintendent pipeline. Masgai used bibliometrics to draw conclusions of a possible “echo chamber effect” in superintendent shortage literature, using the 2000 AASA study by Glass et al.
as the nucleus (p. 57). Echo chamber was defined as the “fallacious, but unintentional, result when research conclusions are based upon surveys and low response rates in a thread of studies and cross citation occurs” (p. 19). Masgai mapped citations among superintendent shortages using the bibliometric tools Web of Science and UCINET to identify evidence supporting the existence of an echo chamber effect in superintendent shortage literature. Additionally, Masgai noted that with each subsequent AASA publication in 2005 and 2010 a “resurgence in superintendent shortage studies occurred” (p. 73). As each decade unfolded and the superintendent shortages did not materialize, a shift in research around the superintendency occurred (Masgai). While Masgai was able to use bibliometrics to reach a conclusion of a possible echo chamber to the 2000 AASA study, caution should be taken in that the Glass et al. study had a diverse number of aspects that were looked at with regard to the superintendency. The number of citations from this study cannot all be looked at as having been based on the superintendent pipeline.

Glass and Bjork (2003) noted that numerous studies have been conducted showing a potential crisis in the superintendent pipeline, however posited the superintendent crisis may be manufactured and there may be reasons for sustaining the perception. One reason superintendents may help continue to perpetuate the crisis is to help with salary bargaining power with their respective school boards. Additionally, professional associations can use the perception of a crisis as a reason to establish leadership academies. Finally, anti-education groups can use the perceived superintendent shortage as a rationale for the elimination of superintendent licensure to allow for nontraditional educators to serve as the chief education officer. Concerned
about these issues, Glass and Bjork mailed a survey to 2,096 public school board presidents that had hired a new school superintendent during the 2000-2001 school year. The researchers had a 20% return rate, and therefore the survey was deemed not generalizable but was thought to be “useful” (Glass & Bjork, 2003, p. 272). The researchers noted that 28% of respondents indicated having between 11-20 applicants and 20% indicated 21-30 applicants for their respective superintendent openings. Additionally, the researchers identified that regardless of district wealth, the participating school board presidents indicated that 69% of applicants were “well qualified” or “qualified” (Glass & Bjork, 2003, pg. 275).

The research around a declining superintendent pipeline is inconclusive. Several studies have been conducted that show a concern for the quantity and quality of available future superintendents. Other studies have questioned the methods and results of the research around the superintendent crisis, while also providing rationale for organizations and individuals that may benefit from a perceived crisis. Finally, surveys conducted have shown both a perceived crisis and that the pipeline of future superintendents is healthy should be taken with caution due to low response rates. However, it is clear that an aging population consisting mostly of baby boomers is currently employed in large numbers in the superintendency and will soon be on the road to retirement (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Nussbaum, 2007). It is also evident that current superintendents have viewed their career as fulfilling, even if challenging. Moving forward, it will be imperative to prepare future educational leaders to move into the role of the superintendent.
Aspiring to the Superintendency

As of 2010, there were approximately 600 institutions across the United States offering courses, degrees, or licensure programs for school administration (Kowalski et al., 2011). According to the Colorado Department of Education (2017a), aspiring superintendents must hold a baccalaureate degree from an accepted, regionally accredited institution of higher education; must have completed an approved graduate program for school administration at an accepted, regionally accredited institution of higher education; and must pass the PLACE Administrator content exam. Superintendents’ primary preparation tends toward formal graduate leadership preparation programs, with 85% of respondents in the 2010 AASA study indicated having completed superintendent preparation through an accredited university program (Kowalski et al., 2011).

An examination of the literature provides a vast picture ranging from administration programs with low ratings (Levine, 2005), emphasis on managerial expertise with indifference toward instructional leadership (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Murphy, 2002, 2007), a tendency to treat superintendent preparation similar to principal preparation (Glass et al., 2000), and equating superintendent preparation with a doctorate in educational administration (Grogan & Andrews, 2002).

Arthur Levine (2005) noted in his report on educating school leaders that there was a “race to the bottom” and, “the majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country’s leading universities. Collectively, school leadership programs are not successful” (p. 23). While continuing to note there were some strong programs across the country, Levine identified a lack of clarity in the mission of educational leadership programs, disconnected curriculum, and a
misalignment between the degrees that are awarded and the needs of the school leaders that receive them (Levine). Murphy (2006), a Professor of Education and Dean at Harvard Graduate School of Education, concurred with this, noting “Levine deserves credit for reminding us yet again of this enduring problem” (p. 490).

One of the reasons preparation programs may struggle is the difficulty that exists in the development of a comprehensive preparation program due to the fact that the position of the superintendent varies significantly (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). The superintendent’s role will vary greatly based upon district size, demographics, various state laws, and the scope of board and superintendent responsibilities (Grogan & Andrews; Kowalski, 2006). Additionally, few universities have programs tailored specifically for the position, although most doctoral programs in educational administration are considered to be preparation programs for superintendents.

Research conducted through the AASA over the past 10 years has found that superintendents reported having a different experience in their respective preparation programs. Glass et al. (2000) and Kowalski et al. (2011) found that 74% and almost 80% of superintendents reported having a good or excellent academic preparation experience, while the 2015 study did not report data regarding this topic. However, a disconnect may exist between acting superintendents and some researchers. Glass et al. (2000) identified some weaknesses as perceived by practicing superintendents which included a “lack of hands-on application,” a “failure to link content to practice,” and overemphasis of the professors’ personal experiences (p. 156). Seeking a more in-depth perspective on the quality of superintendent preparation programs, Orr (2006) conducted focus group interviews with superintendents from across the country. Her findings revealed a variety
of perspectives from superintendents about the quality of programs, ranging from “useless” to “extremely helpful” (p. 1392). Orr also reported graduate programs were viewed as most beneficial when they mix theory and practice, are rigorous and coherent, focus specifically on the superintendency, and were more selective in their admissions (p. 1392). Finally, an analysis of the AASA superintendent standards and NPBEA standards used for university accreditation reveal a difference in focus between district and school level leadership. According to the NPBEA, the standards are geared more toward school-level leadership than district-level leadership (2015, p. 2). With this in mind, does the implementation of these standards by CAEP accredited universities across the country provide the wrong framework to follow for preparing aspiring district level leadership? This could be a reason for superintendent programs being treated more like principal preparation programs, which has been noted as an issue by Glass et al. (2000) and Kowalski (2008).

Although 85% of respondents in the 2010 AASA study indicated having completed superintendent preparation through an accredited university program, professional superintendent preparation opportunities are available beyond traditional university programs (Kowalski et al., 2011). Other preparation options may include privately funded or foundation based programs as well as non-university programs.

The American Association of School Administrators offers its own non-university based superintendent academy (AASA, 2017). Offered as part of the organization’s systematic professional development which dates back to 1969 (Knezevich & Murphy, 1968), the AASA aspiring superintendent academy provides an opportunity for aspiring superintendents to partake in a year-long program designed to prepare future
superintendents with the skills needed to be successful in the superintendency. The program is made up of four mandatory in-person sessions and allows aspiring superintendents to work and connect with experienced superintendent mentors, with a culminating capstone project that is presented to complete the program.

Foundation based programs also have begun to provide opportunities for aspiring superintendents that come from a non-traditional background outside of education, such as the private sector, non-profit organizations, or the military. The Broad Superintendents Academy is a foundation based program specifically tailored toward superintendent preparation (Saltman, 2009; Quinn, 2007). Created in 2001 by Eli Broad, the academy believes that “effective leadership at the district level is essential to ensure student achievement” (Quinn, 2007, pg. 54). With an understanding that urban school districts may be as large as the biggest companies in the country, the Broad Superintendents Academy has a focus on preparing individuals for the nation’s largest school districts (Quinn). The curriculum is designed to focus on five aspects including CEO leadership, student achievement, making connections to stakeholders, organizational competence, and obtaining and maintaining a profession in the superintendency. Furthermore, the Broad Academy provides graduates with alumni support for superintendents that have successfully completed the program and earned a position. According to Quinn (2007) the Broad Academy has demonstrated that two-thirds of academy graduates that have served as superintendent for two years have outperformed their colleagues in raising student achievement in similar size districts and in other districts with new superintendents. Additionally, superintendents from Broad have shown to outperform their peers in reducing income achievement gaps and ethnic achievement gaps.
While Quinn (2007) writes about the successes that have taken place at Broad Academy, it should be noted that the author was employed as the managing director of the Broad Superintendents Academy at the time of publication. Writing about the rise of venture philanthropy and the increased use of business concepts in public education, Saltman (2009) noted several specific concerns with the Broad Foundation approach. Saltman’s contention has been that funding educational leadership programs with a focus on recruiting corporate, military, and non-profit leadership to public schools is done in order to promote deregulation of teacher and administrator programs across the country. Using neoliberalism as a context for his argument, Saltman believed venture philanthropy in public education is a form of class warfare and a way for private foundations to push their agendas into public education through substantial financial investments.

Saltman’s concerns around the Broad Foundation are philosophical in nature and do not provide an examination into whether deregulation has been helpful in recruiting more applicants and increased diversity to the superintendent applicant pool. Smith (2008) conducted research looking at whether the removal of certification requirements led to a larger and more diverse applicant pool for superintendent positions in the state of Michigan. Utilizing data collected on superintendent search processes between 1996 and 2005, Smith examined superintendent search files and semi-structured interviews with search consultants, private sector recruiters, out-of-field superintendent candidates, and professional association leaders to determine if Michigan’s removal of certification had improved the superintendent applicant pool. Her findings over the 9-year period showed that removing certification requirements did not “stimulate new sources of leadership for Michigan school districts” (Smith, 2008, pg.48). Smith (2008) did note that of the 14
individuals that fit the executive leader’s profile, four had assumed positions after making “significant commitments to the educational administration field beforehand through networking, service learning, and formal education” (pg. 48).

The research available about superintendent preparation programs leads to greater questions around preparing individuals aspiring to the superintendency. At this time, the research available is contradictory. University based programs fit more in-line with the traditional preparation model, however concerns about quality and a focus on school-level leadership instead of district-level leadership exist (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006; NPBEA, 2015). Programs have also been established through professional organizations and philanthropy based programs to help prepare superintendents, however research indicates these programs are not getting a majority of the aspiring superintendents and there are concerns around their motivations (Kowalski et al., 2011; Saltman, 2009; Smith 2008). While superintendents have repeatedly rated their respective preparation programs in high regard, positive response bias may partially explain part of those ratings (Briggs et al., 2012, p. 150). Additionally, more in-depth and richer research through a qualitative approach can be conducted on what aspiring superintendents need to do in order to be prepared for the position.

The Role of the Rural Superintendent

The rural superintendency has received little attention when looking at the educational leadership literature (Garn, 2003). As the nation’s politicians and researchers have focused more on the country’s large urban populations, with an emphasis on minority populations and low-income populations, rural education in the United States has taken a back seat (Hill, 2015). According to the Colorado Department of Education
(2016c), approximately 80% of school districts are designated as rural or small rural school districts. Even though the rural and small rural schools only make up 20% of the state’s student population, “they represent critical aspects of Colorado’s education system” (CDE, 2016c, pg. 1). The need for effective leadership in rural schools will be instrumental in rural communities, as they continue to deal with issues such as teacher shortages (Garcia, 2017), lower student achievement, high student mobility, and budget constraints (NASBE, 2014).

As noted in the AASA standards, all superintendents have specific leadership and technical responsibilities that are a part of the position (Hoyle, 1993). However, due to the size and financial constraints that exist in rural school districts, these superintendents are also likely to be more responsible for the daily operations of the district (Hill, 2015; Jones & Howley, 2009). This may include functioning as the human resources department, risk management, leading professional development, and numerous other specialized departments or tasks (Jones & Howley). As a result of their small size, superintendents working in rural school districts are put under tremendous strain (Hill, 2015). Along with the need for the rural superintendent to wear many hats, there is also an increased expectation that school provide most of the recreational and social activities for the community (Copeland, 2013). The more intimate involvement in the daily operations of the district and expectations placed on schools for recreational and social activities from rural school districts may explain why superintendents in rural school districts reported a greater feeling of responsibility than did superintendents in urban or suburban settings for state and federal accountability measures (VonSchnase, 2010).
Looking to identify the specific roles of a rural superintendent, Copeland (2013) conducted a case study seeking to characterize the expectations of a rural superintendent in North East Colorado. Three practicing rural superintendents and three past or present rural school board members were interviewed in order to identify their thoughts on the unique expectations placed on rural school superintendents (Copeland). Through this research, Copeland identified five “major hats” for rural superintendents: (a) manager; (b) planner; (c) listener; (d) communicator; and (e) community life (p. 11). An additional important distinction between rural and urban superintendents was identified by a school board member that had practiced on the board in both an urban and rural setting. This board member stated: “The nature of working in a larger district makes a person somewhat immune to things that are not accepted in a rural district” (p. 12). It is apparent that the roles for rural superintendents are different from that of their urban and suburban counterparts. Beyond the rural superintendent’s role in a school district, what are the specific leadership attributes needed for rural school superintendents?

**Rural Superintendent Leadership.** Referring back earlier to Burns’ (1978) notion of leadership, leaders are those who influence their followers to act in ways that will enhance both the leaders’ and the followers’ values and motivation to reach a certain goal. Boyd and Fitzgibbon (1993) noted that the research available on the role of rural superintendents in effecting change is limited. Seeking to fill an identified gap, Boyd and Fitzgibbon interviewed four rural school superintendents to describe their experiences in change implementation. Noting that staff development and professional growth “are, in fact, change” the researchers identified a theme of helping staff overcome doubts in skill
development and providing the necessary funds toward staff development in order to help implement the desired change.

The importance of communication, amongst other leadership attributes, was identified in a dissertation written by Wilson (2010) looking at the practices of successful school superintendent leadership as perceived by rural school superintendents. Wilson interviewed six practicing rural superintendents with the purpose of having superintendents explain which leadership practices they believed were most important. The four major themes which were identified were: (a) communication is essential for successful school leadership; (b) superintendents must demonstrate high ethical and moral leadership; (c) superintendents need to be effective managers of administrative tasks; and (d) the ability to reflect on the importance and practices of leadership (Wilson, 2010). Wilson went on to state that “one generalization is that clear communication is essential for a superintendent to practice successful school leadership” (p.83). Through the use of effective communication, a rural superintendent is able to implement the other leadership practices of visibility, inspiring others, and building relationships that are important for the rural school superintendent (Wilson).

Finally, Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) examined the leadership practices of seven rural superintendents. The authors used a case study approach in order to determine if research conducted by Waters and Marzano (2006) had applicability to rural superintendents. Additionally, the researchers sought to ascertain if there are leadership practices used by successful rural superintendents that are unique to rural school districts. The researchers identified the following three leadership priorities through the data collection: (a) a belief all students can and will achieve academic
success; (b) a necessity to have high quality teachers in every classroom; and (c) efforts to create resources (Forner et al., 2012). The researchers were clear to make a distinction between leadership priorities and practices. For the purposes of this study, leadership priorities were defined as “primary goals and work commitments” (Forner et al., 2012, p. 5).

The analyzed data collection also led to seven leadership practices that were identified. The researchers defined leadership practices as “the means and methods used by the subjects to pursue their leadership priorities” (Forner et al., 2012, p. 5). The seven identified leadership practices and the correlation to Waters and Marzano (2006) are provided in the following table:

**Table 3**

*Correlation Between Waters and Marzano (2006) and Effective Rural Leadership Practices*

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| Continuous monitoring | 3a. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling *students*  
3b. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling *teachers*  
4. Low-performing teachers or principals are removed |
| Providing defined autonomy to principal | 5. Close working relationship with the building principal is leveraged |
| Effectively utilizing resources | 6. Takes a harder line in union contract negotiations  
7. Re-aligns financial commitments to match district priorities |
An analysis of Table 3 shows the findings from Forner et al. (2012) were consistent with a majority of the findings from Waters and Marzano (2006). Forner et al. (2012) found that collaborative goal setting was not a common practice among rural superintendents, which was the lone significant difference from Waters and Marzano (2006). Forner et al. (2012) found in their research that rural superintendents clearly set the tone for goals and expectations through the use of direct and personal conversations in order to convince stakeholders. One possible explanation for this approach was the close proximity and accessibility that rural superintendents have with stakeholders.

A key theme that is identified in each of these studies around rural superintendent leadership is the importance of effective communication. This leadership characteristic fits with the notion Kowalski et al. (2011) identified that we have entered the age of superintendent as communicator. Rural superintendents must be able to communicate in order to address the numerous challenges that are specific to the rural superintendency. These challenges are addressed in the following section.

**Rural Superintendent Challenges.** The need for effective leadership in rural schools will be instrumental in rural communities, as they continue to deal with issues such as teacher shortages (Garcia, 2017), lower student achievement, high student mobility, and budget constraints (NASBE, 2014). The issues that are specific to rural school districts and the superintendents charged with leading these districts may make the role of the rural superintendent less desirable (Lamkin, 2006). Hill (2015) noted that it may not be uncommon for a rural superintendent to have to drive a bus, teach a class, as well as handle paperwork for all federal and state programs. Or put more succinctly, as
one superintendent stated “I’m it! I don’t have any support staff like the guys running the large districts.” (Hill, 2015, p. 7).

Another aspect of the rural superintendency that may make it less desirable is the notion of the rural superintendent being one of the, if not the most visible person in the community. Copeland (2013) quoted one rural superintendent as saying “anonymity – everybody knows you . . . everybody knows you” (p. 13). This feeling is unique to the rural superintendent due to the close-knit nature of rural communities (Lamkin, 2006). The isolationism goes beyond being one of the most identifiable individuals in the community. Hill (2015) also identified rural superintendents lacking access to major universities or corporations from which to draw help from in a variety of ways. Examples may include access to volunteers, special foundations, or civic organizations that urban and suburban superintendents likely would have access to (Hill).

The identified needs and challenges that exist for rural school districts have been written about. Research has shown that while the country has focused on urban schools and their respective problems, the rural school district could currently be being over looked (Hill, 2015). Research conducted about rural school superintendents shows that they often carry many different roles than those of their urban and suburban counterparts. The roles, leadership, and challenges that rural superintendents face is unique to the position.

**Conclusion**

It has been shown superintendents have a positive impact on student achievement (Henwood, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006), therefore it will be imperative to hire effective superintendents to replace those leaving the profession in
order to make the overall quality and effectiveness of public education in Colorado better (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1148). As the roles and emphasis on the superintendency continue to evolve due to a volatile political and cultural environment, superintendents will face an increased number of dynamic issues and complex problems. With an anticipated shortage of superintendents that have experience due to current and impending retirements and possible misalignment in the NPBEA standards, the current approach to prepare aspiring superintendents to be ready for the position needs to be examined. Additionally, the need for increased research on the rural superintendency was identified as an area of emphasis (Garn, 2003; Henwood, 2016). With approximately 80% of school districts in Colorado designated as rural or small rural by the Colorado Department of Education (2016b), it is important to have individuals prepared to take on the specialized nuances of the rural superintendent.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I reviewed research around the superintendency in chapter two to provide context and to identify a gap in the current research. In chapter three, I discuss the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods that were used in the study to identify what aspiring rural superintendents can do to best prepare for the superintendency. Additionally, I identified procedures for participant selection and research setting, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness for the proposed research project. In response to the gap that I identified, the central question of this phenomenological study was: What do current rural superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to prepare?

The continued evolution and changing dynamic for the school superintendent, identified need to research rural school districts, and the documented concerns around preparing aspiring superintendents guided the formation of the research question. I used the research question to frame the methodology, data collection, and analysis in this research study. The purpose of this study was to provide rich, in-depth data through qualitative research by studying practicing successful rural superintendents’ perceptions about superintendent preparation.

Qualitative Paradigm

Understanding the perceptions of practicing rural superintendents on how to best prepare for the chief education officer position in a school district is critical in helping
future educational leaders be successful for the position of rural superintendent. Learning from the common lived experiences of those individuals who have made the successful transition to the superintendency can be helpful for those individuals who will one day be seeking the position. I used qualitative research methods to identify themes that can be helpful for aspiring superintendents and professors to know if the current standards and coursework around the superintendency are valid (Kowalski, 2008).

Qualitative research is “the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns and themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Based on this definition and description, qualitative methods in this study were helpful to make sense of practicing superintendents’ perspectives. While a researcher may use quantitative survey data from a large number of respondents to generalize how aspiring superintendents can best prepare for the position, gathering data about the common lived experiences of current successful superintendents allowed me to provide a richer and more in-depth understanding of the topic.

**Epistemology**

It is important to understand the philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research because it guides how researchers identify a problem and develop research questions to study and helps readers understand the epistemological viewpoint from which research is conducted (Creswell, 2013, p. 19). Research is about questions, and considerable effort should be put into answering what methodologies and methods
will be utilized to answer the chosen research questions (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). Additionally, researchers should be concerned with justifying the choice and use of the methodologies and methods (Crotty). The justification for the decision to use a particular methodology and method may be rooted in the researcher's assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives (Crotty). Understanding and explaining these ideals illustrates how we know what we know.

There are four elements which should inform one another and have perspectives that relate: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods (Crotty, 1998, p. 4). Epistemology is defined as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Or put another way, epistemology is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know.

The research design I used aligns with a constructionist epistemology in that it assumes “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). I attempted to construct meaning and a clearer reality through the collection of data to answer the research question. Therefore, the epistemological stance that guided me through this process was constructionism or the idea that “reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single observable reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 8). Researchers following a constructionist epistemology believe that meanings are created when people engage with the world they are understanding (Crotty, 1998). Hence, by
following a constructionist view, it was critical that this study included the common lived experiences of current practicing superintendents.

**Theoretical Framework:**  
**Interpretivism**

According to Crotty (1998), theoretical perspective addresses “our view of the human world and social life within that world” (p. 7). An interpretivist viewpoint informs the choice of the theoretical framework guiding this study. Ultimately, I was seeking to understand and interpret the meanings of human behavior through the use of the research question. This mindset allowed me to utilize an interpretivist theoretical framework. By analyzing current superintendents’ responses about their perceived career experiences as a practicing superintendent, I was able to interpret the verbal responses provided to construct meanings and to develop a deeper understanding of the research problem.

**Research Methodology:**  
**Phenomenology**

Crotty (1998) identified methodology as a “strategy, plan of action, process or design” (p. 3) used to shape a researcher’s choice and the particular method for conducting research. In order for a researcher to understand the appropriate methodology and utilize the correct methods, an understanding and identification of epistemology, theoretical framework, and researcher stance must take place. Based upon my constructionist epistemological view, I used an interpretivist theoretical perspective to guide this study.

Phenomenology is the study of peoples’ lived experiences of their world and is an attempt to identify a fresh perception of existence (Crotty, 1998). The problem identified in this research was best examined by identifying and understanding several individuals’
common or shared experiences of having served as a rural school superintendent. This was well suited for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). The emphasis in phenomenology is to “find common understandings and the meanings of common practices” (Crotty, 1998, p. 83). In doing so, I focused on an exploration of personal experiences. A phenomenological methodology called for the researcher to use a qualitative interview as the primary method of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through my qualitative interview, the end result of the phenomenological study allowed me to develop a “composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). My goal in utilizing this type of approach was to provide the reader with a better understanding of each participant’s perspective on how to best prepare for the rural school superintendent (Creswell).

Methods

Methods are the “techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). For this investigation, I used purposeful sample selection and data collection from semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are utilized when specific information is desired from the respondents while still providing an opportunity to ask follow-up questions that are not planned ahead of time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These methods fit the phenomenological methodology in attempting to discover through direct experience an identification of a single concept through the common lived experiences of a group of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998).
Data Collection

The following describes the process I undertook to identify the participants that were included in my data collection. Specifically, the setting of the study is described, the sampling method that was used to identify participants and the rationale for that method, and the method I used to collect my data. This systematic approach helped me appropriately identify participants that would help me answer the research question.

Research Setting. Research was conducted within the state of Colorado with superintendents working in districts designated as rural or small rural as defined by the CDE (2017c). The Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2017c) categorizes school districts into two separate rural designations based upon the size of the district and the distance from the nearest large urban or urbanized area. A rural district has a district student population between 1,000 and 6,500 students, while a small rural district consists of student enrollment below 1,000. Rural and small rural school districts account for approximately 80% of the school districts in the state of Colorado (CDE, 2017c). Due to the high percentage of districts that are designated rural or small rural, I focused on superintendents that are currently employed in a rural or small rural district. When possible, the research was conducted in the respective participants’ workplaces. Conducting face-to-face interviews in the natural setting is conducive for qualitative research because allowed me to interact with the participants in their actual context (Briggs et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There were instances when the participating superintendent’s workplace was not conducive for the interview. When this occurred, I met with the participant at a public location most convenient for the participant.
Participants. The sampling for this study was a nonprobability method common to qualitative research that allowed me to discover or find implications from practicing superintendents’ experiences when they first assumed the position they currently fill (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Specifically, typical purposeful sampling was used in order to ascertain the common lived experiences of current superintendents. The participants were selected because they were not in any way “atypical” or “unusual” and had common lived experiences which are necessary in phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97).

The selected superintendents were in at least their fifth year of experience in their current districts and worked in a district that has a minimum of an accredited rating according to the 2014 CDE District Performance Framework (CDE, 2017b). These purposeful criteria were used for several reasons. First, due to superintendent tenure typically lasting approximately anywhere from three to six years (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2011), these criteria indicate the participating superintendents have worked with multiple school board members and have earned at least one contract extension. Second, the CDE District Performance Framework is used by the state of Colorado to rate how school districts are performing in the state (CDE, 2017b). An accredited rating indicates the district meets statewide attainment on the performance indicators (CDE, 2017b). The 2014 CDE District Performance Framework was used in lieu of the 2016 framework due to concerns around accurate data with the 2015-2016 data that stemmed from a substantive increase in statewide testing opt-outs during the spring of 2016 (Whaley, 2016). Finally, rural and small rural schools were selected because of the high percentage of rural school districts that exist in Colorado and the identified need
to further research rural schools (CDE, 2016b). Further, it can be assumed superintendents working in a rural or small rural school district have more in common than if they worked in suburban or urban designated school districts, essential to phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I interviewed six superintendents from the rural CDE categories in order to obtain perspectives from practicing superintendents in rural school district educational settings. The districts were identified using the Colorado Department of Education Rural and Small Rural Designation list (2017c) and with the assistance of Jhon Penn who works with the CDE and superintendents across the state. I purposefully identified districts from the eastern and front-range region of the state that fit the rural and small rural criteria. I had a personal connection or was referred to the participants through a professional relationship. This purposeful sampling was utilized in order to provide the best opportunity to obtain quality, in-depth responses to the research question (Lichtman, 2013). I believe that by having had a prior relationship or a professional connection with the participants that I was able to obtain more in-depth and rich responses to the interview questions than if I had not had a prior connection with the participants. While this approach did not lend to objectivity, the purpose of this approach was to construct and interpret the participants’ common lived experiences (Lichtman). The superintendents were contacted by email to solicit participation and inform them of the study’s purpose (see appendix B); the email was followed by a personal phone call. The email was accompanied by a Request to Participate in Research form (see appendix c) which outlined the informed consent process, including the purpose of the study, the
procedures, and the potential risks of participation, confidentiality, and research participation rights (Creswell, 2013).

Permission to be Studied. I received approval from the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study commenced (Appendix A). Procedures required by the University of Northern Colorado IRB were followed with fidelity. An initial letter of introduction was sent to the identified rural superintendent fully explaining the purpose of the study and requesting consent to conduct the in-person study either at their respective office or a location of their choosing. A follow-up phone call was done to check that the letter had been received. After approval from the participating superintendents had been attained, the University of Northern Colorado IRB process and procedures were adhered to before the study proceeded. Once the University of Northern Colorado IRB application had been approved, I spoke with the respective superintendents to explain the purpose of the study in further detail.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Individual interviews were conducted in coordination with the participating rural superintendents. Times and locations of interviews were mutually agreed upon. All participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed for the study. Participants in the study were identified by pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The school district and school names were assigned pseudonyms for confidentially purposes as well. Only the researcher in the study has a key with names and identifiers. The process was in alignment with the requirements of the IRB at University of Northern Colorado.

Data Collection. Researchers utilizing phenomenological study typically rely on in-depth interview for the process of collecting data (Creswell, 2013). I used open-ended,
semi-structured interviews as my main form of data collection method in order to better understand how people think and perceive reality (Briggs et al., 2012). The interviews were completed in two separate meetings and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews allowed me to collect data related to what current rural superintendents believe aspiring superintendents can do to prepare for the superintendency. The interviews consisted of 15 total questions that revolved around leadership and superintendent preparation. The questions were written in relation to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) standards to obtain a deeper understanding of the necessary leadership attributes and skills needed in correspondence to the AASA standards.

I utilized an interview protocol for participant interviews. The interview protocol provided an opportunity for me to collect a similar amount and type of information from each participant (Creswell, 2013). I used semi-structured interview to obtain specific desired information from the respondents while providing for the opportunity to explore emerging issues or themes as the interviews unfolded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, I took fieldnotes during the interviews and used documents to triangulate data and improve trustworthiness. Documents included items such as news articles, documents collected from the participants, and the superintendent’s message from the participant’s district website. I assigned each participant and school district with a pseudonym in an effort to make their identity remain as confidential as the research method allows.

Prior to beginning the interviews, I piloted the interview questions through a BOCES rural superintendent group to obtain feedback on how well the questions related
to rural superintendents. I applied the feedback and rewrote the questions and submitted to my committee to check for applicability towards the AASA standards. This final round of feedback helped me to develop my final 15 interview questions that were used during the two interviews.

**Data Analysis**

In order to answer the research question, I used a process conducive to analyzing qualitative data as identified by Creswell (2013). This included organizing the data, reading through the database, coding the database, interpreting data, and presenting the essence or meaning of the findings (Creswell, 2013, p. 190). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that analyzing qualitative data requires a “tolerance for ambiguity” (p. 201). Therefore, in order for me to have structure in my approach, I followed data analysis guidelines identified by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), while following coding guidelines as identified by Saldana (2016).

**Organizing the Data**

This initial step helped me to be successful in the proceeding stages of data analysis. I had the recorded interviews transcribed by a transcription service. I did this due to personal time constraints while trying to conduct research at the same time as working full-time in a new job. Upon receiving the transcribed data, I organized the individual word documents into files on my computer. Additionally, I organized documents I obtained and the recorded interviews into respective files on my computer. All data stored on my computer was passcode protected. Field notes that were collected from my interview protocol were stored in a locked file cabinet at my home office.
**Reading through Database**

Following completion of each interview, I listened to the interviews until I felt I had a good understanding of the content I obtained. This helped me reflect upon the interviews and identify areas that I felt like I asked appropriate follow-up questions and get a sense of the data. Simultaneously, I had the recorded interviews transcribed by a transcription service. After receiving the transcribed interviews from the transcription service, I listened to the recorded interviews and read through the transcription to ensure accuracy. I read the field notes and the transcripts several times over in their entirety in order to become immersed in the details to obtain a complete understanding of the collected data. This was done to acquire a deeper understanding of the whole database (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016).

**Coding the Database**

Next, I compiled and analyzed data using open coding to identify common emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Forming codes or categories is an essential step in qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). This is done in order to begin breaking the data down into small pieces and eventually identify themes that emerged from the research. The initial step was to begin open coding, also known as initial coding, is when the data is broken down and then examined and compared to identify similarities and differences (Saldana, 2016). My goal during this process was to remain open to all possible directions the data took me and to reflect on the contents of the information that was collected (Saldana). All data was compiled and similar responses were identified, coded, and organized into common themes or the broad units of information that consist of several codes combined to form a common idea (Creswell). I did this by going through
the interview transcripts and open coding sentence-by-sentence, otherwise known as microanalysis (Saldana, 2016).

In the second step, or second cycle, of the coding process I utilized axial coding to reorganize and reanalyze the data from the open coding process (Saldana, 2016). This was done to identify categories and themes from the data into a smaller list of categories or themes until saturation was achieved (Saldana). This step in the process allowed me to begin forming categories, or themes, from the open and axial coding process.

Themes are broad units of information that are comprised of multiple smaller codes put together to help form a common idea (Creswell, 2013). The goal in identifying these broad units, or themes, is to capture recurring patterns that come through in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I developed the themes based on the first and second rounds of coding, which were subsequently condensed into major themes. These themes were used to help interpret the data.

**Interpreting Data**

The major identified themes are used to help identify what is learned from the data collection. In this step, I made connections and comparisons to the literature in order to identify areas that supported to the existing literature as well as contradicted or added to the body of research. Creswell (2013, p. 187) identified interpretation based on “hunches, insights, and intuition” ways to process and interpret data. I used insight obtained from my interviews and data collection to interpret my data.

I worked to identify the individual experiences and context of those experiences as stated by the superintendents participating in this research. In order to deliver an accurate portrayal of the superintendents’ experiences I provided a description and
verbatim examples of what the participating superintendents experienced, a process Creswell (2013) identified as textural description. By using this rich description and verbatim examples I was able report and visualize the essence of the findings.

**Representing the Data**

The findings were organized by theme to answer the research question. Rich description, dialogue, and quotes were used to provide appropriate context and support the identified themes. Additionally, figures and tables were used when appropriate to provide a visual representation of data to support the written analysis. Finally, I wrote an exhaustive description of the data to describe the lived experiences of the participating superintendents. This step is referred to as the “essence” and represents the concluding aspect of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013, p. 194).

**Trustworthiness**

Regardless of the type of research, quantitative or qualitative, it is important for my work to be viewed as credible. In order to be viewed as credible, qualitative researchers must demonstrate a level of reliability and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness strategies, described by Creswell (2013) as “validation strategies” (p. 250), are accepted strategies used to document the “accuracy” of a study (p. 250). Triangulation was used to increase trustworthiness, which according to Briggs et al. (2012) “compares many sources of evidence in order to determine the accuracy of information or phenomena” (p. 84). Interviews, field notes, member checking, peer review, an audit trail, and documents were used to triangulate data and improve trustworthiness of the phenomenology. Documents included items such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent’s message from the participant’s district website.
Member checking, or response validation, is an additional way to assess the credibility in qualitative research and is utilized in a majority of qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers member check when they “solicit participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Soliciting participants’ views includes taking the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants for review of accuracy and credibility.

I conducted member checks by emailing a transcript of both interviews to every participant and providing the participating superintendents with an opportunity to respond, providing clarifications, corrections, and commentary on the preliminary findings. Most of the participants responded through email and verified the transcripts were accurate and in context. I had to follow-up by phone with two of the participants and received verification that the transcripts were accurate on the respective phone call.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

As a researcher, my biases include perceptions and assumptions obtained from my personal and professional experiences. It is important for qualitative researchers to bracket their biases in order to provide context from my personal experiences to help with trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). My personal experience around the school superintendency began at youth with my father presiding as the superintendent of schools where I grew up. Additionally, I had an uncle that served as the superintendent of schools in a number of districts throughout the Midwest. Both individuals served as superintendent of schools for over 25 years. Because of this experience, I initially rejected the pursuit of public education as a career. Watching from afar the time, energy,
effort, and community interactions that took place for superintendents seemed unappealing. Instead, I pursued leadership opportunities in the private sector.

Throughout my undergraduate pursuits, peers stated the difference my father had made in the schools and community. Similar statements were made about my uncle. These interactions led to my belief in the impact of leadership.

Upon moving from Maine to Colorado, I had a desire to change career paths in order to improve the opportunities afforded to our youth and our community. Reflecting upon the impact my father and uncle had in their respective communities and the conversations that had taken place with my peers, I made a career change from the private sector to public education. I have always had the belief that teachers will have the greatest impact on individual students, but in order to achieve the greatest impact on all students and school community, I am pursuing a career as a school superintendent.

In an attempt to minimize bias from this research study, I utilized several strategies to increase reliability and trustworthiness of the study. Specifically, I used member checking, data triangulation, and reflexivity in order to improve the trustworthiness and reliability of the research. After each interview was transcribed, I read through the transcript and listened to the recorded interview to ensure accuracy. Next, I emailed the transcribed interviews to the respective participants to member check accuracy and approval of content. If I did not receive an email response in return stating the transcription had been received, I followed up with a phone call within three days to ensure the email had been received. I had one participant ask to ensure a segment of data was removed due to concerns of confidential information. I received a response for all of the transcribed interviews except for one. Documents were also collected that included
press-releases and newspaper articles to verify information obtained through the interviews. I also used an audit-trail to write my thoughts and impressions following the interviews. Finally, as part of reflexivity, I provided a statement about my personal professional experiences in education as well as growing up with father who worked as a rural superintendent. These are generally viewed as “accepted strategies to document the accuracy of qualitative studies” (Creswell, 2013, p. 250).

The limitations in this study are typical of qualitative research. I focused on the perspectives of six practicing superintendents from a rural or small rural school district in Colorado. The data was collected a single time. I did not seek to include school superintendents or school leaders that currently practice in a charter, private, or parochial school setting. Given the limited number of participants that were interviewed, the results of this study should not be considered generalizable.

An assumption associated with this research was that the superintendents involved in the study were honest to the best of their knowledge during the interview process. Additionally, it was assumed the superintendents were able to reflect on what they struggled with upon initially being hired as a superintendent. Finally, it was assumed the participants were able to recall and identify what they would have benefitted from learning most in their preparation or university programs.

**Conclusion**

The importance of leadership in public education cannot be overstated. The body of literature available supports the position of the school superintendent as a role that has transformed with increasing expectations and responsibilities since its inception in 1837. It is a position which requires the person presiding over it to wear many hats, embrace
many challenges, and take on a variety of leadership positions. As we progress into the 21st century, it is clear that a high percentage of superintendents are currently retiring or plan to retire by the year 2020 (Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015). Additionally, there is concern about who is prepared to take over the positions once they become available (Cooper et al., 2000; Howley et al., 2002; Nussbaum, 2007; Finnan et al., 2015; Winter, 2007) and the preparation programs currently available for aspiring superintendents (Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006). In order to best prepare aspiring superintendents for the position, additional qualitative inquiry focused on analyzing how current superintendents believe aspiring superintendents can best prepare for the chief education officer position is warranted.
CHAPTER IV
DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This dissertation was conducted to identify what current rural superintendents believe that those aspiring to the position must do to prepare for the position. Specifically, I focused on current practicing rural superintendents that were currently in their fifth year of employment with their current school and had a minimum of an accredited district rating as identified by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2017b). The rural designation status was obtained by using the CDE Rural and Small Rural Designation list (2017c.). I conducted this research in order to gain an understanding of practicing rural superintendents’ perspectives about what those aspiring to the rural superintendency can do to best prepare for the position. Additionally, Kowalski (2008, p. 255) noted a need for additional research to identify the extent to which practitioners and professors agreed that the existing knowledge base on superintendents is valid. I hoped that conducting this research would provide information to superintendent preparation programs, licensure programs, and universities that would help them refine, adjust, and improve the content of their programs to align with the realities of the position.

Research is a systematic way to answer a specified question or questions (Crotty, 1998). In chapter one I identified the problem and provided a brief overview of the superintendency. I continued the research process by examining and writing a detailed
review of literature around the superintendency and narrowed the content down to the rural superintendency in chapter two. In chapter three, I explained the methodology that I used in my data collection and analysis. This chapter includes the presentation of data that I collected and analyzed through my qualitative approach in order to answer the research question.

The research question in this study was: What do current rural superintendents believe that those aspiring to the position must do to prepare? In order to answer the research question, I purposefully selected and interviewed six practicing rural superintendents that have been in their current position for a minimum for five years. Two separate interviews were conducted with each participant; both interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. I used a semi-structured interview protocol so I could have a set of predetermined questions and have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. I used the first interview as an opportunity to acquaint myself with the participants if I had not already known them, to get an overall impression of their respective leadership approaches, and identify what they believed had led to their success at their current district. In the second interview I focused on gathering specific information connected to the AASA standards and the participants’ self-identified involvement with them in their own district. This was done in order to try and identify specified areas of focus that the practicing superintendents spend most of their time on. In identifying this information, I hoped to obtain data to inform aspiring superintendents and respective educational institutions what these practicing rural superintendents do in their day-to-day jobs. Any answer was appropriate if it came from what the superintendents had learned or recalled from their respective prior experiences.
The 15 questions I asked the participants, when combined together, were used to help me answer the research question. Additionally, I gathered documents from outside resources which included newspaper articles, historical conference agendas highlighting speaking appearances, and press-releases in order to obtain corroborate the data from the interviews. Finally, I used field notes and an audit trail to write my personal thoughts during the interview and to reflect on the responses I obtained following the interviews.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is a written profile of the practicing superintendents and their respective school districts. The second section is an analysis of their responses to the two semi-structured interviews.

**Participant Profiles**

The six participating superintendents in this study were all practicing rural or small rural superintendents in Colorado. Due to work obligations and time constraints, I only interviewed and worked with rural superintendents in eastern Colorado. In order for me to have a face-to-face interview with someone from the western part of the state or some of the mountain areas I would have had to drive a minimum of five hours one way for a 45-minute interview. I did not find this feasible. Below is a table of the participants that were a part of the study. The participants and their respective school districts were given pseudonyms in order to try and maintain participant confidentiality.
Table 4

*Participants’ current district employed at, years at that district, and approximate total years in education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Current District</th>
<th>Years at District</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chuck Taylor</td>
<td>High Plains</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth Wallace</td>
<td>River North</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Ross</td>
<td>East Plains</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Sexton</td>
<td>West Plains</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly White</td>
<td>Forest Park</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Springsteen</td>
<td>Prairie City</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Briefly summarizing the table, it is evident the participating superintendents have all been involved in education for a long period of time and that most have spent a significant amount of time employed in their current district. Bob is the exception to this, with only six total years in his current district. The following is a description of each participant’s background and their respective district.

**Chuck Taylor.** The first study participant, Chuck, is the practicing superintendent at High Plains School District. High Plains School District is comprised of four separate communities with a total district enrollment over 800 students as stated by the 2016-2017 CDE district rural and small rural designation table (CDE, 2016c). The district encompasses approximately 450 square miles. High Plains is a diverse district that is comprised of approximately 60% Caucasian and and 40% Hispanic students (CDE, 2017d). The free and reduced population was over 40% during the 2015-2016 school year (CDE, 2017d). The district’s graduation rate in 2016-2017 was over 95%, the second highest in the state and compared to a state average of 78.9% (CDE, 2017e).

Chuck has been involved in education for 26 years and has been the superintendent at High Plains for ten years. Chuck first started in education as a
vocational shop teacher before beginning his administrative career as an athletic director. Chuck spent time as an elementary principal before initially moving into the superintendency at Bedford School District for three years. After his third year at Bedford, Chuck was offered the superintendent position at High Plains School District where he has been since. Chuck earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Wyoming. Prior to entering school administration, Chuck obtained his Master’s in Educational Leadership from the University of Phoenix then a license in administration from CU at Colorado Springs.

I have known Chuck professionally for 10 years prior to this study. We began at High Plains School District at the same time. He began as the superintendent at the same time I earned my first teaching job at High Plains. Chuck gave me my first opportunity in school administration when he hired me as the high school assistant principal and athletic director where I stayed for four years before taking another position in the same role. Since I left, Chuck and I have stayed in contact. He is someone I have considered a friend and a mentor since I have known him. I appreciated his candor while working with him at High Plains and believe he gave me the same candor for this study. Both interviews were conducted in his office. Chuck had his diplomas hanging in his office. Additionally, he has numerous books related to leadership and business that he has used in his career and that he referenced in our interview.

**Martin Sexton.** Martin began his education career teaching special education at a large district in Fort Worth, Texas when he was 28 years old and spent five years there before moving to Colorado. Prior to teaching, Martin spent time working with his father-in-law in the construction business. Martin has spent the last 15 years as superintendent at
West Plains School District after spending five years as the superintendent at Silver School District. Prior to being a superintendent, Martin was an assistant principal and athletic director for two years at a rural school district in Colorado before moving to Silver School District as their middle school principal. Martin spent a total of 17 years at Silver School District serving as middle school principal, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent before leaving to become the superintendent at West Plains School District. West Plains School District is a diverse school district with approximately 70% of the student population Caucasian and 30% Hispanic. The district has a free and reduced lunch rate of approximately 30% (CDE, 2017d). The free and reduced lunch rate has decreased each year over the past five years from approximately 40% in the 2011-2012 school year. The district had over 3,500 students enrolled during the 2016-2017 school year (CDE, 2017c). West Plains has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school along with a charter school that serves students in kindergarten through 8th grade.

Martin earned his bachelor’s and master’s degree while in Texas. He has a Master’s in Special Education and went on to pursue his Ph.D. in Psychology with a central office administrator license from Colorado State University while he was serving as principal at Silver Middle School. After finishing his doctorate, Martin became the high school principal then assistant superintendent at Silver School District when the acting superintendent asked Martin to apply for the position. Martin served as assistant superintendent for three years prior to becoming superintendent at Silver School District where he served for five years. He moved to West Plains School District in 2003.
I had never met or spoken with Martin prior to emailing and calling him to participate in this study. I was referred to Martin by a peer in my doctoral program that works as his assistant superintendent. I believe this personal connection allowed me the opportunity to meet Martin. Furthermore, I believe this connection helped me to obtain candid information as Martin came across as genuine, relaxed, and thoughtful during our two interviews together. Both interviews were conducted in Martin’s office. Martin had his Ph.D. diploma from Colorado State hanging in his office as well as a clock he had received from Silver School District signifying and thanking him for his 17 years of total service to Silver School District.

**Seth Wallace.** Seth has been the superintendent at River North School District for 19 years and is in his 27th year overall at the district. Seth was the only participant that has spent his entire career at the same school district. Seth earned two bachelor degrees, one in business management and another in biblical studies. Seth had a less traditional path to the superintendency. Seth worked at a couple of small Christian colleges in admissions and financial aid after earning his bachelor’s degree. Eventually Seth came to Colorado to earn his MBA at the University of Colorado in Boulder before returning to the southeast to work in an admissions and financial aid office in Mississippi. After a short period of time in Mississippi, a friend contacted Seth about a job opening as Business Services Director at River North School District. Seth moved for the job and served in the role for seven years before eventually becoming the Superintendent at River North in 1998. Seth eventually went on to earn his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Northern Colorado in 2007. He earned this while serving as the
superintendent at River North. Seth has never taught in the classroom, the only individual in this study that has not done so.

River North School District is comprised of two small communities and had over 1,000 students enrolled in the district during the 2016-2017 school year according to the CDE (CDE, 2017c). Similar to High Plains and West Plains School districts, River North has a diverse student population with over 60% of the students being Caucasian and approximately 40% of the students Hispanic (CDE, 2017d). The district has historically had a high percentage of free and reduced students with approximately 40% of the population qualifying for free and reduced lunch during the 2015-2016 school year (CDE, 2017d). During the 2016-2017 school year, River North High School had one of the highest graduation rates in the state (CDE, 2017e).

I have known Seth for three years. I originally met Seth when I was taking School Finance in my doctoral program and he was one of the two professors that co-taught the course. Since that time, we intermittently remained in contact. In June 2017, Seth took a chance and hired me to serve as River North’s Business Services Director. I now report directly to Seth. Over the course of the past few months, I have had an opportunity to work closely with Seth and see how he operates and runs River North District. Seth was very personable during our interviews and came across as humble and as an individual that sincerely wants to help and make the district better. His responses were very genuine and thoughtful. He spoke frequently to his servant leadership approach. Additionally, his desire to help and serve can be exemplified by a mission trip he took to South America in 2015. Both of our interviews were conducted in his office. Items in his office included all of his diplomas as well as several educational texts that he has used as resources when
teaching collegiate courses. Additionally, Seth has numerous binders with information about the district’s bond initiatives and awards given to him he had earned for work with Association of School Business Officials and from the district’s local Future Farmers of America chapter.

**Lilly White.** Lilly has been the superintendent of schools at Forest Park School district since 2005. This is the only superintendency position she has held in her career. Lilly was a landscaping contractor prior to starting her career in education and initially earned her Bachelor’s in Electronics Engineering with a Minor in Mathematics. After facing some health issues, Lilly earned her alternative license in math and eventually became a math teacher. Lilly eventually went on to earn her Master’s in Special Education from Adams State University and her administrators license from the University of Colorado Denver.

Lilly initially started her career in education at Central Decatur where she worked for four years as a classroom aid and swimming instructor. After earning her alternative license in math, Lilly earned a math teaching position at Bondurant. Lilly eventually returned to Arriba as a special education teacher after earning her Masters in Special Education. Lilly eventually moved to Forest Park School District as a math teacher and became superintendent after having taught math at the district for four years.

Forest Park School District is classified as small-rural with a district enrollment of approximately 90 students (CDE, 2017c). The district is comprised of mostly Caucasian students which made up over 80% of the district enrollment during the 2015-2016 school year (CDE, 2017d). Hispanic students were the other significant population, making up over 10% of the student population. Over the past five years, these two demographics
have made up the majority of the student population. The district’s free and reduced lunch rate trended between 45% and 65% amid the 2011-2016 school years. This fluctuation is common in rural districts because a change by a few students can cause a significant change in percentages.

I did not know Lilly prior to asking her to participate in this study. Jhon Penn from CDE suggested that I contact her. I called Lilly to follow-up from my initial email to participate in the study. When I mentioned Jhon’s name and that he had suggested I contact her, Lilly’s attitude changed and she agreed to participate. Lilly later admitted in our second interview that she ignored my initial email request and was surprised that I had “persevered” and made a follow-up phone call. Again, I believe having referenced a personal connection served me well in getting Lilly to participate in this study and earn her trust. Both of our interviews were held in her office. Lilly came across as eager to work with me and share her experiences. She has also expressed an eagerness to see the data that comes from my research. Lilly has earned two awards during her time as superintendent, recognizing her leadership role in education. One of the awards was specific to women and another included men and women.

**Bob Ross.** Bob is the superintendent of schools at East Plains School District. Bob experienced the most job-change of the superintendents that participated in this study, having served in the position at three other Colorado school districts prior to taking the principal position at East Plains in 2012. He was named the superintendent at East Plains in 2013 following the retirement of his predecessor.

Bob started his career in education after spending a few years working in construction. Bob taught math and English for eleven years in Montana, then took the
superintendent position at Great Plains School District in Colorado in 2002. Bob had also been working as a high school official since moving to Colorado. His love for athletics and his kids came through during our interview.

Bob initially went to school to become an engineer, however switched to education and went on to earn a Bachelor’s in Math with an English Minor from Montana State. He also has a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership and Administration from Montana State and his Colorado administration license from the University of Northern Colorado.

East Plains School District lies in the Colorado northeastern plains. With over 200 students in the district, East Plains is classified as a small-rural district (CDE, 2017c). Over 80% of the students that attended East Plains School District in the 2015-2016 school year were Caucasian (CDE, 2017d). This number has fluctuated between 80% and 90% since the 2011-2012 school year. Caucasians and Hispanics are the ethnicities that have made up the majority of the student population during this five-year span. The free and reduced lunch rate was similar at East Plains School district than other districts in this study with approximately 35% of the students claiming free and reduced lunch at East Plains in the 2015-2016 school year (CDE, 2017d). This number has fluctuated from approximately 30% to 40% during the same five-year time-frame.

Bob was another participant that I did not know prior to interviewing him. My current boss, Seth Wallace, served as Bob’s mentor when he first came to Colorado. When I initially contacted Bob I mentioned that Seth had suggested I contact him. Bob spoke about how much he liked Seth and how he had helped him throughout his career. The first interview with Bob was in his office. He had several pictures of his family, one
of which he made sure to point out during our interview when he spoke of his daughter and her wrestling accomplishments. The second interview took place in my office. Bob had a superintendent’s meeting that morning that he was going to with Seth. Bob was personable and forthcoming during both interviews.

Richard Springsteen. Richard is the superintendent at Prairie City School District where he has been in the position since 2002. Richard earned his Bachelors in Math at Fort Hayes in Kansas, his Master’s from University of Phoenix, and his licensure from the University of Northern Colorado. Richard initially served as the elementary and high school principal as well as superintendent. In approximately 2014, the district hired a 7-12 principal, however Richard maintained his elementary principal responsibilities as well has duties as superintendent of schools. Richard also serves as the school’s six-man head football coach. Prior to serving as superintendent at Prairie City, Richard was a secondary math teacher in Kansas before moving back to Colorado to become a Dean of Students at a small private school. Richard then became the Athletic Director and Transportation Director at River North School District before moving to the Athletic Director position at Polk High School where he stayed for two years before moving on to Prairie City.

Prairie City School District is located in the northern plains of Colorado. Based on data from the CDE (2017d), Prairie City has consistently maintained a majority Caucasian population over the past five years with approximately 90% of the student body being white. The district’s IEP rate has increased 15% from the 2011-2012 school year to 2014-2015. The district’s free and reduced population has decreased during this time, going from approximately 40% to around 30% during this same time period (CDE,
The district had over 150 students in the 2016-2017 school year according to the CDE Rural Designation (CDE, 2017c).

I did not know Richard prior to our interview. Richard knows my boss, Seth, so there was a personal reference. My initial communication with Richard revolved around a conversation on a Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) bus grant. During that conversation, I asked Richard if he would be interested in participating in this research. Both interviews took place in his office which is located in the district’s K-12 building. The district successfully passed a bond initiative in 2006 to build a new facility, the first in their history.

In the next section of this chapter, I look at the identified themes and sub-themes that were identified through my coding process. Overall, I identified four major themes through my data analysis: (a) Aspects of the Rural Superintendency; (b) Working with the Board; (c) Past Experiences and (d) Beliefs and Characteristics for Success. The diagram in Figure 1 below depicts the identified themes and sub-themes.
Information from the interview transcripts, the notes I took on my interview protocol, and the documents I obtained about the participants were analyzed and coded in order to identify the four major themes. Additionally, seven sub-themes emerged that supported the four major themes.

The four major themes and their respective sub-themes are discussed below. I used information from the multiple data sources—interviews, document collection, and field notes I gathered—in order to provide detail and context. I begin with a written description of the participants’ past experiences and transition to aspects of the rural superintendency. Next, I describe what the superintendents identified around working with the board and finally finish with what participants identified as characteristics and beliefs for success. Table 5 below provides a list of the identified sub-themes, a description of the terms associated with each sub-theme, and an example quotation from the participating superintendents that speaks to the respective sub-theme.
### Table 5

**Summary of Identified Sub-Theme Qualities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Term(s)</th>
<th>Participant Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>Past work experience, degree</td>
<td>“I’ve been a referee for 31 years, 33 because I started in ’84. When I graduated in high school. So, you can’t find better training to be a superintendent than to be a referee.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential People</td>
<td>Mentor, predecessor, paid mentor, relationships</td>
<td>“What happened is I had-- I think a lot of it is relationships and I ended up as a principal getting a new superintendent, named Jeff Ament. And he really became a mentor to me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical &amp; Leadership Skills</td>
<td>School finance, human resources, personnel, communication, operations and maintenance, mentor leadership, servant</td>
<td>“…finance, you need to have a good grasp about that, that’s a quick way to get in trouble.” “People buy in if they see that you’re not afraid to get your hands dirty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m It</td>
<td>Multiple job responsibilities, wear many hats, knowledge of technical skills, easily identified</td>
<td>“You just have so many other irons in the fire in a small district than you do at a bigger one. In a bigger one you can be the icon of the district and be a-- Just a good PR guy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Superintendent</td>
<td>Employee of board, administer, carry out board vision, board work vs. superintendent work</td>
<td>“My job is to administer [what] the board directs me to do through policy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Relations</td>
<td>Superintendent turnover, working with the board, common ground, communicate</td>
<td>“Yeah, and the cardinal rule is, uh, if you got seven members, you never piss four of them off at the same time.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Participant Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Weekly updates, agenda meeting, no surprises, building relationships, formal and informal</td>
<td>“You want to always, always keep your board informed. You never want to surprise them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Characteristics</td>
<td>Education background, professional background, work experience, agenda</td>
<td>“I think their profession makes a difference, level of education is so-so, I think it matters but it's not a guarantee for sure.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>Same vision as board, alignment with community and board, hire good people, hiring a personality</td>
<td>“for the majority of the time and the board members, their vision is something that I could support”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Past Experiences**

Prior to becoming a rural school superintendent, all of the participants spoke to a variety of prior educational and professional experiences that helped them get to where they are today. The superintendents referred to these experiences frequently during their respective first interviews and intermittently throughout their second interviews.

Researchers have identified characteristics such as educational attainment and the use of mentor programs as an important piece of superintendent educational programs (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). While those are certainly aspects that have been identified within this research and are discussed, the opportunity to obtain in-depth qualitative data about how specific past experiences have shaped how these individuals was interesting, and I believe gives insight to how they have been successful in their current positions. Participants spoke of specific relationships that had been developed with peers and individuals that ended up being mentors, positions that were
obtained through acquaintances that allowed them to get their start in education, prior
careers that helped them pull from prior experiences as practicing superintendents,
educational attainment and what was garnered from their respective programs, and
experiences learned from their careers in education prior to becoming superintendent.

**Journey.** The journey each participant took prior to becoming superintendent was
as varied as the individuals that partook in this study. Table 6 below highlights their
respective backgrounds.

**Table 6**

*Participants’ educational and professional backgrounds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
<th>Professional Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chuck Taylor</td>
<td>B.A. Tech Education</td>
<td>Tech Ed Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.Ed. Educational Leadership</td>
<td>Athletic Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrators License</td>
<td>Elementary Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Sexton</td>
<td>B.A. Education</td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.Ed. Special Education Ph.D. Psychology</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>H.S. Assistant Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M.S. Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>H.S. Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>College Admissions and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth Wallace</td>
<td>B.A. Biblical Studies</td>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B.A. Business Administration</td>
<td>Business Services Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBA Organizational Management</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ed.D. Educational Leadership</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly White</td>
<td>B.A. Engineering with Minor in Math</td>
<td>Landscape Business Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.Ed. Special Education Administrators License</td>
<td>Math &amp; Special Education Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chuck Taylor, superintendent at High Plains School District, spoke briefly about his educational experiences and educational career path, instead focusing more on the key people and influential individuals that positively impacted his professional life. Chuck has been a lifelong educator, beginning initially as a high school tech education/shop teacher before becoming an athletic director, then elementary principal and finally superintendent of schools. The path of teacher to building level administration to superintendent is the most commonly identified path to the rural superintendency according to research conducted by AASA (Finnan, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011).

While Chuck credits his coursework and classes for providing frameworks and concepts, he had this to say specifically regarding classes and coursework:

Well, um, so, the other part that probably in the last five years that I've tried to implement a bit more and that I've learned is some leadership, organizational leadership, from-form the business sector. So, Jack Welch-- I think I have read all the Jack Welch books and he was, uh-- he was successful. He was a change agent. I've tried to implement some of his policies and evaluation of people, and a differentiation policy that he uses or that he used. Six Sigma, I've not gone, but would love to go to Six Sigma and get trained there. So, um, I think-- I think that part of leadership's been good. I don't know how many superintendents, uh, follow the business part quite as much.
The education part, for sure, student teaching was important. I can remember my supervising teacher, uh, Randy Brady, like it was yesterday. So just learning from them. You know, I think learning from individuals for me has been much more successful than any CDE meeting than I had gone to. I mean, that's where you get some information on what you have to do. But as far as leadership and philosophy, and for sure just some of those people along the way that I've been able to-- fortunate enough to rub shoulders with. I've learned from classes and-and CDE, uh, seminars, and CASE is process. About how to work the budget and what happens with implementing laws and policies by big picture, how to treat people, uh, how to take on projects. Those-those are the things that you learn from people.

All of this said, I did not feel as though Chuck spoke negatively of his educational experience, however it was clear he felt as though he has supplemented his learnings from areas outside of the educational realm. Additionally, his emphasis on learning from individuals that were also educators was apparent.

Martin did not touch on his prior experiences as much as some of the others. He entered education later than others due to a change in his life circumstances:

I kind of came into teaching after I was a little older. I was 28 years old when I first started teaching. And, it was, an opportunity, I think, for me to kind of find a home, uh, after you know working in my 20s. As I was telling you, I worked for my father-in-law who was in the construction business. I made really, really good money.

But then, when the-- when the marriage fell apart so did the job. And so, I went back to school and got my teaching degree and started teaching in Texas. And I taught-- I taught there for five years at a very, very large district, Fort Worth, and then I was going to school. I got a Master’s degree in Special Education. I was a Special Ed teacher.

However, when he did speak about his educational experiences, Martin focused on what he obtained from his Ph.D. program at Colorado State University. Martin finished the program while he was the middle school principal at Silver School District. From there, he became the high school principal, then assistant superintendent, and finally
superintendent at Silver. Regarding his preparedness for the superintendency, Martin had this to say:

Well, I was better prepared [laughs]. Fully prepared is a-- I don't even know if I'm still fully prepared. It's really good to be in a central office setting for for a few years before you really jump into that head job. So that was, uh, a-a very positive thing for me in my experience with it. I learned so much about it.

Martin was the assistant superintendent at Silver School District for three years and then superintendent for five years before moving to West Plains where he has been for the last 15 years. Martin’s career path to the rural superintendency followed a similar track to what has been identified in research (Finnan, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011).

Seth, superintendent at River North School District, followed what could be considered an untraditional path to the superintendency. Seth began his professional career working in a couple of different college admissions and financial aid offices at small Christian colleges in the southeast United States. It was while he was working at a school in Mississippi that he began looking for a new opportunity and a friend was working as the elementary principal at River North informed him of an opening in their district.

So, after college, I worked for a couple small Christian colleges in admissions, and financial aid, and public relations, and came out here to Colorado to go to grad school and ended up going back to work for one of those colleges. And that wasn't working out very well. They-- Their perception of what I was supposed to doing and my perception of what I was supposed to be doing did not align. And so I started looking for another job, and a friend of mine was the elementary principal here at River North. And, gave me a call and said, "We have this thing called a Business Services Director open. Is that something that you would be interested in?" And I could not write things down fast enough.

After earning the job at River North as Business Services Director, Seth served in the position for seven years before his predecessor and mentor, Mike McCready, retired. Mike worked with Seth to possibly prepare to serve as his replacement. Colorado had
recently changed the requirement that superintendents must have been a classroom
teacher in order to be in the position. Mike worked with Seth to apply for acceptance into
an Educational Leadership Doctoral program. While Seth was ultimately accepted into
the program and earned his Ed.D from there, it was not until after he had become
superintendent at River North. In fact, Seth was initially passed over to serve as
superintendent at River North.

Then the eighth year the current superintendent retired, and I applied, and was not
selected. They selected another gentleman, Bobby Hurley. He was only here for a
year, and, shortly after-- Well, after Christmas of that year, he started not feeling
well, and then it was found out he was pretty sick, and so he actually ended up
resigning in July.

We had passed a bond issue, and so everything in the district was under
construction. So we only had the two buildings at that time, and, everything was
under construction. All the contents of the building were in 17 tractor trailers. We
were in the process of building the high school, and he resigned. And so, I was in
your office, that office [points to office next door] working like mad, because
school started in three weeks, and we didn't have a superintendent. The board was
actually in this room, meeting, and, I had drawn up some things, choices, CASB
provided. You know, like interim superintendents, and they would do the
superintendent search for you, and those kinds of things.

So I just provided options for them, and they asked me to come in and said, "So
how long would it take us to get an assistant superintendent?" Which was my job,
and, I said, "Oh," so, I answered that to the best of my ability, and they kind of
kept talking about different options, and I said, "Well, who's going to be
superintendent?" and they said, "Oh, you are." So that's how I found out that I was
going to be superintendent. So not a traditional path to the superintendency.

Seth noted that his MBA in Organizational Management was beneficial to him in
his position as Business Services Director and ultimately Superintendent at River North.

He also spoke to similarities between his MBA and the Educational Leadership program
at the University of Northern Colorado:

I think my MBA was very useful, in just school, in district administration, as a
whole of managing all the support services, and-and those types of things.
Organizational management, organizational structure. Organizational behavior is
all about dealing with people. There were the accounting classes and cost accounting and, you know, there was basically, another management class of HR [human resources], dealing with the auditors and that kind of stuff. I-I had the terms, I didn't have the experience necessarily, but at least I knew what they were talking about.

When I got into the doctoral program, a lot of the leadership literature that we used in the master's program for business, for organizational management, and the leadership in educational leadership, it-it was a lot of the same authors and literature.

Lilly White originally went to school at the University of Colorado to be an engineer. Life circumstances changed her career path. Lilly raised a family while working at a large telecommunications company and then divorced her husband. It was at this time that she started her career in education when she became an aide at a Title One school and worked as a swimming instructor.

Lilly’s background also involved working as a landscape contractor during the summers in order to help pay for her “educational habit.” From there, Lilly discussed her path:

Central Decatur lays along there, and I had done four years there doing, swimming instructor and Title One Math and then did one year in Bondurant. So for me, big district experience is Bondurant [classified as a Small Rural District]. I decided that was enough, I want to go back to rural Colorado and so-- I did get my alternative and also finished on my Master’s in Special Ed the same year. And so--Master-- in Special Ed. And then, I went back to Central Decatur. Just a fluke thing they happened to have a Special Ed opening. So I didn't go back to the same job I had, but back to the same school and did Special Ed down there. Then married, a farmer across the hill here. And so my daughter graduated from Central Decatur then they had an opening in Math that very same time of year, so up I came as their Math instructor.

Lilly eventually left Central Decatur to become the math teacher at Forest Park. It was at that point that Lilly began thinking about an opportunity to serve in a larger capacity:
I attended all of the board meetings during all of that. And then kind of came to be known as way back in those days as a “head teacher”. In his day, the superintendent and principal were one person. So he did that work but then, you know how it is, you’re always out of the district and something, so at least that gave him somebody that can kind of back-up. So when I had my endorsement even though I wasn't practicing I was still full-time teaching at least that gave him, you know, a backup, so...

Lilly found her education program to be beneficial, especially when it came to the leadership and human relations aspect:

I would say that another thing that really helped me, as you can tell probably with my background, I did have a weakness in the human relations part of it. You know to do your own your business, you run your own business. And you know, of course, teachers have a different relationship than with your co-workers, and with your mentors and your bosses and everything. So they did a really good study in there about leadership styles. ‘What is your normal style versus what style do you need?’ You know, what if you have someone who isn't that engaged in their job and isn't doing that good of a job all the way to the self-starters and look how leadership has to change for them. That for me was a very necessary as I really didn't have any experience with leadership styles at all.

However, when asked how she became prepared for the technical skills of the position, Lilly did not reference her education or mentors. Instead, Lilly responded by saying the “school of hard knocks,” implying learning about the position as she was working as superintendent. This was actually a consistent response from a number of the participating superintendents. Chuck likened it to transitioning from student-teaching to your first year as a teacher, while Martin noted that he was “better prepared” because of having served as an assistant superintendent, he still did not know if you are ever “fully prepared” to be a superintendent.

Bob Ross has been employed by the most districts of the superintendents that participated, having been a superintendent at three other districts prior to coming to East Plains School District. Originally going to school to become an engineer, Bob switched to education:
I was going to make big bucks being a coach and a teacher. Probably I could've just jumped straight into math and probably gotten out of school, but that wasn't the right way to go. I needed to get a degree and a half to get out of school. Because I graduated with 272 credits and you only need 190 for a degree, so, that was the English minor influence there coming through. So, I ended up going an extra year, basically to get the English minor.

Bob did not speak much about his teaching career; however he did share other past experiences that he believed have been beneficial to him as a superintendent. Unlike the other superintendents that I met, Bob jumped straight from the classroom to superintendent:

I had a couple of job offers to do the admin-- But I never or I could take the superintendency job. There was $20,000 difference in pay. I just jumped in with both feet. That honestly, probably, helped a lot in regard to all the work that you do in your degree. I could come to Colorado. And, the only reason I really did was because I started looking and one of the guys that I'd competed against his son in high school. So, he coached against me in Montana. Was a superintendent up at Great Plains School District and, you know, we just got to chat and he's a good- good guy, rural superintendent for years. He, you know, basically convinced me to come down to Colorado and Great Plains School District hired me.

This jump may have been one of the reasons Bob had so many job changes, although he did not state this. The move created an opportunity for Bob to directly apply what he was learning in the classroom at the same time he was working in the position:

I'm halfway through my master's degree, applied for a job in Colorado and get it. So, I am basically with one other gentleman that was in the master's program. There's 30 of us together, and two of us are practicing superintendents. So, we got to be the experts. You know, we could do the summer courses or you do the stuff online, we were the experts because we were the guinea pigs half the time going through that. So, the school law course that was done at Montana State was-was excellent because, you know, we got to be the guinea pigs up in front of everybody else talking through all that stuff.

While teaching, Bob spent his summers working construction to supplement his income. Bob believed his experience running a construction business while teaching was beneficial saying “having to do your own budgets and all the rest of that has been great
preparation for what you see in a district and having to run the budget for that.” He has also been a high school official in a number of areas for over 30 years. Of all the experiences he has had, Bob felt his officiating experience may be the most beneficial he has had for preparing him to deal with people as superintendent. Bob went in depth on this experience:

"I've been a referee for 31 years, 33 because I started in '84. When I graduated in high school. So, you can't find better training to be a superintendent than to be a referee.

You have the crowd scream and yell at you, and you get to sit there and go, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," and then finally, you get to say, "Okay, you're leaving." "Yeah, no, I've heard enough." That's the same thing right here in this job. You get- you get people screaming in on, all you can do is try to say, "Okay, well, here's why we did this and here's why we didn't--" at least we get to talk to them more as a superintendent. Because as a referee, you kind of just say, "That's enough." You know, 'I've heard it. You can be quiet or you can go away.'"

Richard was the only participant that has had experience outside of a small rural or rural school district as designated by the CDE (2017c). Richard spent seven years as a high school math teacher in Kansas then moved to a small Christian school in Colorado to teach math before becoming a Dean of Students. Richard spent time as an assistant principal and athletic director at River North and then Polk High School prior to leaving to become the superintendent at Prairie City School District. Speaking about earning the position at Prairie City, Richard noted:

"This is one of the places that I always thought if anything would ever happen, I would at least put my name in the hat, just to see. [I] didn't really expect it because I didn't know if I had enough experiences and they offered it to me. Now, that was back in 2002 and so I've been here now for 15 years.

Richard later noted his appreciation for his large school experience and how it helped him change his perspective on how to “manage kids” as he became superintendent/principal."
I was shocked from coming from River North is how well the kids take care of each other if you just tell them they have to be responsible. One of the things at Polk that was done on purpose was you put pictures of the kids in a lot of places. Even in these classes and everybody, you have them set up and the kids see themselves and that kind of thing. We do that here. If you are there, we have pictures of each class above their locker areas. This is your area, be responsible.

That was probably one of the more interesting dynamics that took a little more time because so many of the teachers here and the administrators want control over everything. Especially they dictate and with this number of kids, you can. You can have a lot of rules and you can say, ‘You can and can’t do this.’ Just from being at Polk, knowing the kids will do that if you just let them, it's a lot easier. It's just experiences like that that were really, really interesting, but a lot of just that kind of stuff where we backed off from the office through the halls on some of those black and white that because you can, you don't have to and so we don't.

Richard has had a variety of roles in his time as an educator which he views as having been helpful and providing perspective. He was involved in construction, helped with transportation, and he helped as a summer custodian when he was in high school. “I have been blessed. When I was in high school I worked at the school. I truly got to see that side of custodial where you're cleaning gum off the desk.” His experience working in transportation and maintenance helped him to have “an understanding and appreciation” for those areas of education. Richard believed his experiences in these areas helped him to be “better prepared for everything the position entails.” Richard believes that most aspiring superintendents will have experience working with discipline and contacting parents, however “if it was possible for a person who is going to become a superintendent to have had even the conversation” about construction, transportation, or maintenance they would be better prepared.

It is evident that the individuals involved in this study had a varied background, all of which they pulled from in a multitude of ways. The experiences the participating superintendents pulled from may illustrate the importance for universities and programs
across the country to provide connections in learning opportunities instead of prioritizing theory. Glass et al. (2000) identified “lack of hands-on application,” a “failure to link content to practice,” and “overemphasis of the professors’ personal experiences” as weaknesses in programs as perceived by practicing superintendents (p. 156). The experiences referenced illustrate the importance of having professors or access to individuals that have had experience as a practicing superintendent, which could provide a better opportunity to connect “content to practice” and provide applicable material which relates to theory. These are similar findings as suggested by Kowalski et al. (2009).

**Influential People.** Orr (2006) noted the use of mentors as a component superintendents have identified as being a part of their preparation. Some of these had been set up as part of the program they were a part of, while others reached out to practicing superintendents that were thought to be successful in their respective areas. One superintendent specifically noted of one of his mentors that “he became a mentor and friend, even after retiring” (p. 1393).

Through my conversations and interactions with the participating superintendents in this study, it became clear that an individual in each of their lives was instrumental in their success in their position. Chuck made thoughtful reference to the individuals that had a major impact on his decision to become a superintendent as well as to how he practices. The individual that likely had the most influence on Chuck as a superintendent was Jeff Ament:

So I-I certainly didn't start off as an educator planning to be a superintendent. I just wanted to coach a team. What happened is I had-- I think a lot of it is relationships and I ended up as a principal getting a new superintendent, named Jeff Ament. And he really became a mentor to me. And that was the one-- first
time— it ever entered my mind about being a superintendent was when I was working for him and started learning some school finance so without, you know— if he would've taken the job down the road, I'm not sure I would've ever been a superintendent.

I think I was able to see the change. He came in to a district, when we had like six sup— six different sups in eight years or nine years which isn't uncommon out on the eastern plains. There was no stability. The academic performance was struggling and he came in and made some drastic changes and had the school academically achieving very well, um, had the teacher morale up, had a big impact on-on the community, not just the school.

When I sat and watched that and then he kind of made me believe that, "Yeah. You-- maybe you could handle this too." That's when I first started to think, "Yeah, that might be, be a challenge worth trying."

As noted earlier in Chuck’s journey to the superintendency, he has a belief that he has learned “process” from places like CDE and classes. What he has learned about the “big picture, leadership, how to treat people, and take on projects” he has learned from the people that have impacted him most.

Similar to Chuck, it was the influential people, these mentors, which helped Martin earn his first superintendency and has had an influence on his success. Martin had an influential person that ultimately led him to the superintendency. Martin initially planned on staying in the principalship.

Well, my goal was always to be— After-after I got my principal license, my goal was-- I thought this was what I was going to do the rest of my career. I wanted to be a high school principal. And my aspiration at that time was a high school job in Silver because I knew the-the guy was going to retire. And, uh, so that was my goal, was to be the principal there at Silver, and I was, you know, eventually the high school principal there, so, you know. I was very, very comfortable when I was the principal of Silver high school. I really loved the job. It's probably the probably best I've had out of all of them.

However, Keith LaCock, the acting superintendent at Silver at the time had a different plan in mind for Martin:
I had a superintendent, his name was Keith LaCock and Keith was a very good man. He-he was very supportive of me. And the assistant superintendent out there retired. I remember the day Keith came over to my office. And he said, "Martin, I want you to be my assistant sup." I said, "Aw, I don't-- I don't think I want to do that." And he said, "Martin, I want you to be my assistant sup." "Okay, Keith. I'll be your assistant sup."

The opportunity for Martin to work with Keith was influential to him. Not only was he able to see how the superintendency worked from a close distance, he also developed a relationship with Keith that ended up guiding his career, whether Martin knew it at the time or not:

The guy [Keith] that was the superintendent had been in the Colorado Springs School district for 20 or 25 years before he came up to Silver to be the sup, and he was-- he was an assistant superintendent in Colorado Springs probably for 15 years. And he had great experiences, you know, with very, very, very large school district compared to Silver.

I learned a lot from him, a lot from him. Especially, um, after I'd been there a couple of years, the last year I was there, you know, he-he started showing me a whole lot of things about how all of this stuff works, gave me a lot of good tips on, you know, board relations, which I probably should have listened a little better than that.

When Keith retired Martin became the superintendent at Silver. The two remained in touch up until Keith’s recent passing. “I learned it from a guy in Silver that was my-- really my mentor, Keith LaCock, by the way he just passed away a couple of weeks ago.”

When Martin referenced this, he became visibly saddened at the point in our conversation.

Seth was also fortunate to have had someone that took the time to work with him and serve as a mentor. Seth also served as what was essentially the superintendent’s right-hand person when he became Business Services Director at River North.
As Seth continued to work with the district, he began “to think about ways to leverage what they had to better serve kids.” Eventually, Seth and Mike “became this team that then helped things in the district.”

The relationship that Seth and Mike McCready developed continues to this day. The two still speak regularly. Seth noted a prior conversation that had recently taken place:

I had a conversation not that long ago with Mike McCready. He actually complimented me and said that he thought I'd done a good job and he said that old adage of leave it better than you found it. He said you're going to-- you're going to be able to say that because he said, "The campus is a lot better than when I left it." He says, "And I genuinely think I left it better than I found it."

Mentors are important and provide an opportunity for people that lack experience to have someone to lean on in difficult times as well as learn from. Like Chuck, Martin, and Seth, Lilly felt this way about her predecessor, tearing up as she reflected on her relationship with the former superintendent at Forest Park:

I-- I'd always had a curiosity about the superintendency. So he is like, "Well, you going to go get your endorsement. You need to do it right now because I only had five more years left you know." So he talked me into running up and getting some more education. I just kind of got to know him a little bit better and he encouraged me to do so. Then he served as my mentor as I was going through that process and, just like you, just did the same type of things about any questions that would come up. I was very curious about the school budget.

However sometimes circumstances can change that relationship. Lilly’s entrance into the superintendency was due to some turbulence that took place within the district as a result of outside circumstances.

We ended up that summer with a huge hail storm. My predecessor was on the PERA one month leave thing. That storm came in the month before he was going to go; where there was just a lot of rebuilding to do. Because it just ruined so many things. It broke a whole of bunch skylights in the school, flooding and stuff like that. In that whole instance they brought me on board to do the interim
superintendent while he was out. And that was fine. Of course, my landscaping quickly took a different turn.

I thought the whole time I was like, "It's just a month. It's just a month." But then it ended up an asbestos issue and so the Department of uh Environment. So I didn't-- I hadn't really prepared myself for that (potential for a longer period of acting as an interim superintendent). I was counting 29, 28, 27 until he came back. And this was a month before school was going to start. And I was faced with the decision, what do you want to do? Carry on and apply for this job or do you want to go back to teaching? And only because I had been so invested in all the projects that were going on to walk away from that and go back to the classroom. For me, it felt like as if I was abandoning something that could be very beneficial for the school. So I did apply, and I ended up getting the job.

Upon being hired for the position, the school board at Forest Park hired a retired superintendent to work with her and serve as a mentor for her first year:

They got a mentor for me. Who was actually the other person that they had interviewed for the district, for the job besides myself. He was a retired superintendent he didn’t want a full-time job but he was willing to be the mentor. His style was exactly opposite of mine. He was a people person, you know. I mean I could be running around like a chicken with my head cut off and he would just be watching the whole circus, just go flying like that.

I learned a lot from him, yeah. And he always felt as if he didn't really help me that much, but with the relationship things and with the -- and to this day I still struggle with those. But just kind of those “how do you know”? When to buy and what to do? And just some of those kinds of things was really invaluable.

Unlike the other participants, Bob identified a mentor that was assigned to him as having had a positive influence when he was first hired as superintendent.

I had Seth Wallace as my mentor when I first got to Colorado, just because I didn't want to screw up on the budget. You know, he was- he was kind of the guru, around the state, and so it- and even then, he'd been probably at River North for, you know, five to 10 [years]. He'd been there quite a while and then he was a superintendent probably five years prior to 2002. But I wanted to make sure I got training from somebody who would make sure I- I didn't screw up budget stuff. And that always helps because, you know, he's really good and I'm kind of a math geek, so that wasn't hard to pick up the rest of that. He and I have been good friends since, so, just we do as many things as we can together, try to get our families together when we can.
Bob noted that mentors are important because those are the people that you “aspire to be like.” His parents and brother were also individuals that Bob mentioned; however, an influential person in your life does not have to be a mentor. Sometimes a person of influence can come about as a negative experience:

Either someone inspires you by being a really good leader or they inspire you by making you angry. And saying, you know because I had a- a principal in Montana that I saw him once or twice in seven to ten years and he was an expert in everything that happened there everywhere. You're like, “You’ve never been in my class. How would you know one way or the other? And yes, I do most of that stuff and do it well, but how would you? You don’t know.”

The idea and concept of mentors for new superintendents is not new and is referred to in literature. Studies from Finnan et al. (2015) and Kowalski et al. (2010) were qualitative studies that identified the use of mentor programs for new superintendents. Qualitative studies by Antonucci (2012), Orr (2006), and Quary (2016) provide more in-depth perspective on the importance of mentor programs. It is evident looking at prior studies and analyzing the context and responses provided in this study that mentors are an important aspect for aspiring superintendents to have in order to provide the opportunity to be successful.

Aspects of the Rural Superintendency

“The superintendent might wear the hat of manager, communicator, and custodian or cook all before the first bell even rings” (Copeland, 2013, p. 7). Recent literature around the rural school superintendent has identified it is a position that carries a vast job description with numerous responsibilities. I found the practicing superintendents that participated in this study identified having a similar belief. During my time with the six participants, I heard about a vast array of items including instructional leadership, construction, school finance, transportation, food services, water rights and legalities, and
district housing just to name a few. To put this all succinctly, Dr. Seth Wallace may have stated it best after I asked him what he believed his specific essential roles and responsibilities were. Seth responded, “I feel like in order to be a successful superintendent, you really have to be responsible for everything.”

The feeling of ultimately being responsible for everything was common amongst the participants. The degree to which the individuals that participated in my study actually were directly involved in doing the individual jobs varied in nature. Some of this involvement was based on the size of the district, with the superintendents that were employed at the smaller districts having" to be more involved than the superintendents at the larger districts. This was especially the case for Martin, whose district enrollment was over 3,500 students (CDE, 2017c). As Martin stated, “the main thing about my role is to oversee all of these programs. To be ultimately responsible to our school board first and foremost and to our communities.” That is a significant difference in size when compared to the approximately 200 students at East Plains School District or approximately 150 students at Prairie City School District. When I asked Martin what he believed were his specific essential roles and responsibilities, he stated:

To be ultimately responsible to our school board first and foremost and to our communities at West Plains School District and to make sure that we're fiscally sound, that we're addressing the educational issues and we're meeting the needs of our students, we're fulfilling what I believe our role is and how our community believes what we should be doing with their most prized possession, their kids, to educate their children. The human resources side of it, working with teachers, with the teachers’ union, I'm very active with that.

The superintendent’s role is, people have to be able to believe they can approach you and talk to you about anything. Whether it's, ‘We need a bus,’ whether it's a special ed issue. Whether it's a high school sports issue which can really blow up on you. Elementary curriculum. It just varies almost from day to day what your responsibilities are but you never forget, you're responsible for all of it. If something goes wrong, they come directly at you.
Here it is evident that, while Martin may not be directly involved in picking a bus or choosing the elementary curriculum, he emphasized, like Seth, that he ultimately was responsible for all of it.

Martin’s role as superintendent appears to be very different from Richard Springsteen or Lilly White. Lilly noted one of the roles she specifically has at Forest Park:

Here at Forest Park, myself and another one served as the safety coordinator throughout the district. I've gone to anything from developing our own safety plans and making sure that they're in line with insurance protocols and procedures all the way to, yesterday, we had a lot of staff that was out of the building to a training. I seized the day as an opportunity to use it to do a lot of safety trainings across the district. We literally were almost running from group to group of different classrooms running through all of these safety drills. It was myself and the safety coordinator that led that whole effort.

The concept of various roles continues with Richard. Richard was initially hired to be the K12 principal/superintendent. Now he serves as the elementary principal/superintendent as he hired a high school principal several years ago. He also coaches the football team at the high school. Richard works diligently to stay abreast of all the different areas in education:

It's just bizarre, you just can't believe how many meetings I can have in a year and all together. But I try or I send somebody to any transportation meetings we can. My food services person we send them to that. I try to go to CASBO as much as I can which is the school business officials. That just gets goofy because it's time it takes but that's not, for a bigger district that's totally all different people. But as many of those different groups and organizations that I can go.

I've been to the summer transportation, the big summer one in the and CASBO. Any of their different organizational things if you have time. The same with curriculum development. Fortunately, now I think I have a really good one so I don't have to go to the NCLC meetings but I used to go to them until I found that person. That's a luxury piece if you find somebody that can do something else, it's really nice. I was involved in Gifted and Talented and now I have a counselor, I
think that can run with that. The person that deals with homeless, McKinney Vento, and I think you have to try to get to some of those meetings along the way.

Then of course, from the budgeting, your money side you deal with Title I and now you have the federal and if they have a meeting a lot of times I'll attend those just to make sure. Just trying to get enough to know whatever it might -- not been able to master any of it.

Chuck and Lilly spoke to attending the many events that take place at the schools outside of the regular school day. Chuck specifically noted it is part of the “engagement” portion of the school board goals. He works to attend an event “on a weekly basis.”

Another aspect of the rural superintendency that came out is the need to ensure a safe learning environment. Chuck noted this as one of his essential roles as superintendent:

The second one is an obvious one but we're paying more and more attention to that and that's creating a safe environment. I really believe that parents when they drop their kids off at school should feel confident that they're in good hands there, so we're getting better at that I think. For sure, in our district we've taken some steps to do that and to make that a priority but that's not one that I forget. I try to make it to our elementary in the mornings, a couple times a week so I'm available to parents when they drop their kids off. So I watch that and it's a constant reminder that they're expecting us to keep those children safe.

The district is approximately 20 minutes away from emergency response and has not been able to effectively implement an SRO program. In an attempt to find a solution, Chuck partnered with a group of Colorado State Patrolmen to provide additional security for the district. The group became known as “Guardian Angels” and assists the district to provide security.

Forest Park is also a school district that is a significant distance away from emergency response personnel. I recall the first time I walked into the school at Forest Park where Lilly’s office is. As I approached the front office doors, a sign was displayed informing everyone that entered that the district was protected by armed personnel. Lilly
spoke about this briefly during our time, albeit in the context of working with the school board and setting policy. These are all examples of the “many hats” Copeland (2013, p. 7) wrote about.

While the specifics of the job came out most frequently during our time together, the rural superintendents also noted the impact the position can have on your personal life. These were aspects of the rural superintendency that were noted by Copeland (2013) as well as Lamkin (2006). When asked about advice he could give to aspiring rural superintendents, Bob Ross responded “that it will likely have you moving two or three times in your career and be willing and ready for that impact on your family. If you can’t do that, then don’t jump into the position.” Any time someone enters into a position, it is important to know what it may entail. Seth spoke to the scrutiny he has received while being superintendent and living in the district:

I got criticism when I built my house because it was, "Why do you need a big house? You're just showing off." Now, I didn't build that house the day after I became superintendent. It was five, six years later but still. There was that. I told you the story it's hard for me to take a day off and be around here during the week. Like to take a Friday and be around the community doing your yard work or something like that. Because everybody sees you. Somehow, you're not allowed to have days off, even if you have vacation days.

Echoing how the rural superintendency can impact your personal life, Lilly mentioned some of the hours she was putting in and how her job was going at one point in her career:

There was a time when I’m going home at eleven o’clock at night only to turn around and be here by seven o’clock. I was walking out into a very dark parking lot and I was the only one here again. It's like I finally admitted I hate my job. And that was kind of a realization for me because before I was always kind of white washed these feelings down.
The participating superintendents all spoke to the impact the position can have on your personal life and family. Whether it is feeling as though you cannot take a day off, purchasing a new car, frequent moves, or the significant amount of time that the participating superintendents were away from home, all spoke to the impact the rural superintendency can have.

Technical & Leadership Skills. The rural superintendency is a position with vast job responsibilities. This became apparent as I progressed through the interviews with the participants and corresponds with data identified by Jones and Howley (2009). The leadership and technical skills necessary for the position are of great scope and a sub-theme that was identified as an aspect of the rural superintendency.

The technical skills required for the rural superintendent may be best identified through the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) superintendent standards which reflect a broad range of competencies and technical skills needed by superintendents (Hoyle, 1993). As noted previously, the technical skills required are likely to depend on the specific position. Furthermore, and something that will be discussed more specifically in the section Identified Beliefs and Characteristics for Success, the superintendents spoke frequently about finding people that can complement or supplement the individuals’ weaknesses. This may be why the identified technical skills in this study consisted of a wide range of responses. We will first take a look at the responses as they connect with the AASA standards.

In connecting with AASA Standard 1, Leadership and District Culture, Seth spoke of the importance of ensuring that the district culture is in good standing, which he views as having an increased importance as he has progressed through his career. “When
I first became superintendent, I probably thought it's important but not at the forefront or preeminent.” However, Seth spoke to some difficult times he went through with the district and leadership and since that time has reflected on his philosophical change around the importance of district culture. “I realize how much, if things aren't in order with culture you don't ever get to the ‘important stuff.’ We went through a period of time that the culture in the elementary was really toxic before our current principals came.” Seth proceeded to speak about the work it took to change the culture, noting “you don’t turn culture on a dime.”

Culture was something that Lilly looked to adapt and change when she became superintendent at Forest Park. “When I first started, I was not going to be a one-man band”, referring to her predecessor’s approach in making decisions and her desire to have a more collaborative approach. Continuing with this transition, Lilly expanded. “So a lot of times I would let staff know, ‘look, these are the decisions that are coming up for me I would like your input.’ Oh, the first thing I got was resistance from the old staff.” However, as Lilly has progressed through her career at Forest Park, she noted that she “has pity for the person that tries to come in and try a top-down approach again.”

While Seth spoke about the importance of the district culture, Chuck referred more to what he has done to build the culture in place at High Plains stating you “you got to get out in there a little bit, you have got to get in the buildings.” Chuck stated he works to be “available, visible, and approachable so that third-grade teacher can give you an honest assessment of something” and that “if you stay in your office too much you just aren’t going to know.” Additionally, Chuck said he has worked to get out in the
community more recently, eating lunch at the Senior Center every other month to “get what their idea of the school is and their perception.”

Chuck placed an importance on making sure he developed relationships so he could be approachable. Bob emphasized the importance of developing relationships to create an effective culture.

If- if you haven't built those relationships ahead of time then you come across as a hammer. And I don't-I don't ever want to be a hammer. Because I don't envision my staff or anybody else as a nail. I want them to know that their health and their family, and their religion, and all of that stuff comes first.

However, I also want them to know that if you can find a job that's better for you and makes you happier, I'll support you 100% to go do that job. And sometimes it's me guiding you to go somewhere else. I do get along with people and that I think is, why you tend to be successful.

Richard identified how he was fortunate to have inherited a healthy district culture upon taking the position at Prairie View:

I really think that my longevity came in the first year I walked in to a district that was doing well. I didn't have to put out fires, I didn't have to make enemies. I literally was able to sit back and let things happen and watch what happens. That to have that is so big even because then it establishes me in a different format.

Organizational Management, AASA Standard 4, was another technical skill that was frequently discussed by participants of this study (Hoyle, 1993). This standard can be described as how the district operates, data-driven decision making, and problem solving. Items included in this standard may be school finance, operations and maintenance, and school law (Hoyle). Specifically speaking about school finance, the superintendents regularly identified this skill as one of the most important pieces to pay attention to, along with personnel. As Chuck specified “finance, you need to have a good grasp about that, that's a quick way to get in trouble.” Continuing on, Chuck noted:
that if you are having a bunch of financial troubles, you lose confidence of those board members pretty quickly but if you're responsible with that money and can explain your decisions then you're gaining confidence and pretty soon it's like your business.

I was talking my business manager that you can get a mistake here or there because they know over time you're going to make more good decisions than bad ones. I think financial stability is crucial.

Richard also noted “the finance side, budgeting that kind of deal obviously would be your -- if you're messed up there, you're going to have a lot of trouble I would think in any district.” Bob echoed the importance of having a good understanding of school finance and budgeting:

The finance piece is very important. Had I not run my own business, I'm not sure I would have felt prepared for that. That helped a lot. Getting to know your own districts budget is huge and knowing what has been done in the past.

While Bob noted that having run his own business was beneficial, Richard thought that understanding school finance was a completely different concept than people from the private sector are typically used to:

Well, I used to run a business and the different accounting pieces of match up really anything in business. And anybody that's a good accountant in business tries to go in education and takes them some time. But you have to know something that a lot of it maybe is in the Finance Act so you understand a little bit about where does your money come from depending on the number of students and PPOR and your outdoor accounts and some of those foundations.

Seth noted that he was fortunate to have experience working directly with school finance prior to becoming the superintendent. “School finance again, I was fortunate in that regard because I was Business Services Director and I invested a lot of learning about that when I was there. I've kept that up as superintendent.” As Bob mentioned previously, Seth has become known throughout the state for his school finance acumen. Seth has presented at CASE conferences on the topic and currently is working with a
group of superintendents from across the state to update the School Finance Act from its present-day formula.

Operations and maintenance was another technical skill that was identified by the practicing superintendents, which is part of AASA Standard 4. Richard and Bob both spoke to their previous experiences being very beneficial to having a working understanding. Richard believed that his prior experience in food services and transportation were beneficial when he became superintendent. “When you get into a district like this [Prairie City] at least I had a background to start from.” Additionally, Richard noted the several remodeling and building projects he was a part of at River North and Polk.

I was involved in three building projects prior to coming here. Being at Polk I was involved in a smaller-- It wasn't really small, but just fixing up a building to where I came right after River North where I actually was involved in moving in to the new high school so I got to see the end of that project. The two in Polk and then here, but all of those experiences that I did so many different things. When you sit down as a superintendent in any area of this district, that if the food service guy wants to walk in and talk I know enough plus you keep up with stuff enough that I know if there's questions or things and then I've been able to share CDE or challenges he's had with people and again I can talk their languages a little bit.

Those experiences are really helpful in the management where people could come in and say, "Well, what do you think we should do with purchasing lights? We need to change toilets and all that." Well, that's what I did at Polk. Those experiences really were valuable and then it gives you a little bit of credibility because you do know something about what you're talking about.

When people come in and say, "Well, what do you think we should do here?" And you're going, "I don't know." That part of it was really valuable. I think my experiences helped out a bunch in being a superintendent that can handle all the stuff. Because when you go to Jeffco as an example you'll see-- Our principal he was a really good principal and he had spent all of his administrative years either as an assistant principal, dean of students. Well, when we had the Feds come through to do an audit on our lunch program, food services, he had no idea. He says, "Richard, can you come to this meeting with me?" I said, "Sure." And I go.
Richard spoke to the complete spectrum of schools, a number of aspects that take place which the public does not think about when they think of education. Additionally, his comments highlighted the notion that there are aspects in school districts that teachers or building level principals may not think about because it is not part of their normal routine. Bob was not as extensive in his response about operations and maintenance. However, he believed his prior experience in construction was beneficial and has a better working understanding because of that experience. “My construction background helped with this a lot as I ran my own construction business for over a decade while teaching.”

Chuck noted that one of the goals given to him from his school board this year revolved around the completion of a new transportation facility. The district is toward the end of completing projects stemming from a successful bond election several years ago.

Let me give you an example. Right now, we're trying to build a new or looking at building a new bus facility, so I'll get calls, "If we can't acquire this land, what would happen if I have another option", or "what's the water situation on the current land that we have?"

We have an infrastructure goal and they made it clear to me that by this time next year we-- they want to see, maybe not complete, but they want to see visible progress on a new transportation and maintenance facility. So as far as with acquiring land and-and getting contractors and-and RFPs; I would hope this time next year, if you came out, like you said, it might not be done but we're walking around the foundation or-or some walls of a-- of a new facility.

Operations and maintenance is a side of education that seems to be infrequently thought of by stakeholders. The emphasis is on students and instruction, as it should be. However, the quality of infrastructure and operations may impact students’ ability to learn. After all, operations and maintenance work to support and assist the learning that takes place. Seth spoke best to this when he said:

Meaning a field can be the classroom for a PE teacher. You know, the cafeteria that has a stage in it can be the classroom for the music teacher. And so all of
those things are in support of that. You know, that the food service program is so that the kids have the fuel that they need to learn, that the transportation is, you know-- We have families that are strapped financially. If it weren't for the bus program, they may not get here and get home.

Chuck and Bob noted the poor condition of Colorado school finance and the impact deficient finances have had on superintendents’ ability to update and stay current on facilities. Bob mentioned the negative factor, now known as the Budget Stabilization (B.S.) factor, as a way that Colorado has decreased the amount of money districts should receive in order to meet state budget requirements. Bob spoke to the impact it has had on facilities:

The part where the negative factor has been real, a bit of a struggle for all districts. Because even as small as we are, that is 3 to 5 million dollars that we didn’t have. So, and a lot of that’s been at the expense of facilities. They just don’t get updated or upgraded, or your buses keep running to the dirt a little bit more than they normally would. And try to maintain that if you can, because the student staff relationship and what they can get done, is-- is what we’re here for.

Chuck mentioned that he had come to High Plains in the midst of financial struggles. As he worked to figure out how best to put the district in better financial standing, the first place he looked to cut from was operations and maintenance:

I think the-- I think the facilities probably suffered more than anything. I think we were able to maintain services for kids, fine arts, and an interventionist and coaching, some of that. But, uh, facilities, we went a-- a good stretch there where we didn’t do much. Put in a little carpet but that was about it. And, so I think we're trying to recover from that now.

Most of the educational research identified in the literature review spoke to the importance of superintendent as educational leader. While it was commonly identified that the superintendent is considered the CEO of the school district, little emphasis seems to have been placed on the importance operations and maintenance carries within a school district. Furthermore, it was apparent from this study that, the larger the school
district, the less the concept of operations and maintenance was brought up. For example, Martin, whose district was by far the largest in this study, noted frequently the importance of “hiring good people and letting them do their job” when asked about his role in managing and operating the district. Contrast his responses with Lilly or Richard, and you will see much more emphasis and detail around specifically doing tasks or being directly involved in what is taking place. Most of the emphasis within AASA Standard 4 that is noted in prior research revolves around the importance of school finance.

The importance of communication, AASA Standard 3 Communication and Community Relations, was also identified by each participant as an essential skill to have. This standard also frequently connected with the theme Working with the Board, which will be discussed in a later section. This standard consists of being able to speak to and articulate the district’s purpose and priorities to stakeholders, ability to build and consensus and mediate conflict, and being able to create and carry out plans for internal and external communications (Hoyle, 1993). The importance of communication has been written about in the literature (Henwood, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2011; Wilson, 2010). Bob Ross may have highlighted the importance of communication best when he said “as far as the technical piece, if you’re a great communicator, you can survive and thrive based on what you do with your organization.”

All of the superintendents in this study had a way of communicating the district’s purpose and priorities to its stakeholders. Some used faculty and students at board meetings to highlight and demonstrate the good things that were taking place within the school district. Bob Ross spoke to this approach:

We do a good job of having the students that go on field trips. Or if we have something cool going on, we have those kids come report to the board. Those are
great PR things for what's going on in the district. I report almost every meeting about scores that we've done academically. Everybody's usually involved with sports. It's not like they need to get a report on that. But we try to make sure that the board, even though they have mostly elementary students, still get to see the things that are going well in the high school.

Seth mentioned occasionally asking principals to invite students or faculty to come to report on special events that have taken place. These typically take place when a school board meeting agenda is light on business or action items. Another way of communicating the district’s purpose and priorities is to include them on the district’s website. This is often done through the district’s purpose or mission statement. It is also a way to communicate recent information around academic data, financial information, and again to show images of students working in a variety of ways.

The use of social media has changed the way school districts can communicate and connect with its community. It has provided an opportunity for school districts to push out information directly to its stakeholders and send the message it wants to send, allowing them to not just write in words but also show through images how it is fulfilling the district’s purpose. Two superintendents have gone so far as to hire an outside communications specialist in order to help improve their communications to the outside world with the help of social media. Seth explained how River North has used a communications specialist to benefit the district:

Then, of course, what is it now, going on three years of having the communications specialist with the BOCES. I think that it's been a huge boost to positive perception of our district, is that she is just-- Again, I think I had a lot of the ideas but you get caught up in the day-to-day because we get the call that the kid's not riding the bus or all this other kind of stuff and pretty soon you spent 15 or 20 minutes on that and that's the 15 or 20 minutes I would've written up a a little blurb. Again, I can't remember even previous to having that communication things. I might get the blurb written, but then I never did anything with it. I never found the time to send it to the paper or if I sent it to the paper, it wasn't enough for them to publish anything. It just gets lost. Whereas, especially now with
Facebook, as much as a detriment it is, it's been good in that regard is that she just regularly has positive things coming up on that Facebook post. Whether it's about kids doing the Lego robots, or the Ag department doing the drone, or the choir concert, or the high school getting an award, or middle school going to outdoor ed. They just did that last week.

I'm sure that Carrie [the communications specialist] will be having-- I haven't seen anything yet, but there'll be something about that coming up. I've seen a lot of things that she has done that long-time community people will see me like at a football game. I saw that thing about Outdoor Ed. I didn't even know you guys still did that. That's cool. Those little things, are what really help when we get to that next election is, what are the things that are present in your mind? If your last few recollections are positive then there's a much better chance of getting that positive vote, whether you have kids in school or not, as opposed to your last few interactions that are negative.

The ability to control your own message and get a sense for what is being said about your district can be important. It is something that Martin realized several years ago and reflected on when speaking about hiring a communication consultant to help the district:

We've-- we've had, uh, uh-- we brought some people, um, a communication consultant in. I brought her in in January of last year, and she is so smart. I mean she just-- It's-it's been such a help for me, you know. I called another superintendent because all the stuff that they had out there just looks so great. You know what I'm saying? "Who in the hell writes this for you, Dan. I know it's not you," and he says, "You are right, I don't."

He told me about her and, uh-- we brought her in and she's helped us out so much too. And again, the ability to kind of see past some of this stuff or to say, "Hey, I need some help," and I told my board this is going to cost money but I need some help and you do too. We've got to get some better communication going on around here. That's-that's an example of what we did or what I did and don't be afraid to do that. That was a little bit of a challenge for me because I thought I could do some of these things and obviously it wasn't working very well. So, I said you know, "I need some help with this."

I had to step back and had to give up a lot. Because the main thing that has changed during the times that I've done this is how the technology works now, and how people utilize all of these various devices; Twitter and Facebook and all these kinds of things. I know just enough about it to get me in trouble so that's already paid off for me huge, huge big time but where the big change was, I had to step back and give part of that away.
While Martin and Seth have found a communications consultant beneficial to their district, especially in the use of social media, Chuck Taylor has resisted the use of district sponsored social media platforms. He acknowledges High Plains does not do as well promoting what has gone well in the district:

I probably don't do as well as other districts in general of promoting our accomplishments and our good things, that's probably an area of weakness and we need to do better. I've tried some different things on the webpage and then it doesn't get updated soon enough, so that's a hard one for me to do. There's a fine line between bragging there, which isn't what we want to do but also to promote the accomplishments of our people. We probably need to do better at that. We have staff newsletters, I talked to you about the board update, it's called "first street files" that goes out.

Continuing with the use of social media to publicize and push information out, Chuck said “we haven't done well at social media, I'm anti-social media so there's areas there where we're just losing out on.” While the district has not embraced the use of social media, that does not mean that Chuck does not emphasize the importance of communication. He spoke to an administrative guideline he has added in the past few years:

Then the other thing that I think is important, I've created, since you've left I started doing things better I think, maybe it was because of you [laughs]. I've created administrative guidelines, some things that they need to abide by. An example of that with communications is 48 hours. If you get a call or an email I'd really prefer that you respond in 24 hours, but bottom line 48 hours that parent or community member should hear from you, like I said, 24 is preferable but drop dead 48 hours. Even if that means, "Mrs. Jones, I got your message. I'm looking into it and I'm going to call you back on Thursday." But within that 48 hours everybody should get a response. A staff member, community member, a parent or a student. I think that's helpful too, I think that's a good guideline.

Another method of communication the participating superintendents spoke to was formal versus informal communication with constituents. Chuck noted his school board
members, as well as himself, attending games or other student sponsored events as a way for people to approach them in a less formal setting:

We do a couple things well I think. Our boards have always been visible, they're at ballgames and they are in the parades. I try to do that same thing, I hit a ballgame at least weekly, some kind of activity or something where people can ask questions or make comments in a less formal way. I think that's helped get to spread the word.

Recall this was one of the board goals Chuck had referred to. Lilly mentioned a similar approach and opportunity for her to speak with patrons while attending school events, or church, as an important opportunity to communicate. Martin Sexton mentioned attending football games in order to be visible and accessible to community members. Seth also mentioned regularly attending games. Additionally, he spoke about an opportunity he had to converse with a parent shortly after a student threat incident while at the store:

Since then, I've probably had 10 to 12 conversations but they were all outside the building, or at the bus stop, or I had one on Sunday at the grocery store. I dropped by the grocery store and in the produce section was one of the moms. She says, "Hello" and I said, "Hello" and she said, "The call about the situation in school," She brought it up and she just said, "We send our kids, we weren't concerned, we talked about it with one of our daughters," and then she said, "You called and it sounded like from your call that it was handled and, well, fine." I said, "Well--" I called her by name. I said, "I think it comes down to do you trust Mr. Gordon and myself," and she said, "Exactly." To me, that is engaging with the community and it's public now. My bet is, knowing this mom, that will be repeated.

Referring back to Bob’s belief in the importance of communication, it was evident that all of the superintendents in this study believed that communication is of the utmost importance. The methods and tools that were used may differ some, however the importance was evident. This information connects to a number of prior studies that have been conducted. Kowalski et al. (2011) recognized that we have entered the age of superintendent as communicator. Henwood (2016) corroborated this belief in his recent
dissertation utilizing mixed-methods approach. In a dissertation written by Wilson (2010), which analyzed the practices of successful school superintendent leadership as perceived by rural school superintendents, he stated “one generalization is that clear communication is essential for a superintendent to practice successful school leadership” (p.83).

Human Resource Management, AASA Standard 7, was an additional skill that was noted by the superintendents as being important. This includes areas such as evaluation, applying legal requirements necessary to hire and recruit staff, and identifying the best ways to supervise staff (Hoyle, 1993). Chuck specifically noted personnel as being the most important part of the job, along with finance, a superintendent deals with. “There's an art to personnel and dealing with people and understanding people and knowing when to be compassionate and when to use the stick. I think that one just takes time, and I don't think you ever master that.”

Similar to some of the other standards, the level and type of involvement associated by the participating superintendents in this study were predicated upon the size of the district. Bob, Lilly, and Richard all were directly involved in the evaluation of teachers, actually conducting teacher cumulative end of year evaluations and using the Colorado state evaluation rubric. Chuck assisted the district principals in doing teacher walk-throughs, considered an informal evaluation, so he can get a sense of what is taking place in the classroom. However, the cumulative end of year evaluations of teachers were left to building level administration to complete with Chuck evaluating district personnel and building principals. Martin did not specify his role in evaluation, only stating that
“the human resources side of it, working with teachers, with the teacher’s union, I'm very active with that.”

Hiring personnel is an important aspect for the superintendent; employees are the face of the district and represent the organization. While the idea of fit was identified as an important concept, one that will be discussed in the section *Identified Beliefs and Characteristics for Success*, I mention it here briefly to speak to the concept of hiring. Lilly spoke to the interview process and types of questions she asks when interviewing people. Lilly has been involved in interviewing teachers and classified personnel. While she was not involved in interviewing this past year, she spoke to the types of questions they ask and what they are looking for:

We have a few questions, and I didn’t do interviewing this year, but we had a few questions in the past that really kind of fit this kind of drawing some of that out. I remember in the old days one of them was something about telling us about an event that you're really proud of. And then one that you know looking back on it-it it’s hard and looking back, “What would you tell me about it?” And then, of course, the follow-up question with that was, “If you had to do it differently what would you do?”

And so those are very wide-open questions of course or do you mean school or personal hours, like whatever you're comfortable of sharing. It wasn’t a leading thing but it really -- those kinds of questions tell you a lot about the list that you just mentioned. And especially that if you had to do it again what would you do different. I mean that really kind of helps show that analogy piece of where they at.

I always was told, “Wow, this interview is so much different than any other that I have ever gone through.” But yeah they’d also tell me, “It was kind of fun. It’s just relaxing,” you know. Then I gave them that ability to just --be who they are which is what I'm trying to hire.

During this period with Lilly, I asked if her approach in interviewing was a behavior-based approach to clarify what I thought I was hearing, in essence an interview set-up to identify behavioral characteristics and background as opposed to specific skills.
Lilly agreed that was what she was trying to determine when going through the interview process. Bob spoke to a similar approach:

I'm not freaking out whether they are highly qualified or certified, especially with today's market. You're trying to get anybody [laughter]. I want somebody who wants to be around kids, works well with kids, and builds good relationships. If they can do those things, I'll help them out with getting their degree or getting those extra credits or getting the highly qualified status. Because you-- we're having to scramble on them to a lot of levels to get anybody who's actually competent to work with kids.

Chuck spoke about the behaviors he is seeking to find when the district hires personnel. While he is not directly involved in interviewing all teachers, he has been a part of a large number of interviews at the elementary school throughout his time at High Plains. Speaking about the characteristics he was looking for in hiring, Chuck explained:

I'm convinced more than ever that it's behavior-based hiring that what they did before, you might change, uh, a few things, but you're not going to change a person who was lazy to suddenly be an-- a hard worker. So, if they've established that, that they've-- that they're a work ethic, earn success type of person then you-- that's what you're going to see along the way.

The final standard that was addressed revolved around AASA Standard 8, Values and Ethics of Leadership. One of the key aspects of this standard relates to multicultural and ethnic understanding and sensitivity (Hoyle, 1993). In reflecting back upon the interviews and reviewing my audit trail, the only time the topic came up of multicultural and ethnic understanding was when I specifically asked about it in relation to this standard. In my mind, this speaks to the level of importance, or lack there-of, that professional development around multicultural issues plays. Furthermore, it was evident in analyzing the responses, that the participating individuals skirted around the topic. For example, Bob noted that the question could be viewed in a couple of different perspectives, one being around ethnicity and “languages that are spoken” and the second
around district culture. Bob expanded upon expectations for the district’s culture which would correspond more with AASA Standard 1. Similarly, Seth spoke extensively about nurturing the district’s culture. Additionally, he spoke about the district’s recent uptick in student mental health issues and how the district was working to try and problem solve suicide threats and attempts. Martin spoke about changing sexting laws in the state and having the District Attorney come to the district to speak with his administration team. Finally, Lilly may have articulated the issue and the priority it plays when she commented “keeping these a priority for PD is a struggle when the imminent classroom needs are also requiring valuable PD time. I don’t have a good solution.”

Chuck spoke directly to and the most extensively about the issue, and his frustration with it:

Well, we do it. We most certainly try to stay in compliance with civil rights and professional development for culture diversity. So, make sure you put that in there, that High Plains is striving to be in compliance with all areas of civil rights and cultural diversity, because we are. My personal opinion is, we’ve just swung the pendulum too far. We don't have a lot of those issues here because we'll accept you. We have a nice diverse population of students of ethnic groups here and of socio-economic groups.

I think if you just focus on it, you could almost create a problem. We have expectations whether your skin is brown or white or black, and those expectations are the same. In a way, I don't know how to verbalize it but I think it's addition by subtraction. That we don't try to overdo this. I think, culturally we've done that. That we can't have a conversation without somebody getting offended, and we don't emphasize that here.

We, for sure, expect people to be treated well but it is not our professional development goals to identify certain groups or subgroups of kids and now we're going to go treat them differently. I think, if you are treating them all the same, then how can you be more equal than that? Than treating them all the same. That's really what we try to do. Like I said, I personally believe the pendulum has just swung too far that there are regulations and things that make no sense right now.

We spent $7,000 getting headsets for hearing-impaired kids for our auditorium and we don't have a hearing-impaired kid in our district. But we're forced to just
spend that money and have those in a box that by the time we have the kid, they'll be outdated anyway. My guess is we'll never open the box. That's crazy. If we had a hearing-impaired kid we'd go get one, we'd fix them up. We don't need somebody to tell us that because of the size of our auditorium, we need 31 sets. Thanks, but, we’re smart enough to figure out that if we have a kid in a wheelchair we need to have access for him.

I will shut up on this, but I feel like we do our best. We have them because that's what this office of civil rights is requiring us to do, but it's craziness. I think those things that are best handled at the local level, at the community level. That goes for gender equity and racial issues. Do we have some? Yes. But if we can handle them locally in our community, in our school community, that almost always works better than having somebody from the outside tell us how to handle that.

The degree to which the participants somewhat avoided the question may highlight the politicized nature of the topic. As discussed in my literature review, the superintendent is often caught between the wishes and desires of the local community and mandates forced down at the federal level. Additionally, those mandates may change as presidential administrations and their respective priorities change. The transgender bathroom issue comes to mind as a change in philosophy and approach between the Obama and Trump administrations (Somashekhar, Brown, & Balingit, 2017). Further reflecting on this question, I believe my 13 plus year relationship with Chuck allowed him to feel comfortable enough to answer the question candidly and extensively. While I believe the method in which I sought participants was beneficial and allowed me to obtain thoughtful and honest responses, this topic may be so divisive that, unless an extensive prior relationship was there beforehand, the overwhelming approach to answering this question was to speak around it.

The AASA Standards seem to intermix some technical skills with leadership. I have separated the two and attempted to identify the technical skills that were presented
by the participating superintendents prior to this. I will conclude the subtheme of Leadership and Technical skills with the identified concept of servant leadership.

The concept of servant leadership was frequently mentioned by the participating superintendents either through concepts they spoke of or specifically by name. Referring back to Hoffman (2008), servant leadership places an emphasis on the leader being authentic, faithful, and trustworthy as a way to motivate followers. Martin kept the concept simple before expanding upon it, stating “in life, I've always said, "You treat people the way you want to be treated by them." Delving further into the topic, Martin spoke about how he works with his administration team:

Very active in working with our principals and our admin team. It's not directing them to do things but listening to them and trying to get rapport between them and myself so that it's not this top-down thing from me. Most of the time, if it's going to work well, is get in that same realm or level with them and listen to what they have to say and see if we can come up with some really good ideas on how to address things. Because if you go out and you try to do it all by yourself and you don't listen to them, especially if you don't listen to them and you don't allow them to do what they're hired to do, you're not a leader. You're not even a manager. Actually, you're more of a dictator and you're going to fail every single time.

Treat them like you'd like to be treated, recognize they're professionals and don't second-guess them or don't do this to 'em [places thumb down on desk] on every decision they make and, uh, you know, is it the decision I might make every single time? Probably not.

The notion of dictating was an interesting concept and transition for Chuck, who said in our second interview that “the days I'm managing people the Vince Lombardi way and the days of that, I don't know if that works anymore, the new millennial generation, you have to manage people differently.” Speaking more specifically to the concept of servant leadership, Chuck addressed the topic of people’s willingness to do the job themselves:
So, the other thing that I preach to directors and principals a little bit more as I'm getting older, is that the level of servant leadership and some people don't like to use that. But I am convinced that you'll get people to buy in and work with you if you're willing to serve them more than direct them.

I feel like we-we do a pretty good job of that, uh, exceptional job at some areas and so, if I could change, I've got a principal or two that, "Come on, get in there and sub that day or teach that class and cover for him. You're going to spend the same amount of time trying to call people to go cover for him."

People buy in if they see that you're not afraid to get your hands dirty. I think they would like that. They buy into that. You can't-- So, it's the show horse, work horse. You can't do all of that and-and never make hard decisions, and-and represent the district outside. You can't, but you have to have a level of that as well.

Seth and Lilly spoke about the position of superintendent as an opportunity to serve the community. Lilly briefly spoke to this concept noting that “I really feel as if it was servitude. And it's so hard to say that coming into a field where you know you're never allowed to profess or to talk about your faith.” I asked Seth specifically what leadership meant to him. He responded by reflecting upon why became superintendent at River North to begin with:

I quickly became very fond of this place, and so it was not so much that I wanted to be a superintendent. But, like when Mike McCready did retire, there were only three applicants for the job, and as is often the case with a lot of rural districts in Colorado, not a lot of people want the job. I actually saw it as an opportunity to serve; is that I care a lot about this place. I saw good things happening in this place, and so if to keep things going well meant that I needed to serve as superintendent, then that's-that's kind of where I was willing to go.

Seth continued by referring to a slide he uses during new teacher induction that shows the students at the top of the pyramid and everyone else below it. Seth expanded upon this and took the opportunity to reflect upon one of his initial assignments in his doctoral program:

I think you've seen, I have a slide that I use with teacher orientation and I do with people and it's kind of an upside-down pyramid and it has the superintendent and
the board at the bottom instead of the top. And I am a big believer in servant leadership, I saw that in my predecessor, I saw that in the principals that we had and I've observed that over time. It really seems to me that the more effective leaders approach it from a servant-leadership perspective.

Well, so when you said you were going to do this, I actually pulled out. I wrote a mission statement when I was in my induction program and it said, ‘To serve is the keeper of the sacred trust between the school board and the community.’ It serves. To serve is the leader of the River North School District by guiding the faculty and staff and helping students to learn and succeed. My goal is to see students become continuous learners, thinkers, and good citizens as a result of their participation in the educational process provided by the River North School District.

So, you know, the word ‘serve’ is in there and I try to, that remains part of my language that I serve the board, I serve the teachers and the employees, and it kind of gets back to that. Now, my first response is not no, it's trying to serve the organization, the community, the students, the families and providing education and I specifically--I still think that I use those words. I don't know that you would find that with the whole lot about the sacred trust, but, almost like being in the ministry that I think a lot of times being a superintendent is more of a calling than it is getting a job. It seems to me that sometimes that people that approach it in the-- they want it for a job, they want it for the number of decimal places, in the salary. They, -- Those are the ones that don't last very long.

The notion of trustworthiness mentioned by Hoffman (2008) is an important concept to keep in mind with servant leadership. Bob and Lilly emphasized the importance of building a team. Lilly worked to build a collaborative team to buy-in to the concept that they were “all in this together.” Additionally, the ability to build a cohesive team must include trustworthiness. Bob spoke directly to this idea. “Your organization begins to work a lot harder if that’s built in trust because most people who leave their jobs, it's not because of the pay or the other things. It’s because they don’t feel valued as an employee.”

The technical skills and servant leadership traits identified in this sub-theme illustrate the vastness of the position and how the practicing superintendents have approached the position. Several times I have noted the difference in direct involvement
in a specific area may be predicated upon district size. Each of the participating superintendents noted their involvement with the various AASA standards (Hoyle, 1993). Specifically, the participating superintendents seemed to emphasize the importance of school finance and human resources, which corresponds with the literature (Finnan et al. 2015, Kowalski et al. 2011). Additionally, having an understanding of operations and maintenance seemed to be a skill that was important for the participating superintendents. However, their experiences seemed to be obtained from outside opportunities.

**I’m It.** Differences between rural and their suburban or urban were identified as an additional subtheme of the rural superintendency. “I’m it” signifies a distinct feeling the participating rural superintendents felt in comparison to their suburban and urban counterparts. Lamkin (2006) identified that the issues that are specific to rural school districts and the superintendents charged with leading these districts may make the role of the rural superintendent less desirable. Seth mentioned that rural superintendent openings may only garner “a handful of applicants.” While research from Grissom and Andersen (2012) as well as Tekniepe (2015) shows superintendents are more likely to leave smaller school districts for larger districts, essentially climbing the ladder, all seemed genuinely happy with their current position. The fact that the participating superintendents in this study all were pleased with their current position and career choice can also be identified in prior research (Cooper et al., 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015). The differences that exist between rural and suburban/urban positions cannot be overstated. Or maybe better put, as Richard stated “What happens in JEFFCO, in the educational structure, is very interesting even compared to at River North.”
Hill (2015) noted that it may not be uncommon for a rural superintendent to have to drive a bus, teach a class, as well as handle paperwork for all federal and state programs. Or put more succinctly, as one superintendent stated “I’m it! I don’t have any support staff like the guys running the large districts.” (Hill, 2015, p. 7). Similar to the research from Hill, a common theme that came across from the participating rural superintendents was the difference in the amount of staff available to address the wide variety of roles that take place within the district. As Chuck said, “for us, we’re a one-man HR shop, we’re a one-man business management, two people in our technology department so you need to have a working knowledge of a lot of areas.” Chuck continued on that while the district was in transition and searching for a new human resources assistant, he was posting positions for job openings through their job posting service. He noted “specifically to rural schools, I think it's important that you are aware of all of those areas that you mentioned” in relation to some of the technical skills associated with the superintendency.

Continuing with the theme, Richard is the school’s six-man football coach. As Richard stated, “you're wearing a lot more hats than a [superintendent at a] bigger district does.” Continuing with the theme of wearing many hats, after speaking about acting as the safety coordinator for Forest Park, Lilly expanded upon the differences between the rural and urban/suburban districts and noted “that’s a finny example of how small rural-- in your larger district you would have somebody else doing that for you.” Lilly continued with the theme:

you’re a little lost in a small rural system versus what would be a typical superintendent because I'd think obviously in a larger district ensuring curriculum and standards alignment wouldn't be part of their job. They'd be passing that to someone else.
The participants in this study identified that the rural superintendency was
different than the positions of their counterparts in the suburban/urban districts of the
state and may require a different professional background. Because the rural
superintendent is more likely to have to be directly involved in a variety of areas, a
number of the participants felt their technical experiences were more beneficial as
opposed to someone in a larger suburban or urban district. Speaking to his experiences
and the different needs for a rural superintendent, Bob said:

I think it’s important to have been a teacher at some point and-and-that may or
may not be true. Because there are some darn good leaders that have gone through
the military experience and done some of that stuff that are also, well-trained in
how to- how to do the school superintendency. I think for those people you can be
a district leader at a larger district. Because you don’t have to be involved in so
many of the idiosyncrasies that at a small district there’s pretty much just me. I
still do have, you know, part of the discipline I still do half the-the evaluations on
the teachers. You just have so many other irons in the fire in a small district than
you do at a bigger one. In a bigger one you can be the icon of the district and be a-
- Just a good PR guy.

To be successful in a rural area, you're going to have to either learn on your feet
or have been involved in a lot of different areas. So I'm not saying I work any
more hours than anybody else, but I have 50 different irons in the fire-
as opposed to three.

You know, they’ve got other people in other districts that can-that can do this or
can do that or handle all the RANDA stuff. Because I have to handle all, you
know, and-and do all of that and a manager for those kinds of things. So, you're
probably maybe not a master of any, but you’re at least involved in a lot.

Another difference between the rural superintendent and urban/suburban
superintendent, especially for those that live in the community, is that everyone knows
who you are. Similar to what Copeland (2013) identified about everyone knowing you,
Seth spoke to the visibility he has living in his community and his inability to be able to
take a day off and stay at his house after discussing an article about classic mistakes a new superintendent makes:

This one, and I don't know-- These classic mistakes, superintendents do. I don't know if this one ever goes away but it's classic mistake number six: Buying a new car, taking a vacation as soon as you get the job. You've probably heard about, you know, people doing those when they-- They said, "The dream car that you've always wanted and you've been saving about this for your last two or three jobs." I think that's something that you have to just watch as a superintendent.

I got criticism when I built my house because it was, "Why do you need a big house? You're just showing off." Now, I didn't build that house the day after I became superintendent. It was five, six years later but still. There was that. I told you the story it's hard for me to take a day off and be around here during the week. Like to take a Friday and be around the community doing your yard work or something like that. Because everybody sees you. Somehow, you're not allowed to have days off, even if you have vacation days. My caginess about taking a day off on a Friday and being in my yard. I know it goes with it. Now, I've done it for so long. I just have developed how I do those kinds of things.

An additional interesting distinction that was identified by Richard had to do with the differences in mandatory testing between rural and their suburban/urban counterparts. It is a distinction that makes a lot of sense and one that I had not thought of or identified in previous literature. As part of our conversation around Richard’s leadership role with the Rural Council, Richard spoke of a conversation he had with someone from CDE:

I've had some really personal, honest conversations with some of the big guns at CDE with assessment and finally got one of them to just sit down with me and I said, "Don't kid yourself. I'm a math guy." I said, "You came from Florida, I know you're looking big picture." I said, "You understand that nothing we do is ever going to count for the improvement of education because our end size is never big enough."

That's why I asked him, I said, "What's a good N size?" He goes, "Well, for me, if I get 1000, then I really feel like we can really evaluate, dah, dah, dah" I said, "I'll get back to you, but I don't think we've had 1000 kids go to school at Prairie City since the history of the school." And I came back and checked it out and I'm right. We haven't had 1000 kids graduate from here [laughter]. These big testing ideas are very minimal for us as far as accuracy.
High-stakes testing and the accountability era was policy that was placed upon all school districts and has become a significant part of the superintendent’s role (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). However, small rural school districts do not have the ability to provide reliable data due to an insufficient sampling size. This is important to understand and a distinction between rural school districts and their suburban/urban counterparts. Yet, rural school districts, such as Prairie City School District in this example, have been held to the same accountability standards.

The final piece that bears attention is the perception of turnover and the rural superintendency. I brought the topic of tenure up in relation to the participants’ length at their current positions, noting that with one exception they had all been in their currently role for over 10 years. A compliment to their longevity so to speak. As I mentioned that the average tenure according to data collected from AASA (Finnan et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011) was approximately five years, several of the superintendents balked. Lilly specified that “normally the continuity is not with the superintendent” in comparison to other areas of the school. Martin proceeded to comment that “I don't even know if it's that in Colorado. The little districts, especially, have a lot of turnover and it's unfortunate.” However, as with anything, perception may not match up with reality. Chuck noted the length of tenure that several rural superintendents have had within his area of the state:

I think that's changing a little bit. When I first started 13 years ago, I bet the average was even less. And I also think that-- that average changes depending on what geographic area you are in. So here, like in our BOCES, that average is much higher than five, you know. We had a superintendent at a district for 17 and another is 20-some and another down the road for around 20. Um, they're folks at our BOCES. I bet their average is much closer to 10 or 12 than 5, so yeah. I couldn't tell you exactly why that is, but in this area, the average is pretty high.
The differences between the rural superintendency and their counterparts in the suburban/urban position are significant. It was evident that these practicing rural superintendents viewed themselves as having to handle some of the more technical and day-to-day work than their suburban/urban counterparts. I did not get the sense they believed their job was more difficult, just simply different. As Bob noted above, and Lilly also mentioned in her interview, a perception may exist that their suburban/urban counterparts have more political issues to deal with. It was interesting to hear Bob equate to a suburban/urban superintendent being visible within the community as being political and a “PR guy” as opposed to having it be a normal aspect of his position. This may be because he lives within or near the community at East Plains. He may feel like he is actually connected to the community, as opposed to someone serving in a larger district that is only connected for the political aspect. I am not sure of the reasons, however, it was evident most of these superintendents felt that way.

**Working with the Board**

Another theme that was identified and is commonly referred to in a variety of literature around the superintendency is how the superintendent works with the school board. All six of the participating superintendents spoke extensively about working with their respective boards and the importance of the superintendent and school board relationship. I will examine the different aspects of working with the school board from the perception of these six practicing rural superintendents.

Initially, the American education system was set up to have a board of volunteers make the decisions to run the school (Callahan, 1966). However, as the school system expanded in size and became more complex, it became increasingly difficult for a board
of volunteers to effectively manage and run the school (Callahan). This expansion is what
gave way to the school superintendent. The superintendent and school board have been
intertwined since the superintendent’s inception in 1837.

According to Glass et al. (2000), the common perception is that school
superintendents struggle with and may view the school board of education as a hindrance
to the superintendent to effectively serve as the executive of the organization. However, a
recent survey conducted by Finnan et al. (2015) reported that 69% of superintendents
viewed their local school board as an asset. The participants in this study all identified as
mostly having a positive working relationship with their respective boards of education.
Comments such as “I have been blessed with quality board members” from Chuck or
Lilly stating “I think in that particular case the board relationships were really, really
good” referring to the board when she transitioned into the superintendency exemplified
this. Richard echoed this sentiment in saying “we’ve had a great board and they do have a
heart for what's best for kids.”

The ability to work with a group of individuals elected to represent the
community on matters is something that should not be taken for granted. It can be a
difficult dynamic to navigate as there may be personal agendas each individual board
member has. Cambron-McCabe et al. (2005) identified the difficulty leading within a
governance structure and that ultimately “you must find a way to work with your
board…” (p. 15). Martin Sexton spoke to this concept:

There's some things to remember about it, uh, that these guys and ladies, you
know that's your bread and butter. You gotta work with them. I mean you may not
like them, one or two of them especially. Or they may, they may not really like
you but you have got to be above that.
Martin spoke more about the ability and transition required for new superintendents to work with an elected body in our second interview:

Now you work with a school board and you've never done that before in all the years you've been an educator. And I'm telling you that's the biggest challenge and that's the main reason that some superintendents fail because they can't work with a school board.

Continuing on with advice for new superintendents working with the school board, Martin proceeded to say:

Always treat them with respect. Always listen to them. Always allow them to share how they're feeling. Don't cut them off or don't ever refuse to meet with them if they call you. There's just a rapport that you have to gain with every board member. Sometimes, it takes years. Sometimes if they come in and they're pissed off about everything, you got to win them over. Sometimes, you can't. Most of the time you'll be able to do that at least to a point where they will work with you and not try to get you or something. That's the key thing on the individual side of it.

Every one of them is elected. Every one of them is—they are only one member. Many times they come in and think that they can change the world and they soon realize, 'I'm only one person. I'm not the school board.' Make them feel as though you're there to listen. Make them feel as though you're there to respond to what they want to see happen.

An interesting notion about working with the board was brought up around school board elections and changing members. Lilly, speaking on the importance of the school board, noted the ongoing changes that have taken place with her school board:

I had a brand new board right now, I had two resign. It was really strong with the board president. Oh, my gosh was she a good board president! Everything CASB would have ever wanted it. And during all of the contention last year which is totally a different issue. But she just recently resigned. And then another one left a month later. So several months away from an election there you are trying to get an interim board meeting so that when the election comes you can start all over again. So that was my spring and summer.

Board elections present a variety of different challenges which range from a changing dynamic due to a new group of people attempting to work together towards a
common purpose to training them and preparing them for the work to be done. Chuck spoke briefly to bringing in new individuals on the board saying “there's an election a month away, and I think most superintendents are a little bit nervous about that because one new board member can bring a different dynamic to the old board.” Speaking more in-depth about the role a changing board can play, Martin noted the impact it can have on your job.

Your life expectancy as a superintendent is only as good as your next board election or your next hire for a principal or a director of some sort. Because those are the people that will support you or not support you and those are the people you got to have to continue to be a superintendent of a school district. I've been fortunate, this is my 15th year here. I can’t believe that.

I’ve got a school board election coming up. Every time you have one of those, you know, others-- ‘Do you have in your own mind who you’d like to have? Absolutely.’ In your own mind, you also have to think, ‘If it goes the other way in the election, I’m prepared to work with this person. I’ve got to be prepared to work with them.’ I can’t dig my heels in and say, ‘I’m going to fight you tooth-and-nail,’ because you’re going to lose. You’re going to lose. If you make enemies out of folks that are as important as your school board, you’re not going to survive it. They’ll see. They’ll run you out of town. They really will.

Beyond the new dynamics that can come about as a result of a board election, the superintendents spoke to the training that takes place when working with a new school board member. Seth emphasized this when speaking about a board election:

That example that was last night, meeting with our new board member, and I used that CASB Leadership workbook as the talking point of talking about all the different issues. I met with him two weeks ago, before the board meeting I met with him for about an hour and then last night we met for about two hours. And I've come to find out, that's about the length of this orientation thing, it's about three hours. Whether it's three, one-hour sessions, or one great big marathon three-hour session, that's about what it is. You just try to make it very conversational, you try to make the topics accessible to them, try to put it in layman’s language and not be too technical about it.

Richard also noted the use of the CASB Leadership workbook as part of his trainings with new board members:
We've used the CASB and done some training. We bring in people once a while to be on the board to work with them as group. Somewhat within, you have the individual formation. Had a lawyer come in and spend time with them, as all five together but individually to explain what all the laws are there. Individually, from my district, the board members want to be informed, as much as they think they need.

The superintendent and school board dynamic has been an evolving relationship since the school superintendency came to fruition. While the perception has been that this relationship is frequently rife with conflict, data from Finnan et al. (2015) may show perception is not necessarily reality. The data collected from these rural superintendents would support that. However, it is a relationship that aspiring superintendents and veteran superintendents alike should be aware of. The dynamic is regularly changing and can change with every board election, which in Colorado is every two years.

**Role of the Superintendent.** There were certain roles the participating rural superintendents identified as part of their job that do not seem to necessarily change. This sub-theme looks at the role of the superintendent in relation to the school board. This sub-theme is comprised of responses from the participants regarding their role as superintendent and working with the school board. I routinely heard the role of the superintendent is to present the school board with options and carry out their vision for the district. Some of the superintendents spoke about school board goals, others spoke about doing a majority of the technical work, such as planning professional development opportunities or developing the budget. DiPaola (2010) referenced that the superintendent’s job varies based on school district size, the district’s culture, the size of the school board, the board’s expectations, and governance and policy style of the school board. Here we will examine the superintendent’s role as identified by the rural superintendents from this study.
When asked about his role in working with the school board, Seth specified that he believed he was to act as the board’s advisor:

If you look at the literature, it talks about, you know, the superintendent being the only employee of the board. And you're kind of their hired expert for lack of a better word. So I have always taken very seriously my role in making recommendations to the board. When I write something up in the board packet, I try to-- if there are options- to try to give the board options and then make a recommendation. You know, here's options A and B, or A, B and C. And I'm recommending C because, you know-- Or here's the pro's and con's to the three options and for this reason I would recommend whichever one. . .

But there have been some times that I am genuinely-- don't know what might be the best route. And, to me, that is some of the power in having a locally elected school board that's from the community is saying, "You know, we have a couple of options here. And I'm not really sure-- what--what do you guys think would be the best way for us to approach this? What do you think would go over best with the community?" And so I think you have to utilize both of those situations. And, again, not letting-- not letting it get caught up too much with ego.

Reflecting on the same question regarding the superintendent’s role in working with the school board, Chuck spoke frequently about carrying out the board’s vision:

I think that the-the main thing is to carry out the vision of my board. The board in this district and the previous boards all have a pretty clear vision of what they believe are priorities for the school, and how the district fits within in the state and within the federal regulations. That's what my job is, that the community elects them, our district elects them, and they have a vision, and I-- we get clear about what their thoughts are, about where the district should be going, and then I do my best to get there. So we set board goals. We just did it last week and, uh, so it's pretty clear to me what I need to get done here in the next year.

Continuing with the concept of setting the board’s goals, Chuck proceeded to speak about using them to set his personal goals for the year with the board:

Well, then I set goals after the board sets goals. I-I have to submit goals to the board, uh, at the-- in December, at the December Board Meeting. And I don't know if I love the rubric that they use to-to grade my goals, but, um, they're based on the board goals and-- and so, then I-- it gives me direction on what I need to focus on.

The hard part of that is things come up that you didn't plan for that consume, you know, a month or two months of your time. It was a heck of an achievement that
you-you got the district through something but it was never identified in December. So that's that's the hard part about evaluating a superintendent, is if you could tell me exactly what my problems were going to be this school year, then measure them on that. But inevitably, it's a different-- I'm dealing with something that didn't come up there.

Curious about the role he played in setting the actual board goals, I asked about his involvement. During my time at High Plains, I noted the board goals were pretty consistent each year. Through his response, it seems as if he started out initially trying to have a say in them and has decreased his involvement in that over time:

Yeah, yeah. I think once we got it going, I've tried to sit back a little bit, right then. You know I'll-- I'll speak up if I think one is completely unreasonable because of finances or personnel or something, but yeah, not anymore. Early on, I probably drove it a little bit more because, you know I felt like I- I had a better grasp of what the financial issues were than-they did, but not anymore. Now, I get the print-- the posters printed out.

The role of the superintendent can get muddied at times, and a couple of superintendents signified spending a significant amount of time discussing what should be superintendent work and what should be board work. Speaking to this concept, Bob identified how he approaches the superintendent recommendation:

I'm going to make a recommendation based on what's best practice for kids, best training and the rest of that, and then your board either supports that or doesn't. And it's your job to try to convince them. I don't always get to control that [the outcome] because obviously, we work with boards and I had, the board this last year, get rid of my highest achieving teacher.

Regarding working with the board to develop goals, Bob expressed slight frustration around his role in creating them:

The part that’s I guess frustrating from-- And it may be true with Seth and everybody else too I would suspect. Its-it’s more driven from me or the admin team-than it is from the board, just because of their lack of knowledge in regard to how to do that.
Martin may have spoken best about the role of the superintendent and board being muddied at times. When I asked him about his role in working with the school board or driving and developing school board goals, he spoke to the fact that it depends on the board president and dynamics:

It depends on who's on the board [referencing the board goals]. Sometimes, if you've got a board president that that's really their thing, don't get in their way. You gotta kind of play your cards the way they're dealt to you each each two years with the new school board, and just really try to, uh, put yourself in their position. The main thing about my role is to oversee all of these programs, to be ultimately responsible to our school board first and foremost and to our communities.

Lilly offered up a stark contrast regarding what is considered board work and superintendent work. This is something that according to her she has spent a significant amount of time in working with the board on, which she did from the beginning:

I think just that I served that role as an adviser to them and making sure they had the information they needed to make good decisions. I think that was, I-I kept over and over saying which is the first time I think they ever heard of superintendents say this, "My job is to administer [what] the board directs me to do through policy." You can advise your administrator to do things if there's something you don't want to really do.

Continuing with that focus, Lilly specified again that, “I am strong about what is board work, what isn't board work, and who’s responsibility is it if it isn't (board work).” Lilly referred to a specific board member that at one point stated to her that all she wanted was a “yes man.” Her response, consistent with what she stated was her role, was “That’s not true. I'm here to advise you.” Continuing on:

This is advice that I'm giving but the decision is ultimately yours. And it doesn’t matter what board I've been under I can tell every one of them, “Look there's plenty of opportunities where I advise you this way or here's my recommendation and you refuse it”.

Beyond noting that he is responsible for carrying out the board vision, Chuck echoed Lilly’s comments about working with the board around what is board work and what is superintendent work:

I'm constantly trying to remind them that they are the policymakers. That yes, I know their neighbors want to talk about the coach and the field trip and their teacher, but at the end of the day they are policymakers and that's where they are going to have a good influence and guide me through their goals, and through my goals, and the rest of it. But losing focus of the policy is a challenge, you don't want to have that happen.

Telling them up front, emphasizing them regularly what their role is, that we're going to have to do that again next Tuesday, we have a board issue. Or somebody's asked to be on the agenda and I have to remind them that we have somebody to make that decision, that is not a board decision, you're policymakers. We need to listen, you can give me some input but this isn't a board decision, we don't want to take action on the after-prom party.

Transitioning to policy development, this appears to be another responsibility of the superintendent, which is AASA Standard 2. This technical skill was seldom mentioned during our interviews, and only when I specifically asked what their respective approaches were to it. This may be the case because as Lilly mentioned:

Policy is a killer. So when there's an update, I will present the policies first, but things that are changing I’ll put it in bright red. And then during the discussion, I’ll say, ‘Here is why.’ If it's a legal issue CASB does a lot of things that are more than just the legalities and make it for recommendations. So I say, ‘This is CASB’s recommendation. It is not our current practice.’ I just did that with one that I just presented here this last month was, ‘This is the CASB recommendation but it's not our practice.’

Most of the superintendents spoke to the process they go through in the creation of policy, and that the majority of new policy comes about as a result of a change in state or federal law. A number of the superintendents rely on the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) for their recommendations around policy additions and revisions.
While the CASB recommendations can be a valuable resource, Richard noted that he is cautious in implementing them in their entirety:

> Most of our policy stuff, again, CASB has a big, they want everything on paper. When something new comes out from legislature or something like that, then we look at those change obviously, and update them. But as you go through those updates, a lot of times or, we do have a situation that we have to use this policy, we look at it to fit us. You know, to fit Prairie City, and that's really unique, in a way I think, because there are some indirect pieces that in a policy here, that may not fit everything. I can figure our district in a different scenario. I run it by the lawyer and say, "Can we do this?" and he goes, "Well, we can sure try," till you got to go to court and find out of its crazy or not.

Seth also mentioned using the CASB recommendations as a resource, and noted the importance of considering policy adoption even if the adoption may not have immediate applicability. Referencing when he first became superintendent, Seth said he “didn’t worry about some of the policies regarding charter schools because we didn’t have a charter school.” However someone brought to his attend to have those policies in place because you do not know when someone will bring up the concept or idea. If you do not have the policy in place “then you have to scramble to get the policies in place and go through the pain of having a charter school application.”

Seth also took the opportunity to speak to an upcoming policy review, referring to the fact that his school board would like to do a policy review beginning in January:

> I probably haven't been-- No, I haven't probably. I have not done a great job about going back and reviewing, so that's part of the goal for the board this year is to try to pick some chunks of the policy. We're going to use that as we move on to the Simbly Software is picking a chunk of policies, and really, I think there is A through I, so we have a mini section that is; G is personnel and J is student. Those two are fairly thick and significant. Almost all the other sections I think we can have that whole section, all of section A, a whole of section B, a whole of section C at a city, and go through those policies and review them and I think that'll be fine. G and J we're going to have to break up. I don't know if it's two settings or three settings, but they are going to have to be broken up. I have a feeling it will probably take a good solid year to get through some things and maybe the board might be willing to do some sections before the meeting to do that.
Martin also stated he has “not done a good job of staying current on policy” but that he is also working through a policy review with his board. He noted that anything dealing with personnel has at least two readings, and sometimes three. Martin concluded his comments around policy by saying:

You want to be really careful with the politics of it too because you can step on a landmine with a change in board policy, especially, if somebody's, ‘Why are we doing that?’ Again, if you don't have to do it and you know there's strong opposition to that, leave it alone, just let it ride.

Lilly also spoke to the importance of being aware of the politics, speaking of a specific time when she was dealing with the issue of armed personnel in the school.

There is an armed school personnel push if you’re small rural school district. So the board at that time probably studied the issue for almost two years really. And the sheriff came in, kind of gave his piece and a district that already had it prior to us gave feedback to the board. It was a very tight vote, it was a three-two vote, but not contentious. And for me, that was a success.

I did at the time we were doing it I wasn’t that committed to the effort. It was the board needs to make the decision whatever the board decides I'm going with. You know so but and my whole thing was we need to be rational about this decision you know. We need to really research it so that we are not being manipulated by fear factor. But we have enough facts. You're never going to have enough -- you're never going to have all the facts but enough to make a good informed decision. And they decided when they heard enough. I kept presenting information and trying to give them like, “There where this was.” And we just worked away at it, a little bit at a time. And then finally they said, “We are ready to vote.” Okay. I’ll put it on the action. I had no idea how the vote was going to be.

In looking at the responses in relation to the role of the superintendent, it appears as though there is a fine line between providing input and not wanting to be micromanaged, between providing recommendations for policy work and obtaining feedback on decisions that may ultimately be the superintendent’s. Cambron-McCabe et
al. (2005) spoke to the notion that a central challenge for superintendents to work through is board micromanagement.

It was evident the participating superintendents spent substantial time conveying to the school board the role of the superintendent is to administer and the role of the school board is to advise through policy. The superintendent will provide recommendations on what he or she believes is best for the school district, however the board may ultimately decide to move in a different direction, similar to Bob’s example with a teacher that was let go after being recommended to be renewed. The degree to which these things will occur may ultimately depend on the respective district, which goes back to what DiPaola (2010) referred to when he said that the role of the superintendent will vary based upon a variety of criteria.

**School Board Relations.** The ability to effectively work with a board is essential for a superintendent to operate effectively. Simply put, as Bob stated “with the average length of a superintendency being about three years, it is hard to be successful if you aren’t there long enough to have a measurable impact.” While the three years is not necessarily a correct number, the point is still accurate. Martin spoke to the importance of board relations frequently during our time together. In reflecting upon our interviews and his responses, he may have learned a lesson from his time at Silver School District:

That's a lesson I learned when I left Silver, because I just was-- I dug my heels in over something really stupid and I-- hindsight says, ‘What in the heck did you do that, it-it would have meant nothing really.’ But you know, it's the little stumps that you've-- that you should be able to jump over, that you trip over and can really, really cause you some problems.

Martin was not let go from his position, however it was a lesson he carried with him to his position at West Plains. He continued on to say that:
I can’t dig my heels in and say, ‘I’m going to fight you tooth-and-nail,’ because you’re going to lose. You’re going to lose. If you make enemies out of folks that are as important as your school board, you’re not going to survive it. They’ll see. They’ll run you out of town. I said before if it’s not illegal and if you can ethically do it.

To this day he carries with him the rule, one that he shared with Jhon Penn at CDE and he just so happened to share with me before I met Martin who also shared it with me. The cardinal rule for any superintendent, according to Martin is:

Yeah, and the cardinal rule is, uh, if you got seven members, you never piss four of them off at the same time [emphasis]. If you got five, the same, you know, it’s three. So just remember that, okay. Not at the same time and you will be okay.

Contrasting the cardinal rule that Martin spoke of, Richard, Bob, Seth, Lilly, and Chuck noted they have routinely had good board relations because they believe they have been a good fit for the district. This concept is worth noting in this section however will be spoken to more in-depth in the section *Identified Beliefs and Characteristics for Success.* While the superintendents may need to be aware of “the cardinal rule,” it is important to understand where your boundaries are as a superintendent and what you can live with. Sometimes the board and superintendent relationship can be in a good place, however the priorities and support may end up misaligned. Bob Ross spoke to this scenario while he served in his first superintendency at Great Plains School District:

Here's- here's the situation. We had a hometown kid who was a good athlete. Good everything. But he was a bully. And got kicked out of numerous games and had two or three girls in school, and was just a jerk in the stands, all the time. And I just slowly kept holding him accountable, and finally, you're done for the season. You've been kicked out so many times, you're not coming to anymore. And this was over, you know, two years, two and a half years, and then-- So, I banned him for the season and then, so he gets his family and you know, half the community and comes to the board meeting and it was a December meeting on my fourth year. And they overturned my decision to ban him.

I said, okay, then you'll be finding a new Sup next spring, I'll just tell you right now because I'm not okay with his behavior. It's not a good example for our
community, for our kids, for anybody, and if you're okay with that then I'm leaving. It's that simple. I've got a line in the sand and I'm not okay with that. And it's your choice as a board, it's your community and I get that, I totally understand that. But I have certain expectations of the kids. I have certain expectations of my staff. I have expectations of my community. You as a board can either support that or make your choice. And so—

At the end of the day, the superintendency may be about the ability to work with people: that can consist of stakeholders including teachers, classified employees, students, parents, and board members. There can be a fine line in knowing when to compromise who you are and what you stand for as a person and when to take a stand. Anytime you work with people there is an art to it; knowing what you can tolerate and work with as an individual with anyone could simply be a grey area.

**Communication with the Board.** Part of maintaining good board relations is the ability to effectively communicate with the board. The information collected in this section corresponds to the findings of Kowalski et al. (2010) and Henwood (2016). The superintendents in this study identified a number of different ways and times that they interacted with the board, whether it was on an individual level or group level. Additionally, the superintendents repeated the notion and importance of making sure to communicate regularly and frequently with the school board, the importance of keeping them informed, and to never surprise them. Martin spoke to this topic:

> Just that tenor that you have to maintain with your school board, and keeping them together too, um, you know, uh, kind of doing the behind-the-scene conversations, phone calls, emails, texts, uh, so that they know what's going on, and they know what you're thinking, and keeping them informed, and keeping all of them informed. You don't just tell one or two of them.

Continuing on, Martin emphasized the importance of keeping the board informed.

> You want to always, always keep your board informed. You never want to surprise them. You never want to surprise them, not even one of them. And, uh,
that's kind of survival tactics that I've-- I learned and, you know that's- that's why I'm here 15 years, you know.

Chuck echoed the sentiments shared by Martin around keeping the board informed:

The philosophy is simple, it’s very transparent and honesty. I share the good and probably not as often as I should share the good, but I share the bad. I want them to know quickly from me what’s going on in the district. Doesn’t always happen that way but I prefer that they hear it from me before they hear it on the street. I want to give them good knowledge so when people ask them questions they have an understanding of what’s going on there. Horribly transparent. I don’t keep anything from them. There are some things I’d love to sweep under the rug or I have to tell them with my head down, tucked tail kind of thing but I tell them when I want them to know, not everything going on. They don’t need to know, but if it’s something that I think they may hear about, or maybe question about, I want them to know as soon as possible. The honesty factor can’t be overemphasized.

Lilly seemed to follow the same philosophy around communicating with the board before they hear from another source. “Their rule is if I’m going to hear about it in the grocery store I want to know it from you first.” Providing an explanation as to why she had this approach Lilly said “I'm in a small rural school district. They want to be informed about almost everything. Things that we would think board should never know about.”

While it was apparent the participating superintendents tried to communicate as much as possible with their school board, the opportunity to communicate and develop a positive working relationship was an important aspect Lilly identified. She spoke about an opportunity she was going to have with a new board member:

Example to that would be this upcoming week, we've got two trainings that we're going to, CASB is putting on their little regional directors. It's got a new board members' training down there in Limon and on Wednesday. Then Thursday there's a rural Colorado organization that is running a Meet and Talk to your Senators and Representative. That meeting is happening in Brush on Thursday. I won't have every board member going to those but just that windshield time,
really helps to answer some of those questions and get to know them and see what the priorities are and what they're hearing and seeing. You get to see what their preferences are and their emphasis.

For Lilly, this “windshield time” provides an opportunity for her to make personal connections and develop an understanding of what new school board members are interested in. The time spent communicating and getting to know board members in this fashion allows her to “make a personal tie to show them [school board] how what we’re trying to do, either administratively, at the policy level, or the board level ties in to what their preferences are.” In Lilly’s mind, this approach has allowed her to “show people we are all on the same page” and can remove the appearance of “direct conflict.” Then the conversation can become about “priorities instead of direct conflict.”

Some of the superintendents also spoke about the ways in which they communicated with the board leading up to the board meeting. Interactions were informal and others were more formal in nature. The superintendents had a variety of ways in which they accomplished this. Martin seemed to spend the most amount of time working directly with members of his school board in order to create the board meeting agenda:

Communication, communication, and communication. Many times-- I always-- in preparation for board meetings, I work on agendas. I have agenda meetings with the president and the vice president of the school board. Our meetings are Wednesday evenings. I have an agenda meeting Monday morning. We review the agenda and all of the information that's going to be up for discussion. I always send that out as early as I can on Monday so that they've got a couple of days to read it.

Martin was the only board member that identified working with a member of the board to create the board agenda. Chuck and Seth identified having work-sessions prior to the actual board meeting. Chuck has them routinely, every month, while Seth will have a work-session as the need may come. Bob, Lilly, and Richard noted that they meet with
their board on a monthly basis and did not mention having a board work session. In fact, Richard specifically stated they do not. This leads to longer meetings.

We don’t have a lot of special board meetings. We don't have the working board sessions that a lot of districts will have prior to the meetings. That kind of thing, but what that does is, it creates long board meetings. In other words, on our regular scheduled board meeting time, I would say we probably average of somewhere around two to two and a half hour meetings.

Sometimes the participating superintendents indicated having individual conversations that take place with a board member. When this occurs, the superintendents noted that it is important to be transparent and that the other board members know when an individual board member has asked a question and the context of the response. Chuck spoke specifically about how he handles this, saying “it's one of the board letters that I email out. That, ‘Board member Jones has called with a question about the water availability on the piece of land on a county road.’ Then everybody knows what that conversation is.” This prevents the appearance of favoritism, which Chuck noted was important to avoid. “That's important because I don't think you want your board to think that the superintendent and one guy are doing things that the rest of us don't know about.”

The degree to which board members interact with their superintendents varied, some may only ask a question at a board meeting and never interact with the superintendent prior to the meeting. Others may communicate with the superintendent weekly. Martin noted “I had one that just quit coming and just said, ‘I'm done, I'm not going to do it anymore.’” More frequently, the superintendent was the individual sending out communication to the school board. This often took place in the form of a weekly newsletter or update in order to maintain consistent and constant communication with the school board. Sometimes the information provided was an update to a question that may
have come up at the prior board meeting, other times the information is provided leading up to the board meeting, and sometimes the information is provided just as an update and may not be a subject in the meeting at all.

**Characteristics of the Board.** The local school board is a representation of their respective communities. Some of the superintendents spoke to how the individuals’ backgrounds could shape their understanding of dealing with issues, especially when it came to personnel. Some of this related to the board members’ educational attainment, some of it also related to their professional backgrounds. Chuck provided his thoughts around this topic:

Their profession or their background whether or not it's in an organization, or if they're independent, or working by themselves matter, makes a difference. Some of the most difficult ones that I've had over the years haven't had employees or been part of an organization. They farm and they're on the farm by themselves, then typically hard workers and don't understand why some of these other employees wouldn't just fall into line. I think their profession makes a difference, level of education is so-so, I think it matters but it's not a guarantee for sure. I think their profession makes a big difference.

Bob spoke about how he benefitted because four of his five current board members had experience working in or running their own business. He contrasted that to his experience with the board he had at Great Plains School District:

It’s a lot, and- and this was true in Great Plains School District, I think only one had a degree. Almost none of them had been off of the ranch or farm. And so, it’s hard for them to envision you as something other than a ranch hand, because the only person they’ve ever hired or fired is a ranch hand.

It helped that a couple of them that been around the block a couple of times, and- and, we’re involved with BOCES. But when you just don’t have that next level of- of education or haven’t had to supervise other people that piece adds a lot of understanding. When they’ve had to supervise others and understand that you can’t necessarily control everybody else’s behavior. You can go train them and talk to them, and discipline and do all the stuff, but that’s just the nature of our-- of controlling, you know, or running a business.
Frequently board members may have a direct reason for wanting to be on the board. Bob mentioned that he has a teacher in his district that currently sits on the board, fortunately according to him she has been a quality board member and has been able to “distinguish the difference in her roles between teaching and being on the school board.”

A couple of the superintendents identified having board members that have students in school. Seth noted the current board at River North all have a student in school. Additionally, one is a teacher in a nearby district and another has his wife and mother working for the district. These dynamics may relate back to Martin’s belief that “every one of them has an agenda.” Chuck spoke specifically about the benefit of having board members without a direct connection to the district:

Interestingly my Board President right now took his second term with no kids in school, and it’s been really nice I think, that clears up that there is no agenda for my kid. I'm not trying to do this to benefit my kid.

Some of the better ones I've had have been people who haven't had kids in school, very objective that way. It's a little easier to get emotional on a teacher or a topic or when it directly involves your child. Thinking of Andrew, might be as good a board member as I've had, he didn't have a kid or grandkid in our district but cared about education, cares about kids, understands finance, holds you accountable.

The superintendent and school board relationship has been a complex dynamic that has evolved since the superintendent’s inception in 1837 (Callahan, 1966). Cambron-McCabe et al. (2005) identified the superintendent and school board relationship as an important one to navigate and work through. The relationship’s complexity may be a reason Kowalski et al. (2011) identified superintendent conflict with the school board as one of the top reasons superintendents leave their position. However, it was evident that the participating superintendents in this study identified as having a positive overall relationship with their respective boards. In analyzing the data, the participating
superintendents in this study have worked to have an effective working relationship with their local school board. The effort put into building relationships, effectively communicating, being transparent, and training was evident when examining the data. The ability to effectively communicate is something that has frequently been identified in current research (Henwood, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2011; Wilson, 2010).

**Identified Beliefs and Characteristics For Success**

Connecting back to DiPaoloa (2010) and how the superintendent’s position will vary based on a multitude of items including the school board, it is evident that there can be a lot of variety based on the superintendent’s district. This variety in the technical skills needed by an individual district, what the board seeks in their respective superintendent, and what the community ultimately believes to be important can be influential in the success or lack-there-of for a rural superintendent. In looking at the next identified theme, *Identified Beliefs and Characteristics for Success*, I analyze the participating superintendents’ thoughts on what has allowed them to be successful in their current positions.

The superintendents that participated in this qualitative study have all been successful in their own way. They all are currently serving as superintendent in their current district in at least their fifth year, which is the average tenure for a superintendent as identified by AASA in the 2000, 2010, and 2015 studies (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). All of the superintendents have demonstrated academic successes and had a minimum district rating of accredited based on the 2014 CDE Performance Frameworks (CDE, 2017b). They have all had additional accomplishments that have demonstrated their success including passed bond and mill-levy overrides,
working out of financial trouble, and sustained academic achievement. Through the interview process, a number of different characteristics were spoken to in relation to their respective longevity and success.

The ability to develop relationships was an important attribute identified by the superintendents. This was a finding also identified by Antonucci (2012). Individuals working in schools interact with a variety of individuals with a diverse background, whether that is students, families, and community members or other staff members. The superintendent must be able to effectively interact with them all. Bob mentioned his outgoing nature as being beneficial to him in developing relationships and helps in his position.

It also helps that I'm kind of a social freak compared to my wife. You know, I say, "Hi," to everybody, I give everybody a hard time, and there isn't hardly anybody that I don't get along with. So, that part I think makes this job better.

Lilly spoke to the struggle she initially had when she became superintendent, in what appeared to be a divided staff and a difficult situation:

The first year was -- it was hard. And for me, it was hard because the acceptance thing wasn't really [smooth], half of the staff was totally okay with it. The other half they didn't care. But there was one or two that was going to make sure my life was not a happy one. To this day I still struggle with those. Then after that things really calmed down. I developed good relationships with the people that were originally not supporters.

For Seth, the opportunity for him to develop relationships and be viewed as a resource while serving as Business Services Director was beneficial. The concept of being viewed as a resource was a big part of it, in addition to the fact that he is “people person” and was willing to reach out to staff. Additionally, he did not want to be known as the person that always said “no”:
I did get along with the staff and, he saw that I was regularly reaching out to teachers, you know, trying to make classrooms a better instructional area, trying to, find those things, trying to, you know, work the budget. I think I've told you before, one of the things that I didn't like at the college I was at was that the business manager was seen as the ‘No.’ That was the first thing people thought about. The two men that I worked with the thing was their first response to almost anything was "No." And I just-- I just didn't want-- I wanted to be seen more of a resource and a help, both for teachers and principals and those kinds of things. Very often, you know, we had things in place before them, and I found out that people assumed as they often do with education, we have no resources, we have no money, and so they wouldn't even ask.

The ability to connect with people and be approachable is part of developing relationships, and has been part of Chuck’s success in ascertaining building level issues. If someone is incapable of developing the appropriate relationship with staff they will likely feel unable to meet with or speak to the superintendent about issues that may be of concern. In order to accomplish that openness, you cannot treat your staff as a “nail” as Bob mentioned in his metaphor to working to not be viewed as a “hammer.”

More than the other superintendents, Richard spoke about the necessity to connect with community members and developing relationships. Below I quote Richard in reference to a superintendent he knew that did not work to connect with people and specifically what he believes he needs to do to connect with people in his community:

People in this rural area, more than anything, they need your time. That causes a tremendous challenge for me to get work done. There's a lot of nights that I'm here till later than I needed to be. I watched an administrator and even in my early days of administration he was on the clock. He got there at 7:30 and he was out at four o'clock. He had the ability or he would close his door and his secretary would say he's busy.

Well, he was getting his work done but you're not dealing with people. Well, he was only -- he barely lasted a semester. Highly qualified candidate, he would, he did the business great and I was always impressed because I was still, I have work to do. ‘How did you do that?’ I dealt with it personally. I think that one of the more challenging pieces, especially with a small setting like this is, you do have to be willing to have a good time.
Richard also spoke about the importance of spending time getting to know people in his district and how he used that opportunity to his advantage:

They want to tell you about the week, they got to and if you don't have time for that, then you're not going to get that tie in, that relationship where I'm interested in something besides just whatever is in athletics or whatever's happening in education or whatever and then turn that around, then you've bought some time for them. I can call that person on the phone and say, ‘You know me. We've talked. I know what you're doing. I know your life your little bit, but now I need to know what do you want to have information wise so we can pass the first bond ever in the history of the district to build a new school.’

Because we asked this district for $5.2 million and those kinds of questions. When you develop some of that trade off well then they'll listen. They know they'll comment back to me. You know, that takes time and you just-- You're setting here and you're going ‘I’ve got 20 things I could be doing.’

While the ability to develop relationships is an important characteristic for success, the superintendent must also be able to make difficult decisions. As Chuck indicated “you can't do all of that and-and never make hard decisions” referring to building relationships and being a servant leader. The superintendents noted that part of their job, likely begrudgingly, is having to make difficult decisions. Sometimes those difficult decisions lead to the dismissal of friends, as indicated by Bob. Sometimes there may be a disagreement as to how job performance is going between the superintendent and the individual being let go. Martin spoke to this and the difficulty that goes along with making that difficult decision:

I've had-- I've had to let some principals go in my-- in my years as sup and it's-it's hard because it doesn't matter how bad they are, they've always got a group in that school that just love them. Some of them love them, some of them hate them, the rest are in the middle. And, uh, you know, that's always an issue too. The same thing with parents, you know.

Martin stated his preference, to the benefit of both himself and the other individual involved, was to try and counsel the individual out of the position. Sometimes this was
effective and could possibly prevent a confrontation, although that was not always possible.

If you can kind of counsel them out, you know, ‘This is really not what you need to be doing, you know. You were a lot happier as a teacher, and a lot better.’ You know, sometimes it will work, and sometimes they, ‘What are you talking about? I'm good.’ ‘Well, no, you're not.’”

Chuck also spoke about making difficult decisions and what he termed “plowing around the stump”:

I kinda like this saying, uh, I probably don't use it too-too often, but plow around the stump. That I've tried not to plow around the stump and take on issues if we-- if we find them rather than take the easy way, you know.

One, I won't mention his name but when I was first starting, I had to deal with a couple of tough issues. And I had a 17-year veteran from a neighboring district say, ‘Wow, you're crazy-- you do that, you won't be around very long.’ And I said, ‘So-so you wouldn't-- you wouldn't take that on?’ ‘That's why I've been here 20 years, because I'm smarter and I-I know better than that.’

So I stayed up thinking about that and that's plowing around the stump but that's not going to make significant-- that's hanging on. And, uh, I'm sure he did stay there a long time because of that but it-it would be hard to say that it was a meaningful time, a meaningful 20 years.

So I think as a district and clear from the board down, we have not done that. We've not dodged a ton of issues, you know. We do occasionally but, the big issues, we've taken those on and ran bonds and-and have been successful with that. And then, uh, you know I think, uh, for the most part, I-- I've tried to just be honest with people. I haven't, uh-- sometimes it turns out that you told them wrong or you gave them bad information, that you didn't-- but you know what, I'm at a point where I don't feel like I need to lie to anybody.

An additional attribute that was identified was work ethic. Some of the superintendents spoke specifically to this attribute, while others illustrated it in their comments. Richard Springsteen did not mention his work ethic specifically, however he did speak about the necessity to finish work late while at home on a regular basis, often times at 7:30 or 9:00 at night. Bob did mention his work ethic specifically, briefly
mentioning that “I do not want to do a bad job for anyone, I work hard enough to where I am not going to do a bad job.” Chuck spoke about his appreciation for work, which may be why he seeks a strong work-ethic from the individuals that work at High Plains:

I've worked since I was 15. I've fixed tires at the CO-OP in the summers. Uh, I've scraped drywall out of homes and construction. I was the-- worked during-- during college checking out towels and basketballs at the gym and-- and I've never felt like I've been too good for a job, ever. And, uh, to this day I still-- still don't.

But at Bedford, I think that helped me be successful because my-- You asked about what my goal was, how long. It was never an issue of how long am I staying. It was, "Can I get this job done? Can I-- can I make an improvement?" I didn't have a plan on how long to be honest with you. And I'm not so sure I shouldn't have stayed and to be honest it was a solid job.

I had a mother that believed in hard work and so I didn't grow up with much. And looking back on it, that was a benefit to me. I was basically raised by a single mother and we, she, we worked.

I think I've been willing to -- I'm the, for sure, the dumbest superintendent in the area intellectually, but I think I'd be willing to outwork most of them. I bet I put in the hours. I mean we have some really good ones that are smart enough, they don't have to do that. But even now that I'm getting gray and fat, and stuff, I still feel like I have good stamina to work and-and it doesn't bum me out to be here until six for a couple weeks in a row or so.

Lilly also agreed that work ethic was instrumental in her success. When she first started as superintendent, she referenced many nights being at the school “well past 7:00 pm.” Lilly specifically recalled an evening following a meeting which she left at 11:00 pm. Her work ethic and perseverance paid off after stating to herself “okay, you know you hate your job. What are you going to do about it?” 15 years later she is still employed at the district and she has had numerous successes since starting at Forest Park.

The ability to connect with people and develop relationships as well as a strong work ethic have served these individuals well during their respective careers. Connecting back to the literature, it was interesting to find that the practicing superintendents in this
study, with the exception of Bob, did not speak to the importance of goal setting. This was something that Waters and Marzano (2006) and Forner et al. (2012) had identified as being important for successful district leadership. The superintendents in this study all referenced at some point, some more in-depth than others, the importance of being able to make difficult decisions. This was something Forner et al (2012) identified in their research on rural superintendent leadership. Wilson (2010) also indicated the importance for rural superintendents to have high moral and ethical leadership.

When looking at the identified attribute of work ethic, the superintendents in this study either spoke directly about their willingness to put long hours in or mentioned the amount of time they put in to their jobs. The willingness to work these long hours, along with other aspects of the superintendency, was identified as a reason some educators have chosen not to pursue the superintendency (Winter et al., 2007).

**Fit.** Jack Welch wrote in his book *Winning* that if you “find the right job you will never work again” (2005, p. 256). The importance of fit was a surprising finding that came about as a result of this study. It was not something I came across in the research, however in analyzing the data it appears as though it is something these superintendents might agree with Mr. Welch on.

Bob has been employed as superintendent at the most districts of the participating superintendents, having had three prior superintendency positions prior to coming to East Plains. During our time together, Bob was very clear what he views as important to him as a superintendent and something he stated he has shared with the districts that have hired him:

I want to do a great job for you, but I will hold the academics high. If you don’t want that, don’t hire me. I’m kind of for holding people accountable. If you don’t
like that, don’t hire me and that might mean your best friend, that might mean your wife.

Hopefully for Bob, his emphasis stays aligned with what East Plains wants as their superintendent. It seems as though he may have found the right fit.

As previously noted, the other superintendents have all been in no more than one other district as superintendent and currently in a least their tenth year in their current district. I asked each individual why they believed they have stayed in their current position for such a long period of time. Chuck noted his alignment in philosophy and beliefs with the board:

I think what-- so here’s the answer of why I've stayed 10 years. I think philosophically, I've had the same vision for the district as the board. And not all of them, there, you know, there's-five of them and they're always changing, so there are some that I haven't. But in general, um, even more than general, for the majority of the time and the board members, their vision is something that I could support and not only support, but really wanted to get done to please them.

Being able to personally align with your district’s philosophy and beliefs makes it easier for the superintendent to legitimately support the direction of the district. It provides an authenticity behind the work. Seth spoke to the need about being authentic when going through the interview process and finding the right fit as superintendent:

I guess what I don't want to say and it came off this way is that people that moved districts, that have this goal of being the superintendent at a large district, and so they move somehow are not as true or straightforward. I think what it is, is that sense of self. If you know that's what it is, and then I think to be a person of integrity, you need to tell the board. ‘I plan on being here three to five years and then I would like to move on.’ Some boards are like, "if we can keep somebody three to five years, win." They're fine with that. What I don't think-- It's a little disingenuous to say, ‘Oh, yes, I'll finish my career here,’ when you really have no intention of doing that. Again, for yourself and for the people that you're going to be working for. Some districts, some boards are just like, ‘We need a cleanup person. Things have been a mess for 6 to 10 years. We need someone and we realize in order to clean it up, you're probably going to make enemies. Three years, clean it up and then hand it off to the next person.’
Those all can be valid rolls and reasons and why to do that. There's some people who've made a career of being a superintendent of going places and cleaning up. They just realize they're never going to be in any place more than three to five years. Some of those people, the way they do it is the home that they own is more of a vacation home. They just never buy, going to those communities because they know they're not going to be there. A lot of time if it's clean-up community, getting rid of the house can be this huge anchor. I've known some superintendents that own three different houses because they bought one everywhere they went and couldn't sell them. My preference is obvious is to go someplace and stay.

Speaking about why he came to Prairie City and why he believes he has been able to stay for such a long period of time, Richard reflected on his time at the district as well as the importance for a person to find the right fit and know the community you are working in:

It was the people that I met here and the process of which they worked with us. Just top-notch. People that are just a lot of character, a lot of good morals, and all that kind of thing. You could just tell that it's a place that has some of that internal integrity and those kinds of things. I always kept in the back of my mind that I wanted to look at this rural type set-up.

Knowing what to expect, being close to the area here, knowing a lot about Prairie City prior to even applying for the job. I mean I'm going to say this, knowing your customer. With having that expectation piece, and again it was easier than I thought it might be, at the begin of the transitioning, because of the set up I was able to walk in to. I think that knowing your customer, expecting head of time. Asking some of the -- what I call goofy questions, but getting to the core of, ‘What is this district like?’ Because it's different. You look at River North and take Van Meter. They are not the same districts. You have a totally different mentality, even in who's running the show in this town of River North. You got to have that same comparable mind set going to any of your jobs.

Martin, who stated he has another “year or two left before I spend more time with my grandkids,” said he has really been kind of on a “15-year honeymoon” when thinking about his time at West Plains. He felt as though the community was small enough where you can get to know people but you're not like some of the really small districts where you're doing it all. That's what I like about this size and I've always tried to stay in this size of a district.
The superintendents in this study also spoke about the importance of fit in identifying staff. Finding people that fit the culture of the district and individuals that complement them as a professional were viewed as of the utmost importance for success. Often times this came out as the necessity to “hire good people.” Speaking of hiring good people, Bob stated “honestly one of the most important things, maybe the most important thing that we do is hire good people.” He continued that “if you hire good people and train and trust and communicate with them, they're going to make you look like an all-star.” Analyzing the data a little deeper, hiring good people meant finding someone that can complement the superintendent and be a good fit for the district. Seth spoke about what he looks for when hiring:

> You look for background and sometimes that's education, sometimes that's work experience. Sometimes it’s both combinations. You look for, I’m a big believer in fit, it's finding somebody that fits well in the organization. So, I would even go so far as to say you-you might not [exhales]-- you might give a little bit on the skills part, if they have the aptitude and the capability to be a good fit.

Seth connected the importance of fit back to student achievement and the learning organization as a whole saying:

> When I go back to my belief about stability, I don’t think it’s really great to have a lot of turnover, especially in leadership positions. If I can get good people that are going to stay for a while, that have good skills or can develop those skills, then that is better for the organization which is better for the employees, which ends up being better for the students.

As we continued our conversation around hiring and the importance of “fit”, Seth recalled a time when hired a business services director that was not a good fit for the district:

> You know I think one time, I-I made a mistake. I hired the kind of-- and this is going to sound a little too stereotypical. But I hired a New York person. They didn’t fit the organization and-and you can see it even when they were trying to be personable with people that culture kind of collided-with people. And so, you
know, even in the little things of the jokes which in the grand scheme of things there’s a joke.

But they weren’t connecting with people. So, then, you know, it’s one thing to joke around with people, but often times that helps to establish relationship, because invariably in leadership positions you’re going to have hard conversations. If people think you’re relatable, then a lot of times those hard conversations go better. But, if you’re already struggling with the relationship and then that hard conversation becomes even harder. And there’s more of an opportunity for misunderstanding with, you know-- and then maybe that person-- maybe you didn’t think that that conversation was a job ending conversation.

When asked about what she looks for when she hires staff, Lilly referenced what she hopes to get out of her questions. Lilly had a similar belief to Chuck, Bob, and Seth on the importance of identifying personality for the community and learning organization. Lilly noted that she does “hire for the job,” but that she also believed it was important to know that “you are hiring a personality, someone who has those areas that you are really looking for….you know, hard worker type things.” Continuing she specified her belief in “behavior based questions” that help her “find the right fit for my school, staff, and community.”

Martin’s approach and beliefs around hiring came across differently than the others mentioned, noting that he likes to see “experience” in the candidates’ background. However, he also noted “it is not a 100% indicator” and spoke about the importance of identifying someone that he can trust and has demonstrated loyalty because you do not want someone who will “pull the rug on you and shoot you down.” Martin spoke about bringing his current assistant superintendent up through the district:

Jack started out here in 2006 as a teacher at the high school. Then he stepped all the way up through these things. We had a curriculum director who was n-not really good and she left in the middle of the year, and I brought him over here at the time as a TOSA and then-- because I kind of had my eye on him anyway and he did a fantastic job[emphasis]. Then he became a director and then, last year, he became the assistant superintendent and so it's possible to do it that way too.
His-- you know, his-his strong points, I think his intellect is one thing, and don't give him a big head, don't tell him this. Because he's very smart. He’s a lot smarter than I am. And tech-savvy, oh, my gosh. You know just-- it's wonderful and it's okay to-- I think a guy my age, to bring people in like this, younger people and let them do this. I mean, if you can't do it very well, let them do it. And he can get more done in some of these areas than I could do in a week in five minutes.

Here you notice that, while Jack’s aptitude was beneficial, Martin also noted that Jack fit a need that Martin did not necessarily have in regard to his ability to work with technology.

In all, each superintendent spoke to the importance of fit in some manner in relation to themselves and the individuals they look to hire to complement them. The superintendents that participated in this study were fortunate to work in communities that fit them as individuals and professionals. The participating superintendents also expressed the importance of finding employees that would be good partners and suitable for the community. Specifically, the practicing superintendents worked to identify someone that was able to work with people, trustworthy, and complemented them professionally. Some of the participating superintendents noted using behavior-based interviews to try and find the right fit, while others looked at previous professional experience to match the position. The fit each these individuals had in their respective districts and the ability to identify the right people, to hire “good people” around them, has set these six practicing superintendents up for the successes they have had.

**Conclusion**

Researchers that use phenomenological methodology analyze data in hopes to better understand peoples’ lived experiences and attempt to identify a fresh perception of existence (Crotty, 1998). The data that I obtained was analyzed, which included
documents, interview transcripts, and field notes, were used to highlight significant statements, sentences, and quotes which allowed me to present and obtain an understanding of the participants’ common lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). These significant statements and themes were then utilized to answer the research question: What do current rural superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to prepare?

Through the interview process, collected field notes, and document collection I was able to identify four significant themes and seven sub-themes. I was able to identify what current rural superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to prepare by gathering an understanding of the participants’ common lived experiences in what they believe has allowed them to be successful. In Chapter V, I will discuss the implications of my findings and recommendations for educational leaders.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rural school superintendency is a position that consists of vast responsibilities and complexities, one that is likely only to continue to increase in complexity due to the politicized and increasingly diverse environment we live in (personal communication, Hefty, 9/1/2015). I used qualitative research in order to answer the research question focused on what individuals aspiring to the rural superintendency can best do to prepare for the position. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the common lived experiences of six successful rural superintendents. The methods I used to collect data included semi-structured interviews, field notes, and document collection. The data I collected helped me to develop an understanding of what aspiring rural superintendents can best do to prepare for the position. Four major themes were identified through this phenomenological study: (a) past experiences; (b) aspects of the rural superintendency; (c) working with the board; and (d) identified beliefs and characteristics for success. Seven sub-themes were also identified that fit within the four major themes stated above.

The participating superintendents in this study assisted by providing the context for their common lived experiences of their respective careers leading up to them serving as a rural superintendent. The participants then reviewed the transcribed interviews to ensure authenticity of what was recorded and that an accurate context was provided. The two separate 45-minute one-on-one semi-structured interviews gave me an opportunity to gather information about the common shared experiences the participating
superintendents had (Lichtman, 2013). I used document collection to verify information I obtained through the interviews. I also collected documents to identify additional information that was relevant to the six participating rural superintendents. In analyzing the collected data, many of the findings were consistent with previous research related to the superintendency, or more specifically, the rural superintendency (Antonucci, 2012; Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005; Copeland, 2013; DiPaola, 2010; Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Henwood, 2016; Hill, 2015; Hoffman, 2008; Hoyle, 1993; Jones and Howley, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2009; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006; Quary, 2016; Wilson, 2010).

One primary way this study differed from previous research was the focus on preparing for the rural superintendency by studying the common lived experiences of current practicing rural superintendents. There has been phenomenological research conducted around the lived experiences of African American superintendents as well as phenomenological research around the roles and responsibilities of the 21st Century superintendent. Furthermore, there has been mixed-methods research around the critical roles of the rural superintendency. Due to the increased likelihood of turnover in the superintendency in the coming years (Finnan et al., 2015), an identified need for increased research on the rural superintendency (Garn, 2003; Henwood, 2016), and approximately 80% of school districts in Colorado designated as rural or small rural by the Colorado Department of Education (2016b), further research was needed to identify how best to prepare aspiring superintendents for the position.

In this chapter, I identify the significance of the research findings and implications of the research. The findings in this study may be beneficial to aspiring rural
superintendents as well as university superintendent licensure programs charged with preparing the superintendents of tomorrow. Additionally, I discuss the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research before concluding with a closure writing the essence of the study.

Significance of the Research

I used interview questions and document collection to identify what current successful practicing rural superintendents believed to be essential to their success. In order to determine what was essential to their success, I asked the participants to review their past experiences and ascertain what was beneficial from those experiences as they entered the superintendency. Additionally, the superintendents were asked to reflect on why they have had success in their current positions. The second round of interview questions sought to identify responses specifically related to the AASA standards (Hoyle, 1993). Through interviews, document collection, and field-notes, I gathered data that was compiled into four major themes, which I identified as: (a) past experiences, (b) aspects of the rural superintendency, (c) working with the board, and (d) beliefs and characteristics identified for success. The following summarizes the significance of each major identified theme.

Past Experiences

Each participant’s past experiences played a major part in who they are as an individual and as a rural superintendent. Researchers have identified characteristics such as educational attainment and the use of mentor programs as an important piece of superintendent educational programs (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). Participants in this study spoke of specific relationships that had been
developed through the years. The degree to which these experiences shaped the participating rural superintendents was significant, specifically as identified through the sub-theme of influential people.

Educational attainment and the superintendents’ respective administrative programs all seemed to have an impact on how they approached the superintendency, although the degree of the impact varied. All of the superintendents had good comments about their educational programs. These data support prior research that was conducted around the use of superintendent educational programs and the use of mentorships (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). However, the studies provided were quantitative in nature and did not provide in-depth qualitative responses on the impact that influential people had on them as they became superintendent. The participating superintendents spoke frequently that leadership and district culture, human resources, school finance and budgeting, as well as operations and maintenance are important aspects of the position. Curriculum development and instructional leadership were seldom identified within the data. This does not imply that student achievement was not a priority for these superintendents, in fact student achievement was frequently mentioned throughout the interviews.

The professional journey each individual took was diverse, with several working their way up the chain and having served as a teacher, then assistant principal, then principal, and finally superintendent. This professional progression mirrors the path to the superintendency for most rural superintendents (Finnan et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011). The superintendents in this study identified how their professional experiences were beneficial in obtaining some of the technical skills they believed were important for
the rural superintendency. Furthermore, the participating superintendents distinguished
the perceived necessary differences in professional experiences that were needed to be
successful as a rural superintendent as compared to the suburban/urban superintendency.

**Aspects of the Rural Superintendency**

The rural superintendent has a tremendous amount of influence, responsibility,
and direct involvement with all of the operations of the school district.

“The superintendent might wear the hat of manager, communicator, and custodian or
cook all before the first bell even rings” (Copeland, 2013, p. 7). Recent literature around
the rural school superintendent has identified it is a position that carries a vast job
description with numerous responsibilities. The six participants spoke about a number of
areas including instructional leadership, construction, school finance, transportation, food
services, water rights and legalities, and district housing just to name a few. Interesting of
note was the differences in day-to-day involvement that existed within this group of
superintendents. Martin, who served at the largest district of the six superintendents that
participated, seemed to be much less involved in the day-to-day operations of the district
than some of the participants who served in districts that consisted of 200 hundred
students in the district. Martin had an assistant superintendent, CFO, curriculum director,
and special education director at his disposal. Contrast that to Lilly or Richard who were
working in a dual role position, serving as both superintendent and principal.

Beyond the increased day-to-day involvement, the superintendents noted, they
also identified how being a rural superintendent can impact their personal lives. The
visibility you have as a rural superintendent was viewed as significantly different than
one would experience as an urban/suburban superintendent. The superintendents in this
study spoke about the importance of being visible at a number of after school activities such as athletic and music events. Additionally, Seth spoke to his personal experiences around not being able to take a day off to spend at his home. He also spoke about his experiences building a new home in the community. While Seth stated he eventually became used to the life, it is an issue that researchers have identified as being a negative aspect of being a rural superintendent (Hill, 2015; Lamkin, 2006).

**Working with the Board**

Prior research looking at the relationship between the superintendent and local school board indicated that most superintendents believe their school board is an asset (Finnan et al., 2015). This is contradictory to what Glass et al. (2000) identified as perception of the position. The superintendents in this study all spoke of having a good working relationship with their respective boards of education. While Finnan et al. (2015) identified that most superintendents indicate having a positive relationship with their board and the rural superintendents in this study identified a similar relationship, a new superintendent should be cautious when working with the school board for the first time. Working with a group of individuals elected to represent the community on matters is something that should not be taken for granted. It can be a difficult dynamic to navigate (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005). Martin identified that the board is “your bread and butter and that you have to learn to work with them.” The dynamic of the school board may put the superintendent in an interesting position with the collective individuals he or she reports to. The superintendents in this study reported their board mostly consisted of parents with children in school and some had spouses with employees in the district. Bob
even identified having a teacher that worked in the East Plains district as a board member.

Another dynamic superintendents should be aware of or pay significant attention to is when there is a change in the board due to board election. Board elections present a variety of different challenges which range from a changing dynamic due, to a new group of people attempting to work together towards a common purpose, to training them and preparing them for the work to be done.

Martin expressed that it is important to be able to adapt with your school board because “as a superintendent, it changes for you every two years with that school board, and you have got to change with it or you are not going to survive it.” Chuck also noted that the changing dynamic of a school board due to elections can cause angst while referring to the importance of being able to work with the board noting that “there are elections getting ready to take place and I would imagine that a lot of superintendents across the state are pretty nervous right now.”

The amount of time a superintendent can put in to training new board members is another consideration aspiring superintendents should keep in mind. Martin mentioned he had an election coming up this fall and stated:

I've got three board members up for election. One is term limited so I know I'm going to have at least one new member, the other two are running again. Yeah, I would prefer that they win because there is a lot of work, especially the first six months to a year and bringing somebody new in and really spending a lot of time with them, a lot of time with them.

Seth also had a new board member that would be joining the school board this fall, and spoke to the amount of time he put in preparing the individual for his responsibilities as a
school board member. “I met with him two weeks ago, before the board meeting I met with him for about an hour and then last night we met for about two hours.”

**Identified Beliefs and Characteristics For Success**

Antonucci (2012) identified the ability to develop relationships as an important characteristic for the superintendent. Individuals working in schools interact with a variety of individuals with a diverse background, whether that is students, families, and community members or other staff members. The superintendent must be able to effectively interact with them all.

The ability to connect with people and be approachable is part of developing relationships, which can be beneficial when working to identify building level issues. If the superintendent is not viewed as being approachable staff or community members are unlikely to feel comfortable in bringing issues to the superintendent’s attention. Additionally, the rural superintendents in this study spoke to the importance of developing connections with patrons in the community. Whether they spent time visiting the local senior center for lunch to get a sense of the community’s view of the district, connected with people at church, or attended after school events to provide an avenue for informal conversations to take place, the importance of developing relationships was clearly identified by the participating rural superintendents.

The participants spoke to the necessity of making difficult decisions as an important characteristic for success. The superintendents noted having to fire people they considered friends and the impact that could have on their relationship, or letting go of individuals that struggled and the conflict that can create between supporters and the superintendent. Some of the participants noted that they worked to “counsel” people out
of the position or profession. One superintendent specifically identified his belief in tackling the tough issues, regardless of the consequences.

The final characteristic identified as being important for success was work ethic. The superintendents either spoke specifically to this characteristic or identified it through their conversation. Again, the notion of staying late at night at a multitude of events or meetings came through in the superintendents’ responses. The findings around community involvement are consistent with the findings from Copeland (2013) in his article around the rural superintendency.

Implications of the Research

The findings of this study related to the rural superintendency highlighted a job that is diverse, complex, and always evolving. The six superintendent participants all described what they felt was a rewarding position that was challenging and dynamic, which corresponds with existing literature (Cooper et al., 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015). The individuals in this study spoke extensively about their past experiences and the importance of having influential people in their lives to help them along the way. The vast array of skills that are necessary to be a rural superintendent presents a position that may require an individual be knowledgeable in a number of areas, but a master of none. Accordingly, I have included recommendations for policy development, aspiring rural superintendents, and future research.

Recommendations for Policy Development

The importance of technical skills in school finance, human resources, and operations and maintenance rang through as areas that aspiring superintendents would
benefit from obtaining knowledge. Universities and preparation programs should work to ensure that programs aimed at preparing individuals for the superintendency are appropriate for the position and not an extension of principal leadership programs. This was a finding identified as a potential concern in the literature review (Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Furthermore, an examination of the NBPEA standards which were adopted by CAEP accredited universities across the country, in comparison to the AASA standards, highlights an emphasis on building-level leadership instead of a district-level focus. The data I gathered from this research provides an emphasis on developing a strong district culture through mentor or servant leadership, communication, understanding school finance and budgeting, the importance of human resources and the art of working with people, and a strong grasp of operations and maintenance. The principalship and superintendency are vastly different positions with different job responsibilities. Accordingly, based on the data from this research and concerns identified in previous research, universities and superintendent preparation programs should work to adopt the AASA standards which are aimed at district level leadership to ensure appropriate course offerings and curricular alignment with the position. This would entail working with the national accrediting CAEP organization, as well as state higher education departments, to make this change of accreditation standards possible.

Another recommendation for universities and preparation programs would be to examine adding an introductory accounting course focused on understanding financial statements. While most school districts will have a business manager or even a CPA on their staffs, a basic understanding and ability to read financial statements would help superintendents understand their financial position. A requirement such as this could have

An additional consideration could be to implement an introductory construction management course so that superintendents have some working knowledge of that industry. School districts across the state must work to update or add facilities on a regular basis. Learning how to plan for major updates, the differences between Owners Representatives, General Contractors, Architects, and other industry options for major facility work, may prove beneficial for rural superintendents.

A few of the superintendents indicated that most aspiring superintendents will have had experiences in working with teachers around instructional strategies and working with curriculum which are commonly identified as a necessity in administration programs. There is likely truth in this belief, considering that approximately 85% of superintendents reported following a track of teacher, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent before finally becoming a superintendent (Finnan et al, 2015; Kowalski et al, 2011). The practicing superintendents in this study seldom spoke about instructional strategies and curriculum. I do not believe that curriculum development and instructional leadership should be ignored in district level leadership programs, however universities and preparation programs may benefit in examining their coursework requirements and curricular offerings to concentrate on the aspects of district-level leadership that are cited by practitioners as the knowledge and skills most needed.

Finally, universities and preparation programs should work to ensure that practical skills are emphasized in their programs are connected with theory. There is a place for theory and it is important, however programs should focus on providing
opportunities to work with practicing or retired superintendents that can provide hands-on and practical experience for aspiring superintendents to learn from. This might include a greater emphasis on the field-based component or integrating practicing and retired superintendents into classrooms to provide practical experience for field-based assignments throughout the required coursework.

**Recommendations for Aspiring Superintendents**

The findings of this study may be beneficial to individuals that could be interested in pursuing the rural superintendency. First, I am of the opinion and hope that both individuals considering becoming a rural superintendent as well as strong educational leaders recognize the existing literature and findings in this study that superintendents self-report having enjoyed the position and have found it rewarding (Cooper et al., 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Finnan et al., 2015). There has been a documented concern about the availability of future superintendents replacing their baby-boomer counterparts (Cooper et al., 2000; Howley et al., 2002; Nussbaum, 2007; Finnan et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2007). Public education will need strong future leadership sooner rather than later to fill these positions. Accordingly, I created Table 7, beginning on page 183, to connect the identified themes and sub-themes from the research to recommendations for success to aspiring rural superintendents. I hope this table will serve as a reference to those individuals aspiring to the rural superintendency.
Table 7

Recommendations for Aspiring Superintendents Based on Theme/Sub-theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>T1 Past Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ST1 Journey</td>
<td>• Obtain teaching experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Diversify educational opportunities to include basic accounting, finance, entry level construction management, and human resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Identify educational programs to make sure offerings align with AASA Standards</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Earn a minimum of a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership with an appropriate license based on state requirements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seek and earn positions in building level and district level leadership, preferably with experience in finance and human resources</td>
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<td>ST2 Influential People</td>
<td>• Identify individuals willing to invest in you professionally</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Get to know and build relationships with people you aspire to be like and trust</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>T2 Aspects of Rural Superintendency</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>ST1 Technical &amp; Leadership Skills</td>
<td>• Appreciate the importance and know how to create a positive district culture. (AASA Standard 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understand and practice mentor leadership (AASA Standard 1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Effectively communicate with wide variety of people (AASA Standard 3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Know how to control the district’s message (AASA Standard 3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use formal and informal communication to your advantage (AASA Standard 3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Learn how school finance works, it can lead to quick trouble if you don’t (AASA Standard 4)</td>
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<td>• Have an understanding of basic construction management and an ability to manage large projects (AASA Standard 4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand and be able to apply differentiated evaluation (AASA Standard 7)</td>
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<td>• Know how to work with a variety of individuals, working with people is an “art” (AASA Standard 7)</td>
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Table 7 Continued

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tr>
<td>ST2 I’m It</td>
<td>• Be comfortable with “being it” and knowing there is minimal to no support staff&lt;br&gt;• Be prepared and willing to “wear many hats”&lt;br&gt;• More directly involved in day-to-day operations&lt;br&gt;• More frequent turnover in the position&lt;br&gt;• Be prepared and comfortable being the most visible person in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3 Working with the Board</td>
<td>• Difficult dynamic to navigate&lt;br&gt;• Be aware of personal agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST1 Role of the Superintendent</td>
<td>• Present the board with options&lt;br&gt;• Carry out board’s vision for the district&lt;br&gt;• Continuously speak to superintendent’s role as administrator, board’s role is to set policy&lt;br&gt;• Recommend policy (AASA Standard 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST2 School Board Relations</td>
<td>• “If you have a five member board don’t piss more than three off at the same time”&lt;br&gt;• Ability to work with people&lt;br&gt;• Know what battle to fight&lt;br&gt;• Work to find common ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST3 Communication</td>
<td>• Essential to maintain effective board relations&lt;br&gt;• Utilize opportunities for formal and informal communication&lt;br&gt;• Keep them informed, no surprises&lt;br&gt;• Very transparent and honest&lt;br&gt;• Consider options available to ensure successful board meeting--work sessions, agenda meeting with president, debrief following meeting, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST4 Board Characteristics</td>
<td>• Profession and educational attainment may impact understanding of employer/employee relationship&lt;br&gt;• Be aware of conflicts including kids in school, family members employed by the district, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4 Beliefs &amp; Characteristics for Success</td>
<td>• Ability to develop relationships with a diverse group of people&lt;br&gt;• Readiness to embrace long hours--strong work ethic&lt;br&gt;• Willingness to get to know and be a part of the community&lt;br&gt;• Must be able and willing to make difficult decisions, don’t “plow around the stump”&lt;br&gt;• Identify and find the right fit, for you as a superintendent and in building your staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings in this study may help to alleviate some of the perceived issues around the rural superintendency. Recent research has indicated that over 60% of superintendents reported having a good working relationship with their respective school board (Finnan et al., 2015). The superintendents that participated in this study all reported having a positive working relationship with their current boards as well as for a majority of their career.

Finally, I believe one of the most important findings and learnings from this study was the importance and concept of “fit.” Fit was viewed as important by the participating superintendents both for themselves and for the individuals they hired to work at the district. Additionally, they reported this to being one of the reasons for their success and longevity in their respective districts. In order to find the right fit, it is important for individuals to have a good understanding of themselves, what they believe public education should look like, and ensure their beliefs are a good match for the local school board and community.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The rural superintendency is a complex and evolving position that will continue to change as our state and country progress. There are a multitude of areas that can be researched further to add to the existing literature. This could include the superintendency as a general position or look at specifics of the urban, suburban, or rural superintendency. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are identified for possible future studies below.

The first recommendation is to conduct a mixed-methods study focused on what current rural superintendents believe aspiring superintendents can best do to prepare for
the position. A mixed-methods study on this subject would provide an opportunity for the researcher to add quantitative data and additional qualitative to the existing research. Quantitative data could be gathered to obtain information ranking the perceived involvement superintendents have with the respective AASA Standards. Follow-up qualitative data could be obtained to subset of the sample to obtain in-depth information around the quantitative data that was obtained. It would also provide an opportunity to gather data from a larger sample.

A second recommendation would be to conduct a case study comparing a rural superintendent with an urban or suburban superintendent. In this study, the perception was that rural superintendents must have more hands-on knowledge about the position to be successful than their urban or suburban counterparts. Additionally, the participants in this study had the belief that their urban or suburban counterparts acted more as a “PR” figure. A case study comparing the two positions could provide data analyzing how different or similar the positions actually are.

A third recommendation would be to conduct a quantitative study to see if the addition of an entry level financial accounting course and construction management course for superintendents to obtain working knowledge of these areas would be viewed as beneficial. The findings from this study indicated more of a need to understand school finance and operations and maintenance than instructional strategies or curriculum development. The thought was that most aspiring superintendents will have had exposure and work with those areas throughout their careers prior to becoming a superintendent.

A final recommendation would be to extend this study and identify participants from all areas of Colorado to see if the findings from these rural superintendents
corresponds with the thoughts from rural superintendents in other areas of the state. Expanding this study could provide additional insight and perspective from rural superintendents in other areas of the state. A study like this could highlight differences in perspective or strengthen the data collection and recommendations suggested.

**Research Limitations**

The limitations in this study are typical of qualitative research. I focused on the perspectives of six practicing superintendents from a rural or small rural school district in Colorado. This sample size was conducive for phenomenological research, however it was a small sample size. While I believe the purposeful sampling helped me to obtain authentic and candid responses, it may have limited the diversity of the participants that were involved in my study. The individuals I worked with for the most part knew and had worked with each other throughout their careers, some more closely than others, with the exception being Lilly. It could be possible these individuals knew each other well enough that, through their interactions, they had developed similar mindsets around the superintendency.

Additionally, I was constrained by the geography of the participants, with most of them residing in a specific geographic region in the state. Due to travel constraints and time, I was not able to work with individuals from all geographic areas of Colorado. It is possible that the participants in this study faced similar issues that rural superintendents from other parts of the state did not face. However, I did communicate with a rural superintendent in southwest Colorado that was interested in participating. Again, the ability to set up a time to meet with each other did not work due to travel constraints. While speaking with her on the phone, she noted “it is likely you are hearing similar
responses from the participants in your area that I would have.” In retrospect, due to the travel constraints, I could have included the option to have a phone or video conference as an acceptable interview method instead of constraining myself to face-to-face. While the ideal was to conduct interviews in person, I believe the benefit of having a more diverse group could have benefited my data collection. The data was collected a single time. I did not seek to include school superintendents or school leaders that currently practice in a charter, private, or parochial school setting. It may be that the superintendents from these settings have different lived experiences that could provide suggestions for aspiring rural superintendents and university preparation programs to use in order to better prepare for the position.

**Essence of the Study**

My goal in this study was two-fold: first, to answer the research question by identifying what current rural superintendents believe that those aspiring to the position must do to prepare. Second, I felt that in order to best answer my research question I needed to provided context and the voice of those that participated in this study. I personally believe I accomplished both of those goals.

Prior to beginning this study, it was important for me to put aside my own perceptions regarding what one needs in order to best be prepared for the rural superintendency. As previously mentioned in chapter three, I grew up in a household where my father was a rural superintendent. I also had an uncle that served as a rural superintendent. In order to try and maintain credibility, I had to bracket my own preconceived notions around aspects of the rural superintendency and how best to prepare for the position. It was important for me to focus on letting data I obtained from the
participating superintendents to speak for itself, to allow their voices to come through in the research.

I was surprised by some of the findings in this study. The importance of fit that was regularly and thoughtfully spoken to by the six rural superintendents hit me like a punch in the gut. This was the case because I had not come across anything in the literature and because I felt like it was something that should have been very obvious after the fact. I recently left a position in a large suburban district in Colorado because I learned after three years of working there I was not a good fit for the district. More specifically, I learned I was not a good fit to work in a large suburban or urban district. I left a position in a rural district wanting to know if I would be better off in a larger suburban district with more resources and opportunities. After two years, I knew I had made a mistake.

An additional finding that surprised me was the amount of emphasis placed on having an understanding of operations and maintenance. Again, the logic made sense after the fact when the data presented that most aspiring superintendents will have had an instructional background with direct work and involvement in curriculum. In reflecting on this it may be that the role of superintendent needs to shift slightly away from instructional leader to that of Chief Educational Officer, meaning more awareness in all aspects of the organization.

Finally, the importance of communication with the position cannot be understated. Kowalski et al. (2011) noted that we are in the era of superintendent as communicator. The importance of communication has also been identified by Henwood
(2016) and Wilson (2010). The impetus placed on communication in all areas by these superintendents, as with other research, should be viewed as highly important.

**Conclusion**

The rural superintendency is an important position in the state of Colorado. While more students reside in the urban and suburban areas of the state, 80% of the districts are comprised of rural or small rural school districts. However, little research focused on the rural superintendency. By seeking to identify the common lived experiences of six practicing rural superintendents, I was able to ascertain what these practicing superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to be prepared. While nothing will prepare anyone like actual experience, the insight and in-depth contextual feedback provided by these superintendents may prove beneficial to aspiring superintendents and academic programs across the country.
REFERENCES


Cuban, L. (1976). *The urban school superintendent: A century and a half of change.* Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation


Single-Sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom Act, House Bill 2 N.C. Session 3 (2016)


ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Full Text database.


APPENDIX A

University of Northern Colorado
Institutional Review Board Application
A. Purpose

1. The research question guiding this proposed study is, “What do current rural superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to prepare?” The researcher hopes to better understand how practicing rural superintendents have been successful navigating through the many aspects of the superintendency. This research is sought in order to provide data that may be useful for preparation programs and aspiring future superintendents.

A systematic review of literature has identified approximately 80% of surveyed superintendents rated their academic preparation as “good” or “excellent” (Kowalski et al., 2011). However, that has not stopped politicians, business leaders, and media from writing scathing reports on the quality of university-based preparation programs for superintendents. Appropriately, administrators attribute their sources of leadership models to preparation programs for school leaders (Bjork & Lindle, 2001, p.87). Although superintendents may rate their academic preparation in a positive manner, individuals should be cognizant of positive response bias which occurs when survey respondents are asked about views about desirable or popular alternatives and respondents rate all alternatives equally or favorably (Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012, p. 150)

With approximately 50% of superintendents planned to retire by 2015, an additional third by 2020, and high turnover rates across the country it may appear as though superintendents are entering roles unprepared for the position (Finnan et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2011; Tekniepe, 2015; Thomas, 2001)

Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study will be to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. The research is a unique study focused on examining the common lived experiences of current school superintendents. Because research of this design has not been conducted in Colorado to date, the researcher will interview current practicing superintendents. The superintendents will have been employed with their current district for a minimum of five years and work in a district that has received a minimum rating of accredited according to the Colorado District Performance
Framework. The interviews will be conducted in order to obtain a deeper understanding of what current practicing rural superintendents believe aspiring superintendents can best do to prepare for the position. The overall question guiding this study is “What do current rural superintendents believe those aspiring to the position must do to prepare?”

2. This study qualifies as exempt because it will be conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational and social practices. Research will involve the use of interview procedures. The data will be collected in an environment chosen by the participants, and participants will take part according to their own free will. The data is not considered sensitive in nature and accidental disclosure would not disrupt or manipulate participants’ normal life experiences. Finally, no identifiers will link individuals to their responses.

B. Methods

1. Participants
In order to recruit participants who are currently practicing Colorado superintendents, sampling for this study will be a purposeful nonprobability method common to qualitative research that allows the researcher to discover or find implications for what takes place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Specifically, typical purposeful sampling will be used in order to ascertain the common lived experiences of current rural superintendents. The participants will be selected because they are not in any way “atypical” or “unusual” and have common lived experiences which are necessary in phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97).

Participants will be adults over the age of 18 who reside in the United States and who are currently employed as a school superintendent and have been employed at their present school district as superintendent for at least five years. The participants will be employed in either a rural or small-rural school district as defined by the Colorado Department of Education. Eight (8) participants will be sought initially. The researcher will contact possible participants through email, phone, and professional connections to discuss the purpose of this study and their willingness to participate.

2. Data Collection Procedures
The data collection will include one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, and observational notes. First, participants will be asked to sign a consent form (See Appendix B) to help ensure they understand the purpose of the study and that they and anyone who has been mentioned during the interview by the participants will remain confidential. Participants will choose pseudonyms before interviews begin.
Then the participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire that provides demographic information, including their age, gender, ethnicity, and educational program currently or previously enrolled in.

Next, the participants will participate in two audio-recorded, semi-structured, informal interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in which participants will be asked approximately eight questions (See Appendix C). The interviews will take place at locations agreed upon by the participants and the researchers (preferably the superintendent’s place of work). Interviews will take approximately 45 minutes each due to the nature of semi-structured interviews. The researcher will take field notes during the interviews. The data collected will include demographic information, audio-recorded interview data, and field notes. The interviews will be transcribed by the researcher prior to analysis.

3. **Data Analysis Procedures**
   In order to obtain a complete understanding of the collected data, the researcher will read the field notes and the transcripts several times over in their entirety in order to become immersed in the details. This is done in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the whole database (Creswell, 2013). Notes will be taken and the researcher will identify initial categories from the transcripts and field notes. Next, data will be analyzed using open coding to identify common emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial codes will then be organized into themes that naturally emerge. The identified themes will be incorporated into an in-depth description of the phenomenon.

4. **Data Handling Procedures**
   All participants’ identities will be as confidential as possible through the use of pseudonyms. Their demographic information will be altered in research reports if it could clearly identify a participant. All raw data, audio-recordings, transcripts, and identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet by the researcher and will be erased or destroyed three years after the completion of the study. All digital forms of data will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher’s private laptop. All consent forms will be retained by the Research Advisor for a period of three years and will be destroyed after this time.

C. **Risks, Discomforts and Benefits**
   For this study, the data is not considered sensitive in nature and accidental disclosure would not disrupt or manipulate participants' health or their social or occupational functioning. The foreseeable risks are not greater than those that might be encountered in a classroom environment or a conversation with a colleague about one’s educational experiences. There is also a chance that participants might want to further explore their academic and social experiences following the interview because of the questions that were asked, which may evoke memories or thoughts that are sensitive to the participants.
The benefits to the participants include gaining insight into their educational and social experiences and how they have shaped meaning through the narratives they tell themselves and other people. Other benefits that participants may experience include learning something about themselves and identifying perceived barriers allowing them to seek assistance in overcoming identified barriers.

D. Costs and Compensations
The cost for participating in this study is the time invested to complete the demographic information, participate in the interview, and transportation to and from the data collection site. No compensation will be provided to participants in this study.
APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
DATE: July 4, 2017

TO: Jeremy Burmeister

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1056111-2] HOW CURRENT RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS BELIEVE ASPIRING SUPERINTENDENTS CAN BEST PREPARE FOR THE

POSITION SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS DECISION

DATE: July 3, 2017

EXPIRATION DATE: July 3, 2021

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Hi Jeremy, Thanks for the modified Consent. Everything looks great and your application is approved. Good luck with your study.
Sincerely,

Nancy White, PhD, IRB Co-Chair

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years. If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee. This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB’s records.
APPENDIX C

OFFICIAL INTERVIEW REQUEST EMAIL
Dear Colleague,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you had a great 2016-2017 school year. I know you are busy preparing for the upcoming start of the school year, however I am hoping that you can find time to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my doctoral work at the University of Northern Colorado. I am providing some details of the study below, and I will also follow up with a phone call to you later this week. This letter is intended to serve as an official invitation for you to be a study participant, and I hope you will consider my request.

The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding of how to be best prepared for the rural superintendency. To that end, I will be conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews with several rural and small rural superintendents who have been employed with their current school district for a minimum of five years. Two interviews will last approximately 45 minutes each.

Attached to this letter is a Request to Participate in Research form, which contains several important pieces of information about the consent process, as well as a draft list of my proposed interview questions. As you can see from the questions, they are intended to gain a better understanding of what can be done to best prepare for the superintendency. If you participate you and your district will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure your confidentiality in all written reports of this study.

I truly appreciate you considering this request. I look forward to speaking with you more about this later this week.

Yours in education,

Jeremy Burmeister
APPENDIX D
CONSENT FORM
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Aspiring to the Superintendency
Researcher: Jeremy Burmeister
Phone Number: 970.593.8750
E-mail: burm9290@bears.unco.edu

In collaboration with my advisor Dr. Linda Vogel from the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching what aspiring superintendents can do to best prepare for the position. I will be conducting a study about current rural superintendents’ perspectives on what aspiring superintendents need to do to prepare for the position. If you grant permission, I would like to conduct an interview to learn about your experiences as a successful superintendent.

Through the approach of one-on-one interviews, participants will be invited to share their experiences and perceptions. These experiences will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to develop several core themes or paradigms describing this phenomenon. It is estimated that each of these two interview sessions will take approximately 45 minutes. Participants may be contacted as a follow-up to confirm the accuracy of interview transcripts. Pseudonyms will be assigned and only the primary investigator will know the name connected with a pseudonym.

Data collected and analyzed for this study will be kept in a locked file in the research advisors office, which is only accessible by the researcher and his advisor. Only pseudonyms will be used to report data.

The cost for participating in this study is the time invested to participate in the interview and for transportation related to the event. No compensation will be provided to participants in this study. Foreseeable risks are not greater than those that might be encountered in a classroom environment or a conversation with a colleague about one’s perception of barriers to higher education.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise
entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. As a practicing rural superintendent, you have a distinct experience of what individuals aspiring to the superintendency can best do to prepare. Your insights into what really occurs could be invaluable in helping researchers and educators today understand how best to prepare aspiring superintendents to the position.

Prior to my study, I will visit with the participants to explain the process and to give them this “Consent” form to sign. The forms will be in the possession of the researcher and then provided to my university advisor. Participants will be asked to participate in one, one-on-one interview. All materials will be kept confidential.

The only possible foreseeable risk is an individual being identified, even with the use of pseudonym, which may cause discomfort for the participant. Conversely, there are foreseeable benefits for aspiring superintendents and preparation programs, as results could impact educational offerings within universities. Additionally, there could be benefits to the field of education based on the findings of the research, and an opportunity to build the knowledge base for researchers on commonly lived experiences of practicing superintendents.

Please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the methods used to conduct this study. Please feel free to copy this letter and keep it for your records.

Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

________________________
Jeremy Burmeister

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

___________________________________  ____________________________
Participant Signature                  Date

___________________________________  ____________________________
Researcher’s Signature                 Date
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Session I

1. How long have you been practicing as a superintendent?

2. Tell me more about the journey that led you to becoming a superintendent?

3. In general, how do you manage and operate your school district?

4. What do you believe has contributed to your successful career as a superintendent?

5. Reflecting back on your career, what experiences and opportunities do you believe prepared you to become a school superintendent?
Interview Session II

1. In your current role as superintendent what do you view as your specific essential roles and responsibilities? (All AASA Standards)

2. What do you think are the leadership characteristics and technical skills that superintendents must possess to be successful? (AASA Standard 1, Leadership and District Culture)

3. What is your philosophy when working with board members in each of the following situations: (a) individually, (b) at board meets, and (c) in developing policy. Can you give me some examples of how you operationalize your philosophy? (AASA Standard 1; AASA Standard 2, Policy & Governance)

4. What do you believe has enabled you to have the longevity/success you have had in your current district? (AASA Standard 1)

5. Can you please explain your approach and how you communicate and promote what is going on in your school district? (AASA Standard 3, Communication and Community Relations)

6. What areas of the organization/district do you have a hands-on approach and are actively involved in and what areas of the organization do you delegate more? (AASA Standard 4, Organizational Management)


7. In your opinion, what is the importance that cultural proficiency, or providing training and professional development for cultural awareness, plays in your school district? (AASA Standard 8, Values and Ethics of Leadership)
8. How might you have been better prepared for the roles and responsibilities of being a superintendent regarding:

   a. Leadership and Culture
   b. Organizational Theory
   c. School Finance
   d. Curriculum
   e. Instructional Methods
   f. Public Relations, Communication, and Community Relations
   g. Human Resources
   h. School Law
   i. Operations Management
   j. Equity and Diversity

9. What is the best advice you can give someone today aspiring to the superintendency?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think is important related to being a rural school district superintendent?
APPENDIX F

OPEN AND AXIAL CODE BOOKS
Dissertation Open Coding

Aspects of Rural Superintendency

Job Characteristics

Leadership
  Carry Out Vision
  Organizational Leadership
  State Level Leadership

Technical Skills

Academics

Budgeting and Planning

Communication
  Engaging the Community
  Promoting the District

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Creating Systems

Cultural Proficiency

Curriculum Development

Human Resources

Operations and Management

Policy Development

Professional Development

School Law

Working for Community

Rural vs Suburban or Urban

Struggles of Rural School District

Working with the School Board

Board Characteristics

Board Conflict

Board Relations

Communication

Policy Governance

Professional Development

Role of Superintendent
Career Practicing as Superintendent

Beliefs as Practicing Superintendent
   Accountability
   Can Make a Difference
   Data Focus
   Demanding and Time Consuming
   Feeling Helpless
   Guiding Others
   Lonely at the Top
   Network Group
   Running a Business
   Servant Leadership
   Service Industry
   What is Best for Kids
   Working through Conflict

Career Successes
   Academic Success
   Bond & Mill Levy Initiative
   Campus & Facility Improvements
   State Level Leadership

Characteristics and Traits Used for Success
   Building a Team
   Candor
   Detail Oriented
   Difficult Decisions
   Fit
   Flexible
   Getting Feedback
   Hiring Good People
   Humility
   Optimism
   Relationships
Responsive
Setting Goals
Team Oriented
Transitioning into Position
Work Ethic

Key Events in Career
Practicing as Superintendent
  Bedford School District
  East Plains School District
  Forest Park School District
  Great Plains School District
  High Plains School District
  Prairie City School District
  River North School District
  Rural Valley School District
  Silver School District
  West Plains School District

Path to the Superintendency
Education
  Adams State
  Bryan College
  Colorado State University
  CU Colorado Springs
  Fort Hays State University
  Montana State
  School of Mines
  University of Colorado
  University of Colorado Denver
  University of Northern Colorado
  University of Phoenix
  University of Wyoming

Influential People
Former Principal
Hired Mentor
Mentor
  Basketball Coach
  Bobby Hurley
  Seth Wallace
  Mike McCready
  Keith LaCock
Parents
Predecessor
Professor
Journey
Assistant Principal
Assistant Superintendent
Athletic Director
Business Services Director
College admissions, financial aid, and public relations
Construction
  Business Background
Dean of Students
Elementary Principal
Engineer
English Teacher
High School Principal
Insurance Sales
Landscape Contractor
Math Teacher
Middle School Principal
Officiating
Special Education Teacher
Teacher's Aide
Tech Ed Teacher
Motivation
  Family
  Increased Income
  Opportunity to Make Impact
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past Experiences</td>
<td>Data related to the superintendents’ experiences prior to becoming superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>Data related to how the superintendents got to where they are today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential People</td>
<td>Data related to individuals that were beneficial in the superintendents’ professional careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of Rural Superintendency</td>
<td>Data related to the job responsibilities of the rural superintendency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership &amp; Technical Skills</td>
<td>Data related to identified leadership and technical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m It</td>
<td>Data related to identified differences between the rural and suburban/urban superintendency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with the Board</td>
<td>Data related to the superintendent working with the school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Superintendent</td>
<td>Data related to the role of the superintendent when working with the school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Relations</td>
<td>Data related to superintendent and school board relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Data related to how the superintendent communicates with the school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Characteristics</td>
<td>Data related to personal characteristics of school board members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs &amp; Characteristics for Success</td>
<td>Data related to what superintendents viewed as reasons for their success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>