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# Effective School Leadership Mentoring Characteristics In The 21St Century: Moving Beyond Compliance And Conformity

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# EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MENTORING CHARACTERISTICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: MOVING BEYOND COMPLIANCE AND CONFORMITY

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined experienced school district leaders' informal and formal mentoring perspectives in times of stressful educational reform. In order to accomplish this qualitative research study, I sought to (a) gain an understanding of how experienced school district leaders viewed the presence of educational reforms, (b) gauge whether experienced school district leaders acknowledge stressors induced by reforms, (c) understand how experienced school district leaders grew into their roles, and (d) learn what role mentor-mentee relationships play in experienced school district leaders' sustained effectiveness and success. The purpose of this qualitative grounded constructivist study was to define better and more deeply understand experienced school district leaders' perceptions of informal and formal mentoring in times of stressful educational reform.

This research design included data collection from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten experienced school district leaders. The one-on-one interviews included five female superintendents and five male superintendents from rural, suburban, and urban areas around Indiana. I sought to identify any themes that presented themselves among the participants' responses through qualitative data analysis. The responses to the semi-structured interviews and follow-up meetings were recorded, transcribed, and coded to identify common themes among their experiences as school district leaders.

Themes identified included the participants' strongly perceiving a disconnect with legislators and the stressors reforms engender, an uncanny ability to filter reforms discernibly,

consciously exercising a growth mindset, ardently collaborating with colleagues, diagnostically viewing mentor-mentee relationships as a fundamental aspect of their job responsibilities, and revering mentoring as a duty irrespective of whether they had a mentor as first-year school superintendents. This study's findings serve as a voice for new and aspiring school district leaders as they contemplate their next steps in leadership, prepare for school district leadership positions, or take on new school district leadership positions. Additionally, this study's findings may benefit experienced school district leaders who employ a growth mindset by actively reflecting on the effectiveness of their leadership practices and desire growing as a leader.

Because of the challenges faced by participants in this study, the findings may also provide school board members useful information on experienced school district leaders' perceptions, who expressed the challenges of managing the board relations or preparing to hire a new school district leader. Additionally, this study's findings may benefit higher education institution leaders looking to garner qualitative insight into what graduates learn in their preparatory programs translates to once they are actively serving in the profession. Last, the findings of this study offer legislators, policymakers, and other related officials a keen understanding of how experienced school district leaders perceive a disconnect with them and collectively emphasize the presence of stressors that reforms engender and how they carry the capacity of negatively impacting their leadership practices along with the staff and students they serve.

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In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, we are encouraged to give thanks in everything. Thank you, God, for your faithfulness, provision, sovereignty and for never leaving or forsaking me. May your face shine upon me. I ask that you open the right doors and close the wrong ones. God, I humbly ask that you grant me a heart of wisdom that hears your voice and may you empower me to act on it.

I am eternally grateful for God opening the door for me to attend Indiana State University. I consider it an honor and a blessing to be part of ISU's mission in preparing the next generation of leaders and citizens by cultivating intellectual curiosity and growth through the creation of new knowledge. As Shakespeare recounted, the world is a stage. Each of us has our exits and entrances. While on stage, we play various parts. Regardless of which parts I play, I commit to collaborating with local and global communities to forge long-term relationships and connect with others. I will honor the diversity of individuals, ideas, expressions, and love others through the peaks and valleys of our shared human experiences. As Martin Luther King Jr. challenged us to do—my prayer is that I will commit to whatever roles I play. If called to be a street sweeper, I will sweep streets as Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. May the hosts of heaven look down and say I was a great street sweeper who did my job well!

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During my time as a Sycamore, my personal and professional journey is full of memories I cherish, relationships I will cultivate, and wisdom I will carry forth to others. To my professors and cohort members, thank you! I cherish each of you and look forward to the years to come serving alongside you! To my teachers and mentors along the way, thank you! My mentor and boss, Dr. Peggy Buffington, thank you for giving me a shot and recognizing my potential. If not

for you, I would not be where I am today. I want to thank all of my former students and those I have yet to meet as you, too, will have your exits and entrances. While here, may we play the parts called to play! To God, be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

In closing, I dedicate this study to my daughter, Miss Ellie Fitzgerald Krieg. Expected in September of 2021! I cherish these days as you become who God made you be, and I look forward to the years to come. Someday, when you read this, you will read of my love for you even before you were born.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF TABLES

# CHAPTER 1

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Modern science continues evolving mathematical concepts to substantiate a phenomenon that pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus declared over 3,000 years ago: “Everything is in flux” (Gare, 1993, p. 49). Throughout modern civilization’s storied history, change remains constant (Tortu-Rueter, 2012). Amid this perpetual state of fluidity, leadership “arises wherever there are interactions of individuals or groups, no matter what may be the purposes or aims of these interactions” (Mumford, 1906, p. 218). Consequently, leadership tendencies are often considered a “universal function of association” (Mumford, 1906, p. 218) found within primitive and civilized people alike. Nevertheless, the demise of numerous societies over the past several millennia entailed leaders who “failed to, in times of change, adopt values that were more effective with current institutions and organizations” (Tortu-Rueter, 2012, p. 93).

Given the inevitability of change, Alberts (2013) determined, “A primary determinant of success, often neglected, is how the leaders of its major institutions, governmental and nongovernmental, are selected; how they in turn choose their deputies; and under what incentives they must operate” (p. 660). Public school districts, as governmental institutions, function within this encompassing inevitability. When confronted with substantive changes and reforms, school leaders accustom and amend their methodologies as a means of survival (Tortu-Rueter, 2012). Some school superintendents withstand such trepidations, and other superintendents find a way

to flourish through stressful times and uncertainties. Nonetheless, many school superintendents inescapably submit to brief tenures peppered with turmoil and distress (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). When appraising why some leaders are more efficacious than others are, researchers explored several potential central factors, such as "an abundance of natural resources, wise traditional systems of governance, or the absence of serious conflicts" (Alberts, 2013, p. 66). Notwithstanding "the importance ascribed to superintendents in leading district improvement" efforts, there remains "little systematic evidence with which to question this common conception or issues of superintendent turnover more broadly" (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1147).

## Background of the Problem

In light of these actualities, Monahan's (2012) qualitative study sought to cross the threshold by exploring the provision educational leaders obtain from mentors and coaches as one such "determining factor in how they embrace the latest reform and work with their school communities" (p. 6). In this manner, Monahan's (2012) study aimed at better understanding the "role of experienced superintendents [or] district leaders as mentors and coaches to new superintendents [or] district leaders" (p. 6). By concentrating on the stressful educational reforms during the first decade of the 21st century, Monahan qualitatively inspected the observations of four experienced district leaders whom she interviewed. Each contributing school district leader was actively involved in either mentoring or coaching inexperienced district leaders and had done so under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002).

Monahan (2012) employed a set of interview questions delineated by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published in 1997. After undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the transcripts and field notes resultant from her four participants'

interview responses, Monahan synthesized her findings by deducing a set of unified themes. Based on the reactions of her participants, Monahan drew the following conclusions:

1. The mentor's leadership style is significant in mentoring new district leaders.
2. The educational reforms in Indiana, as well as the United States, are on the brink of a major systems change.
3. Educational reforms are discussed on a regular basis between mentees and mentors.
4. Stress is a positive factor in leading.
5. Each participant elaborated that change is stressful but in a positive way. (pp. 81–87)

Monahan then proposed the following recommendations, intended to extend the findings of her preliminary study:

1. District leaders should understand their sources of positive and negative stress during and after times of significant educational reform changes.
2. District leaders should be aware of strategies to decrease and defuse stress.
3. A follow-up study should be conducted to better understand the impact of informal and formal mentoring.
4. A follow-up study should be conducted to better understand moral accountability as a responsibility of district leaders giving back to the profession. (p. 91)

Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) studied school superintendents' attainment and sustainment by analyzing a qualitative study conducted by Seinfeld in 2010. The first part of Seinfeld's study consisted of interviews with four "reputationally successful" (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012, p. 93) school superintendents—each of whom had recently retired from their position. For the second part of the study, Seinfeld involved the four recently retired school superintendents in a focus group, as they shared in a group interview. In due course, the focus group's emphasis fueled a

desire to thereby work toward “designing a program to prepare future superintendents” (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012, p. 93). In their preliminary analysis of these surveys, however, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) concentrated on two regulatory questions: “Is there a career path or set of experiences that best prepare educators for superintendency?” (p. 93), and “How did superintendents get to their positions and how do they manage to become successful in their roles?” (p. 93).

In response to these guiding questions, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) specifically noted the communal prominence participants placed on the imperative role mentoring played in their professional growth, efficacy, and protracted attainment as practitioners in the field. Among other supplementary findings, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) documented the superintendents’ collective “desire to pass this forward to others in their organizations, to colleagues, and to the researcher” (p. 94). As these four retired superintendents reflected on the trajectory of their recently completed careers, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) also noted the distinction participants placed on how “mentoring bred mentoring” (p. 94). In particular, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) observed that “each of the participants shared how mentors played a crucial role in their preparation for the superintendency” (p. 94). Reminiscent of Monahan’s (2012) recommendation that “a follow-up study should be conducted to better understand moral accountability as a responsibility of district leaders giving back to the profession” (p. 91), Freeley and Seinfeld offered a similar conclusion. Furthermore, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) noted that each participant similarly commented on how “their mentors served as role models in exhibiting dispositions and personal qualities such as work ethic, humility, collaboration, courage, and effective communication” (p. 94).

When concluding their research analysis, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) likewise underscored how the participants' experiences with mentors influenced their approach to the profession and shaped their visions as mentors and nurturing leaders. Refraining from offering sweeping claims resultant from the study's findings, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) suggested the study "confirmed many of the skills and dispositions that are essential for the successful superintendent" (p. 95).

Since 2012 when such studies were published, central state and federal alterations to the NCLB Act (2002) rose from the Every Student Succeeds Act (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015). ESSA was signed into law by President Obama in December of 2015 (Ferguson, 2016). Before the passing of ESSA, however, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) utilized a more prescriptive identification process for holding schools accountable for their students' achievement (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). Under ESSA, the federal government granted states "far more autonomy to determine how schools are held accountable for student performance" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 72). As initially presented, ESSA afforded local school districts the responsibility of determining the kind of support they deemed necessary for each student (Rothman & Marion, 2016). Furthermore, ESSA extended an invitation to states to test-drive different assessments instead of utilizing a single evaluation. As to the single evaluation used under NCLB, many opponents maintained it "failed to capture all the competencies students need to develop and in some cases has constrained instruction and created a backlash against all forms of testing" (Rothman & Marion, 2016, p. 37).

As Ferguson (2016) pointed out, this transference in power was "a direct response to years of complaining by local educators that the school improvement models dictated by the federal government did not fit the unique needs of their communities" (p. 72). Given these

modifications in federal mandates regarding school accountability, school superintendents inevitably encountered an altered set of educational reforms in the months and years to follow (Superville, 2018). Specifically, each state education agency (SEA) afforded its respective "educational strengths and assets to build upon, different needs to address, and a unique set of laws to follow and traditions to expect" (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016, p. 29). School superintendents – under adherence to the guidelines established through ESSA – in so doing dealt with conforming dynamics such as "capacity issues, the delicate nature of stakeholder engagement, and local politics" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 72). These changes ushered in a reformed composite of reputed stressors, which school superintendents met with varying response plans and gradations of attainment (Superville, 2018).

On account of these subsequent stressors, the Broad Center (2018) published a journal that reviewed the varying degrees of success school superintendents had in addressing these reforms before ESSA and after its enactment. The study focused on analyzing the country's 100 largest school districts and spanned 15 years from 2003 to 2018. The Broad Center disaggregated the metadata for statistical significance on correlative trends or patterns connecting superintendent tenure and effectiveness. To the dismay of educational leadership stakeholders, the Broad Center's researchers' analysis's deductive conclusions brought forth more follow-up inquiries than explanations. The Broad Center's concluding deduction specified that "there's far more to learn about the connection between superintendent longevity and superintendent effectiveness" (Broad Center, 2018, p. 13). Since 2018, "the churn of K–12 executives" (Superville, 2018, para. 5) remains intact as researchers and practitioners continue in this pursuit of confirming what correlates superintendent tenure with success.

Based on over 1,300 responses, the American Association of School Superintendents (AASA) released its 2019–2020 Superintendent Salary Study. The AASA reported, “more than half of respondents have served in their present position for less than five years, with less than 11% surpassing 10 years” (Rogers & McCord, 2020, p. 13). Each of the 50 U.S. states offers its respective case studies that shed light on this national quandary as the vagaries surrounding the relationship between school superintendent tenure and effectiveness endure. For field research purposes, this study will focus on the state of Indiana and its public school district leaders—Indiana respondents accounted for 131 (or 10.41%) of the respondents in the AASA’s national survey (Rogers & McCord, 2020).

Given the lack of published research surrounding the most recent state of affairs involving school superintendents in Indiana, I reached out to Dr. Terry McDaniel, who serves in a consortium of former school superintendents. Members of the consortium serve as professors at Indiana University, Ball State University, Purdue University, and Indiana State University. The consortium meets with school districts across the state as districts partake in hiring a school superintendent to lead their respective school community. Dr. Terry McDaniel of Indiana State University stated their team is notified of 40–50 school superintendent openings in the state of Indiana each year (T. McDaniel, personal communication, April 20, 2020). Additionally, I reached out to Robin LeClaire, who served as the Chief Academic Officer for the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). As shown in Table 1, the percentage of chief executive leaders in Indiana who returned the next year endures its annual recession. Of 388 chief executive leaders in 2018, 306 returned (R. LeClaire, personal communication, April 20, 2020).

Table 1

*Indiana Chief Executive Leaders Turnover: 2016–2019*

| Year | Number | Number Returning | Percent Returned |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2016 | 363 | 307 | 84.57 |
| 2017 | 375 | 312 | 83.20 |
| 2018 | 388 | 306 | 78.87 |
| 2019 | 377 | | |

Regardless of the rationales for such departures, this trend gestures to the predictability of school superintendent openings in the years to come—some of which are filled by existing, retired, or first-time school superintendents (T. McDaniel, personal communication, April 20, 2020). As a result of this turnover, efforts are made to equip aspiring school superintendents to assume such positions. As of 2020, for instance, Butler University partnered with the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents (IAPSS) and AASA to launch the Indiana Aspiring Superintendent Academy (IASA) as one such means for working to alter the trajectory of this trend (Butler University, 2020; Rogers & McCord, 2020). As stated by its website, IASA is "a future-focused, groundbreaking aspiring superintendent academy for all educational leaders" (Butler University, 2020, para. 1). In time, researchers will ascertain the role IASA plays in further equipping leaders to serve as the future district-level school leaders.

## Statement of the Problem

In addition to the broad strokes offered to surround the lack of conclusive research regarding the correlation of school superintendent tenure and effectiveness, the "results of the [51st] annual Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools

[painted] a portrait of broad teacher discontent" (Heller, 2019, p. 4). Heller noted that for the 18th straight year, Americans voiced concerns regarding a perceived deficiency of financial support for public schools. Additionally, PDK revealed that "half of [the] public school teachers nationally have seriously considered leaving the profession in the past few years" (Heller, 2019, p. 3). As Hackett (2015) indicated, "School reformers crank out turnaround plans with ease, but they struggle to find ways to include the community in their reform efforts" (para. 7). When school superintendents are unsuccessful in building "solid relationships with the community and her or his board" (Hackett, 2015, para. 7), turnover in leadership and resulting changes affecting staff, students, and the community are inexorable.

In light of these inevitabilities, the Broad Center's (2018) conclusions concerning the pressing need for school districts to ensure "they make *best fit* hires and superintendent candidates ensuring they are pursuing *best fit* opportunities" looms large (p. 13). In the interim, school boards and hiring firms may lean on such leadership traits as clarity in vision, fresh perspective, and relentless curiosity when gauging preparedness and the likelihood of success for school district leaders. Before regarding any such qualities with research-based legitimacy, such findings illustrate the need for "deeper discussions about the conditions necessary for superintendent longevity and effectiveness" (Broad Center, 2018, p. 13). Regarding the presence of mentoring and coaching on a national level, only 141 respondents (11.2%) of those who participated in the AASA survey specified the "support for a coach or mentor for the superintendent" (Rogers & McCord, 2020, p. 44) as a miscellaneous benefit provided in their employment agreement.

Monahan's (2012) recommendations for future study, conclusions offered by the Broad Center (2018), and the AASA's recent findings regarding school superintendent turnover build a

strong case for conducting a more in-depth analysis of these constructs (Rogers & McCord, 2020). Therefore, this research seeks to analyze further if "support educational leaders receive from mentors/coaches may be the determining factor in how they embrace the latest reform and work with their school communities" (Monahan, 2012, p. 6). Whereas Monahan's study focused on perceived stresses afforded by NCLB (2002), NCLB's replacement with ESSA offers a different landscape. The materialized radical shift resulting from major educational reforms that Monahan cautioned against adds to the pressing need for conducting this follow-up study.

## Purpose and Significance of the Study

The published literature on school superintendent role conceptualizations offered by Callahan (1966) along with Kowalski and Björk (2005) illuminates the alterations to the position since its origin and the veracities confounding the current role(s) of school superintendents in the 21st century. In so doing, this study builds on Monahan's (2012) conclusions regarding school leadership mentoring characteristics brought on by NCLB (2002). This study's purpose and significance are to define better and more deeply understand experienced school district leaders' perceptions of informal and formal mentoring in times of stressful educational reform. Since ESSA's enactment in 2015, many such reforms at the federal level continue trickling down to the state level.

## Research Question

The guiding research question for this qualitative case study is underscored by Monahan's (2012) foci for future research, as follows: What are experienced school district leaders' perceptions of their experiences with informal and formal mentoring in times of stressful educational reform?

## Definition of Terms

The definitions of the following terms offer clarification for their use throughout this study:

*Coaching,* for the determinations of this study, coaching is defined as "the process used by the mentor as he or she works with the mentee examining the behavior of the protégé for the purpose of gaining insights" (Monahan, 2012, p. 7) that promoted enhanced performance. As for the actions associated with coaching, "Coaching involves the skills of observing and recording behavior, giving feedback, probing, listening, analyzing, and asking clarifying questions in a non-threatening environment" (Monahan, 2012, p. 7).

*Experienced superintendent or district leader,* for this study's determinations, an experienced superintendent/district leader refers to a veteran, retired, or practicing superintendent with a minimum of ten years' experience practicing in this capacity.

*Formal mentoring,* for this study's determinations, a formal mentor refers to "an experienced role model who guides the professional development of a less experienced mentor through coaching" (Monahan, 2012, p. 8) in a conscious and communicated fashion between the mentor and mentee.

*Inexperienced superintendent or district leader,* for this study's determinations, an inexperienced superintendent or district leader refers to a licensed district superintendent with no more than two years of practicing experience.

*Informal mentoring,* for this study's determinations, informal mentoring refers to a non-organizationally established and unsponsored developmental relationship. According to Noe (1988), "In informal mentoring relationships, discussions between the mentor and protégé usually go beyond career-related issues to more in-depth personal sharing of interests, needs, and

values" (p. 458). Results from Noe's (1988) study also suggested that "organizations should not expect protégés to obtain the same type of benefits from an assigned mentoring relationship as they would receive from an informally established, primary mentoring relationship" (p. 458).

*Mentee,* for this study's determinations, a mentee refers to a protected or trained person; or a person whose career is advanced "by a person of experience, prominence, or influence" (Monahan, 2012, p. 7).

*Mentor or mentoring,* for this study's determinations, as was the case throughout Monahan's (2012) study, a mentor refers to "an experienced role model who guides the professional development of a less experienced individual through coaching" (p. 8).

*Stress,* for this study's determinations, occupational stress refers to the perceived conceptualization of "the nature of stress" by a given participant and how participants thereby "personally conceptualize job stress" (Mazzola et al., 2011, p. 96) as it relates to their prior experiences in the field.

## Assumptions

1. Reforms in education are constant and are thereby bound to occur.
2. Informal mentoring of school district leaders and superintendents occurs.
3. Formal mentoring of school district leaders and superintendents occurs.
4. Professional educators work in stressful environments.
5. There are many changes taking place in America and its public schools.

## Delimitations

1. This study concentrated on a particular phenomenon. The research thereby was delimited due to its focus on the participation of experienced superintendents or district leaders.

2. The designated period for the collection of interviews may have been a delimitation. As of September 21, 2020, the IDOE provided an initial list of 244 district administrators in Indiana as eligible participants for this study.

## Summary and Organization of the Study

When Monahan (2012), along with Freeley and Seinfeld (2012), explored the role of informal and formal mentoring in school superintendents' development, NCLB encompassed school leaders' stressful reforms. Under NCLB, "federal involvement became closely associated with standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and aggressive efforts by the USDOE to shape the school reform agenda" (Jennings, 2018, p. 10). Like its predecessor, critics pointed out ESSA's assumption that "pressuring teachers and administrators to raise test scores will lead to better instruction and greater learning for all students" (Jennings, 2018, p. 10). Nonetheless, ESSA afforded states with much more autonomy than its predecessor as states "implement the law, measure their students' progress, intervene in their lowest performing schools, and evaluate the work of their teachers and principals" (Jennings, 2018, p. 9).

Amid these changes in reforms, the conclusions offered by the Broad Study (2018) and the AASA (2020) upheld the need for additional research on what correlates superintendent tenure and effectiveness (Rogers & McCord, 2020). As the "churn of K–12 executives" (Superville, 2018, para. 5) remains intact, the expectation is that newly hired school superintendents can navigate these uncharted territories. Chapter 1 offered an introduction, background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the study, research design, research questions, definitions of terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 builds on these findings and presents a curated synthesis of the current literature surrounding school superintendents' origin and evolution in conjunction with the

encompassing educational reforms and school leadership characteristics. Chapter 3 offers the methodologies used to construct the qualitative case study, and Chapter 4 presents the study's outcomes. Last, Chapter 5 contains a comprehensive examination of the study's results, suppositions, implications, and further analysis recommendations.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Rise of the Local Level School Superintendent

Although alterations in organizational leadership transpired since the inception of public schooling in America dating back to the spring of 1635, the depth and breadth of organizational leadership changes advanced in conjunction with America's public schooling infrastructure (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As the number of local school districts increased to accommodate the number of students entering public schools, a mounting need for state-level school leadership materialized. As America's democracy evolved, so too did public education's function in society (Allman, 1941). Public education was initially "blended with civil and religious control [but matured into what was] recognized as a separate and distinct problem" (Allman, 1941, p. 261). The need for statewide school leadership developed as public education grew into a "separate and distinct problem" (Allman, 1941, p. 261).

In 1812, the manifestation of these statewide needs sprang forth as New York became the first state to hire a state-level superintendent (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). At the time, the state-level superintendent of schools had three significant responsibilities, which were to "plan a common school system for the state, report on the management of public funds, and provide school-related information to the state legislature" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, pp. 142–143). Over the next 40 years, "every northern state and some southern states" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 143) hired a state-level superintendent of schools. Ultimately, all 49 other states

followed suit by electing or appointing a state-level superintendent of schools. Over the next several years, most states additionally established "county-level agencies to act as liaisons between communities and state government" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 143). As state departments of education developed, urban communities and their respective school districts additionally determined an augmented need for district-level leadership and representation.

**First Local School Superintendents**

The majority of published research identifies Buffalo, New York, and Louisville, Kentucky, as the first two major cities to hire a local-level school superintendent (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Between 1837 and 1850, 13 urban school districts followed suit by hiring a school superintendent to lead their respective communities. This trend proved to be a quick-growing one as "most city school boards had created this position" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 144) before the 19th century ended. The inception of the local school superintendency position thereby exemplified implementing a need by creating an agency (Allman, 1941).

**Normative Role Expectations**

Incongruities in the published research make it challenging to ascertain the earliest school superintendents' normative role expectations (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Some researchers "equated the role of the earliest school superintendents to that of a glorified school board's clerk" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 144). Other authors, however, characterized the role of early school superintendents as "part-time educational evangelists and reformers hired to assist the school boards" (Wolf, 1988, p. 9). Many of the earliest school superintendents dealt with stresses from the "development of larger city school districts, the consolidation of rural school districts, an expanded state curriculum, the passage of compulsory attendance laws, demands for increased accountability, and efficiency in expectations" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 3). The earliest

school district superintendents grappled with the common school era's focus on integrating students' assimilation.

**Non-Exclusionary Role Conceptualizations**

The next several sections of this literature review follow the sequencing of Callahan's (1966) four seminal role conceptualizations of a school superintendent. These roles date back to the mid-1850s. A fifth role conceptualization derives from Kowalski and Björk's (2005) findings. There is no definitive role conceptualization unanimously defining the current school superintendents serving districts. As the ensuing sections exhibit, school superintendents over the last 150 years have toiled to personify a "growing recognition of well-merited authority" (Allman, 1941, p. 262). These categorizations should be approached in a non-exclusionary way since "practitioners often assume two or more of them at any time" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145).

Although school superintendents may possess the metaphorical "key to the house of education" (Campbell, 1966, p. 50), the following role conceptualizations collectively demonstrate the parameters of a school superintendent's authority given the "rules, regulations, resolutions, and contractual rights granted by action of local boards of education" (Allman, 1941, p. 262). Notwithstanding the reality that societal problems are often multilayered and thereby fail to yield a singular solution, each historicized era unites with another by some form of societal credence that "the school can, and should, contribute to the solution of such problems" (Campbell, 1966, p. 50). The six role conceptualizations of school superintendents throughout America's history outlining the next several sections of this literature review are as follows:

1. Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar (1865–1910)
2. Superintendent as Manager (1910–1929)

3. Superintendent as Democratic Leader (1929–1954)
4. Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist (1954–1966)
5. Superintendent as Communicator (1966–2000)
6. Superintendent in the 21st Century (2001–Present)

## Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar (1865–1910)

The first of Callahan's four role conceptualizations encompasses the Civil War era. The Civil War-era—known for its ethical, constitutional, and parochial calamities—enveloped Abraham Lincoln's ill-fated presidential tenure (Schafer, 1941). President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, followed by the Civil War's culmination in 1865, led to exponential growth in urban school districts (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As a result of such development, many of the large urban school superintendents thereby "became the models of effective practice because their organizations were larger and more modern than others" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145). Considered master teachers for their proven expertise as practitioners, school superintendents were expected to oversee their respective school districts' instructional efforts. Many school superintendents additionally wrote scholarly articles concerning related themes, became state-level school superintendents, and entered faculty or administrative positions at the post-secondary level. These avenues thereby demonstrated the approbation school superintendents garnered from their academic peers. By concentrating their energies on academic discourses, school superintendents in turn abstained from participating in situations where they could be "perceived as politicians or managers" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145).

Given that the school administration's business facets were predominantly under the jurisdiction of school board members or subsidiary officials during this time, school superintendents engrained themselves in this teacher-scholar role (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

School superintendents endorsed their teacher-scholar competencies by expending the bulk of their time and energy on training and motivating teachers, setting high standards for teacher professionalism, developing curriculum, and ensuring the distribution of staff and students' needs. Such norms endured through the late 1800s. As venerated specialists in the field, many prominent school district administrators also served as "influential members of the National Education Association" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145).

**Post-Civil War Era**

After the culmination of the Civil War, the federal government possessed the authority and desire to "intrude into an era which by virtually universal agreement belonged to the states" (Peskin, 1973, p. 572). The federal government's increased involvement in public education abetted the establishment of federal departments that postured themselves with the power to challenge these sorts of established norms. The national department of education, for instance, began as a reconstruction effort but established itself as a legitimate system for monitoring the effectiveness of school systems across the country. In addition to the federal government's increased involvement in educational matters, several vital legislative verdicts aided in fostering reformative educational changes that fundamentally affected the school superintendent's overall role and responsibilities in the years to come (Wyatt-Brown, 1965).

**Fourteenth Amendment's Impact**

By 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment set a precedent for the eventual rulings in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which in turn guaranteed privileges of citizenship, including due process and equal protection under the law (Wyatt-Brown, 1965). Though later ruled unconstitutional in 1883, the Civil Rights Act in 1875 sought to promote compliance "with the law through mild coercion, more or less in the manner of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964" (Wyatt-Brown, 1965, p. 764). The dawn of a new era ensued as the 19th century drew close. Pivotal shifts in the psychological, societal, political, and educational realms collectively signaled an alteration in the school superintendent's role from a teacher-scholar to one that occupied itself with more managerial responsibilities (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). By 1910, "the conceptualization of the district superintendent as teacher-scholar waned but did not become totally irrelevant" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145).

**Carnegie Foundation's Initial Impact**

In addition to the psychological developments that signaled a nearing shift in the school superintendent's role, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching strongly advocated using a standardized system for equating *seat time* to earning a high school diploma (D'Agostino, 1984). For school superintendents to implement such policies effectively, their presumed teacher-scholar role pivoted in its focus and, in turn, necessitated school superintendents to undergo a shift in their conceptualized position by espousing a managerial-minded role. Amid these calls for increased standardization, a sundry of school district leaders sensed a growing pressure to take on a more active role in addressing external concerns. Given the uncertainties and novelty of stresses encompassing school superintendents during this time, some school boards elected to make bold changes in their new school superintendents. However, other school boards expected their existing superintendent to effectively and efficiently take on these managerial responsibilities and, in turn, pivot away from their presumed teacher-scholar role. As the second industrial revolution gained momentum, such pressures grew in force and volume.

## School Superintendent as Manager (1910–1929)

Significant societal, political, and economic changes accompanied the rise of the second industrial revolution in America throughout the initial decades of the 20th century (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). For many American workers, the second industrial revolution inevitably led to replacing fields with factories. Consequently, "industrialization encouraged urbanization" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146). The augmented rise in urbanization caused many urban school superintendents to increasingly work with their boards to deal with managerial matters increasingly. They established a game plan to accommodate the influx of families moving into their districts. For urban school districts to meet these unprecedented demands, they "required managers to control material and human resources" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146). In due course, the "ever-increasing expenditures in educational programs" (Parker, 1996, p. 64) led to public school superintendents exhibiting their teacher-scholar persona much less than they did in the past.

### Business Managers: A Means of Survival

From a pragmatic vantage point, the school superintendent's acquired use of business management practices was a means of survival. They sought to remain relevant as leaders of their respective school districts (Parker, 1996). In the process of taking on this altered role, however, many urban school superintendents found themselves operationally seeking the respect of their corresponding school boards, community members, local businesses, and taxpayers in an unparalleled fashion. Meanwhile, external parties capitalized on the opportunity to impact urban public education's curricular framework as school superintendents concentrated on these matters (Tomlinson, 1997). For instance, educational psychologists like Edward Lee Thorndike, through his 1913 seminal book *Educational Psychology,* "shaped the curriculum, pedagogy, and

organisational structure of the American school as well as the basic aims and methods of university-based inquiry" (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 366).

**Industrial Revolution**

In due time, school district leaders and their respective boards assented to "the philosophical underpinnings of the Industrial Revolution" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146). John Dewey's 1916 book *Democracy and Education, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education,* is credited for establishing some of this momentum (Tomlinson, 1997). In essence, Dewey emphasized schools' need to increase their effectiveness as deliberate agents of democracy. According to Dewey, a given school's success rested on educating individuals based on the "intellectual skills and social virtues necessary for democratic citizenship" (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 375). According to Dewey, these ideals were considered a form of life.

Dewey and like-minded authorities in the field pushed back on established norms at the time by accentuating how the structure and practice of traditional schools concentrated on "the economy of abstract learning, punishment and competition" (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 375). Dewey upheld such absorptions and promoted a "mentality of fear, greed, selfishness, and individuality" (as cited in Tomlinson, 1997, p. 375). Given these purported outcomes, Dewey and other influential professionals in the field, such as Ella Young, underscored schools' pressing need to nurture a diversity of student interests and talents deliberately (Tomlinson, 1997). Through these means, progressive reformers like Dewey contended that schools meritoriously function as operative agents of democracy. These progressive ideas steadily led to a forthcoming educational reform in which schools and factories alike "were thought to need scientific managers" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146). To traverse these uncharted territories successfully, such

leaders needed to be adept at cultivating processes and procedures through committing to an unwavering emphasis on efficiency and productivity.

**Post-World War I Era**

A year after World War I ended in 1918, the official formation of the "Progressive Education Association [later called] the American Education Fellowship" (Bowers, 1967, pp. 459-460) delivered an impetus to these calls for reforming the public school framework in America. Given the country's ominous economic state and the looming Great Depression, internal and external stakeholders advocated splitting up the school superintendent position into an instructional and business managerial side (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As a result of these sorts of stresses, prominent universities thereby included school management courses in their school leadership preparatory programs. Additionally, "many big-city superintendents tried to persuade policymakers and the general public that their work was separate from and more important than teaching" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146).

**The Great Depression**

With this context in mind, the Great Depression in 1929 brought about school closings, teacher layoffs, and teacher salary reductions (Hendrick, 1972). In an attempt to do more with less and increase efficiency, school superintendents within large corporations took on augmented duties regarding "budget development and administration, standardization of operation, personnel management, and facility management" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146). As such, school superintendents underwent this lane change and ventured into a different public education; others outside the realm of academia publicly expressed their concerns about what comes next. Some politicians, mayors, and city council members "feared that the new role would

increase the stature of superintendents, resulting in their acquiring more influence and power" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 146).

After 1930, a school superintendent's business executive role faced amplified condemnation in light of the stock market crash and ensuing depression that "eroded much of the glitter captains of industry acquired by deploying scientific management" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). Another indication of an impending shift in the school superintendent's managerial role stemmed from patrons' corollaries who were "objecting to a perceived loss of liberty" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). These theories ground themselves in a conviction patrons were "excluded from the governance of their local schools" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). The last significant straw came on the heels of leading progressive educators, such as George Sylvester Counts. Counts insisted that "classical theory and scientific management were incongruous with the core values of a democratic society" (as cited in Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). Despite these communal concerns regarding the managerial role of school superintendents, "the realization that management functions were essential became embedded in the culture of the education profession" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). As a result, policymakers and educators ultimately grew more accepting that school administrators took on a managerial and leadership role.

### Superintendent as Democratic Leader (1929–1954)

As demonstrated, the Great Depression affected the shared fibers that knitted the economic, societal, political, and educational sectors together (Campbell, 1966). Accordingly, the school superintendent's board relations primarily focused on a pressing need to better define and clarify a clear purpose and direction for the school district amid these uncertainties. In due course, the scarcity of available resources for public schools led to school superintendents' direct

involvement in heightened political activity "as schools competed with other public services and with each other to secure financial support" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). In light of the circumstances, school superintendents also faced a mounting demand to secure and allocate the resources necessary to ensure the financial support needed to accomplish their stated goals (Campbell, 1966).

Faced with the reality of accepting that school superintendents would be operating in the bureaucratic arena should they secure the funds necessary to maintain their operations, school superintendents functioned as "lobbyists and political strategists" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). One vocal proponent of this shift in role conceptualizations was Ernest Melby, former dean of the Northwestern University education department. Melby "believed that the community was public education's greater resource" (as cited in Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). At the time, school superintendents were essentially "urged to galvanize policymakers, employees, and other taxpayers to support a board's initiatives" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). That said, the alleged responsibilities embodied within business efficiency and those within democratic leadership proved to be "hardly compatible, even if they exist only in vestigial quantities" (Campbell, 1966, p. 50). As for determining "best fit hires" (Broad Center, 2018, p. 13), "most school people and most boards of education" historically viewed a school superintendent's experiences as a teacher or building-level administrator as "the best training program for the superintendency" (Campbell, 1966, p. 51). Unfortunately for many acting school superintendents at the time, therefore, the relevancy of their experiences in the classroom or as building-level leaders did not fully align with the persistent demands faced with regularly addressing.

**Astute Political Strategists**

As a democratic leader during this era, successful school superintendents took on the role of "an astute political strategist" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 147). Whereas school superintendents were once able to remain "relatively autonomous and independent" (Campbell, 1966, p. 56), the scarcity of resources and the competitiveness for acquiring them led to the need for increased collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies. As Campbell noted, school superintendents were ultimately at the mercy of higher governmental control levels. Accordingly, school superintendents increasingly recognized the democratic need for participation to ensure the sustained acquisition of appropriate operational provisions needed at the local level.

Such responsibilities grew increasingly cumbersome for school superintendents as the nation officially entered World War II in 1941 (Murphy, 1987). In light of the high expenditures and complex programs in need of funding and support, school superintendents found themselves actively involved in a competitive hunt for securing resources; this hunt extended to the "local, state, and national levels of government" (Campbell, 1966, p. 54). As World War II culminated and an appropriately named generation known as the baby boomers were born, school superintendents also braced themselves for the inevitable uptick in student population growth. Coupling these substantial increases in student population, school superintendents confronted unfamiliar terrains given the computer age's inception, among other vital developments. One such action was the 79th Congress's enactment of the National School Lunch Act of 1946, which signaled a heightened emphasis on Maslow's original hierarchy of needs model (Taenzler, 1970).

## Civic and Social Developments

As democratic leaders, school superintendents also faced the ramifications of several crucial civic and social developments during the 1950s and 1960s (Thompson, 2013). The overturning of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson 59* case came when the U.S. Supreme Court announced its landmark decision regarding *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (Thompson, 2013, p. 1252) served as one of the most compelling cases of the 20th century as it represented a turning point for African Americans across the nation. This decision "reinforced the importance of education and its significance in advancing the larger society" (Moore & Lewis, 2014, p. 191). To advance society, despite Strom Thurmond's filibuster, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was voted into law and thereby set a precedent for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Winquist, 1958). As noted by Winquist (1958), the Civil Rights Act of 1957 "ended an eighty-two-year period marked by the absence of federal civil rights legislation" (p. 620).

## Shift in Leadership Roles

Callahan (1966) offered four societal and professional circumstances that signaled a shift away from the school superintendent's role as a democratic leader toward an applied social scientist. The first significant circumstance that led to this pivotal transferal emanated from mounting displeasure with democratic leadership. Critics expressed their concerns regarding the democratic leadership role of school superintendents by depicting them as "overly idealistic" and thereby ignoring "the realities of practice" (Callahan, 1966, p. 148). The second significant development that led to the role shifting to an applied social scientist resulted from the social sciences' swift advancements through the late 1940s into the early 1950s. A third factor that

promulgated this shift in roles ensued in part from the Kellogg Foundation's financial support of education during the 1950s in which it "provided more than $7 million in grants, primarily to eight major universities that allowed school administration professors to conduct social science research" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 148). Fourth, school superintendents in the early 1950s faced a resurgence of criticisms regarding their assumed leadership approach. However, this time, the "public dissatisfaction spawned reform efforts and heightened interest in the social sciences" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 148).

## Superintendent as Applied Social Scientists (1954–1966)

In addition to Callahan's four significant factors, several other influences contributed to this shift in school superintendent role conceptualizations (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As of 1955, "Efforts to make school administration an established academic discipline equal to business management and public administration were intensifying" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 148). In response to such stimuli, administrative preparatory programs infused curricular materials into their study programs focused on the social sciences. At its core, the gradual employment of systems theory demonstrated "how external legal, political, social, and economic systems affected the operation and productivity of public schools" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 148). As a result, acting school superintendents were operationally regarded as obsolete if incapable of embracing these new requirements, including a resource politician (Campbell, 1966). As applied social scientists, school superintendents enlisted themselves in a process suggesting that talent finds itself in "museums, art institutes, musical organizations, business and industry, and colleges and universities" (Campbell, 1966, p. 57).

**Birth of Social Scientists**

Accumulated demands that schools "deal less with mere schooling and more with education, to recognize that the total environment [influences how] the environment educates" (Campbell, 1966, p. 57) propelled the applied social scientist role into action. As a result, refined conditions suggested that schooling take on an instructional and social function. The intensified sense of societal awareness steered ramifications that influenced the internal controls of school staffing, operations, and external relations. By 1957, the space age's commencement began as the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. Within a year, the study of science and science education started taking on an increasingly significant role in shaping educational reform (Stennis, 1963). Such efforts manifested themselves in creating the National Defense Education Act (NDEA; Piltz, 1965). The NDEA, for instance, authorized the increased funding for scientific research in addition to science, math, and foreign language education (Piltz, 1965).

**Desegregation in Public Schools**

In addition to the increasing prominence placed on the social sciences, some school superintendents also found themselves on the front lines of social matters like the desegregation efforts that transpired in New Orleans, Louisiana (Harlan, 1962). Democracy's youngest heroes—the African American children—championed civil rights for African Americans and, in doing so, "attracted the greatest number of child activists in U.S. history" (Ciardiello, 2004, p. 139). After President John F. Kennedy's fatal shooting on November 22, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson became president (Schuyler, 1987). Shortly after that pivotal tragedy occurred, the Civil Rights Act became law. To be effective in their assumed role of applied social scientists, school superintendents needed to form a stable theoretical reference point (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). To "rewrite the normative standards" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 148) for school

administrative practice, significant changes were thus made to administrative textbooks, as those drafted before 1950 never mentioned theory.

Despite such theories and changes to programming, as Determan and Ware (1966) asserted, “Discrimination is hydra-headed: put down here, it reappears there” (p. 5). However, the fight for equality and equitable access to public education took another critical turn when the 89th Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). ESEA, which focused on poverty, aimed at doubling the amount of federal aid some schools were eligible to receive (Osborne, 1965). In particular, five major provisions within this legislation resulted from the federal funding streams. In theory, ESEA signaled a shift away from federal neutrality, given the federal government’s emphasis on providing all American children an adequate educational opportunity to learn (McDonnell & McLaughlin, 1982). The creation of federally controlled educational funding streams and the effects of ESEA led school superintendents to focus on their “functions within a new set of conditions which suggest both an instructional and a social role for the school” (Campbell, 1966, p. 58).

**Staff Diversity and Workforce Dealings**

Internally, school superintendents fought concerns that dealt with discrepancies in staff diversity and non-paternalistic workforce dealings (Campbell, 1966). Such responsibilities stemmed from the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965, which helped fulfill the need for significant immigration reform (Keely, 1971). In essence, the Immigration Act of 1965 reaffirmed “our nation’s continuing pursuit of justice, equality, and freedom” (Kennedy, 1966, p. 138). For public schools in America, this act promoted a considerable increase in diversity within schools across many states in America (Keely, 1971).

### Employing a Pragmatic Disposition

To meet the social demands expected of them as leaders, school superintendents applied a pragmatic disposition regarding "what a good society is and how education can best contribute to its achievement" (Farquhar & Martin, 1972, p. 27). As a means of navigating these uncharted territories with fidelity and precision, school superintendents experienced a greater need to be informed by theoretical insights instead of "procedural cookbooks" (Farquhar & Martin, 1972, p. 26). The heightened use of theoretical insights and the nature of the social demands brought about stresses that required school superintendents to take on an altered disposition in the years to come (Farquhar & Martin, 1972; Keely, 1971).

## Superintendent as Communicator (1966–2000)

During the latter part of the 1960s, "America's transition from a manufacturing society to an information-based society" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85) abetted the school superintendent's role once again pivoting as many school superintendents assumed the role of chief communicator within their respective school districts. America transitioned to an information-based society as most of the critical school improvement concepts and strategies required school administrators to work collaboratively. However, one of the complications abetted by this shift in role conceptualizations arose from the organizational climates in many schools as they "viewed community interventions as being counterproductive" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85). Irrespective, superintendents found themselves in a position by which they needed to be creative in finding ways of continually appeasing members of both parties.

### Organizational Culture and Communication

From an organizational standpoint, public schools across the country were (and remain) strongly "influenced by human transactions [that occur] within and outside of the formal

organization" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85). When restructuring proposals and exchanging vital information between internal and external parties, school superintendents needed to ensure the inclusion of "key implementers and stakeholders" throughout the visioning and planning processes as "the values and beliefs expressed in the reforms are incongruous with prevailing institutional culture" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85).

With this context in mind, school superintendents were expected to lead amid the imbroglio of communicational and organizational cultures within their districts, communities, and encompassing societies (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). In part, such conversations' complexity ensued from the reality that school districts exist within cultures and subcultures. "Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and sustain themselves by all employees' communicative acts, not just upper management's conscious persuasive strategies. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85). However, culture's influence over communicative behavior played a guiding role in "building, maintaining, and changing [the] culture" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85). School superintendents led their respective districts within this convoluted realm through educational reform initiatives.

The normative communicative conduct for school superintendents during this time was thereby simultaneously shaped by two guiding realities: "the need for them to assume leadership in the process of school restructuring [and] the need for them to change school culture as part of the restructuring process" (Kowalski & Björk, 2005, p. 85). Several legislative acts abetted, sustained, and influenced school superintendents' stresses as their school districts' chief communicators. One such legislative action that broadcasted such alterations was the Bilingual Education Act (1968). The Bilingual Education Act (1968) served as a fundamental amendment

to ESEA, which circulated several essential alterations in federal constitutional norms and statutory norms (Punches, 1985). Also, the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania* (1971) and the *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) cases correspondingly beckoned an alteration to how "lower federal courts interpreted the equal protection and due process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment" (Yudof, 1984, p. 164). Many school leaders further addressed sizeable alterations to their admission policies for previously excluded students due to handicaps in due course.

**Constitutional to Statutory Rights**

When Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, the predominant emphasis on constitutional rights focused on statutory rights (Parrish & Kok, 1980). With the shift to statutory rights, Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 mandated free and appropriate education for all children with handicaps (Parrish & Kok, 1980). For some stakeholders, the contention stemmed from the federal funding streams' partial financing of this mandate and the lack of requiring states and local districts to offer such programming (Yudof, 1984). For school superintendents, the ramifications of the bill's passing, in so doing, added to a nebulous milieu of practical, legal, and pedagogical shifts over the next several years (Albrecht, 1984). Although James Conant and others strongly spoke against the notion of there being a typical American high school, the Commission on Excellence impudently advocated that a "school is a school is a school" (Albrecht, 1984, p. 684). As a result, the sweeping generalizations regarding what was wrong with American public schools led to a shift in focus "from the local school to a muddy abstraction labeled American Education" (Albrecht, 1984, p. 684). In effect, however, the endorsement of quick fixes and one-size-fits-all solutions further stripped school leaders from employing efficacious leadership within their local districts.

## Declining Public Confidence

In time, as Farquhar and Martin (1972) noted, school superintendents' incompatible demands and expectations led to declining public confidence and support. Such public concerns included escalating violence and vandalism, by wages of racial prejudice and drug use, combative teachers and unreceptive students, and several other related matters. Given these public pressures, inquiries circulated concerning professional training effectiveness in administrative preparatory programs. Also, concerns regarding school superintendents' sustainability employing this role increased in volume.

## Changes in Fieldwork Experiences

In light of these reproaches, aspiring school administrators for the profession experienced alterations to the nature of their fieldwork experiences (Farquhar & Martin, 1972). In the outmoded internship, graduate students assisted a single superintendent. Then, aspiring school leaders experienced a rotating internship. The rotating internship consisted of having the aspiring school administrator participate in numerous settings under the direction of different superintendents or school leaders in conjunction with serving under executives who led collaborating agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Additionally, external practicum stations included "such school-related locations as mayors' and city planners' offices, health and welfare agencies, local police and recreation departments, business organizations, professional associations, and state legislatures" (Farquhar & Martin, 1972, p. 26). As demonstrated by prior iterations of school superintendency expectations and responsibilities, these external involvements recalibrated the position and altered the course of its direction after that.

Given the professed gaps in school superintendent preparedness, school leadership preparatory programs began "drawing increasingly on the arts and humanities in an attempt to

strengthen their offerings in the areas of values and creativity" (Farquhar & Martin, 1972, p. 29). Many school superintendents' expected duties based on "the need for communication and cooperation among the various organizations involved in administrative preparation" expanded (Farquhar & Martin, 1972, p. 29). The amalgamated junctures between school reform efforts, organizational configurations, institutional climates, and cultural dynamics factored into reshaping the school superintendent's role as a chief communicator (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

**A Nation at Risk**

Further confounding matters for school district leaders during this era, the *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) report's "fiery rhetoric [triggered] a national discussion about the quality and purpose of public education" (Borek, 2008, p. 572). In hindsight, the report proved to be one of several corresponding reforms in the years to come. By the mid-1980s, for instance, "a protracted era of educational reform and high stakes accountability—unparalleled in its intensity, duration and magnitude—was launched" (Björk et al., 2014, p. 2). By this time, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 had evolved into "an enormous government program, providing for the allocation of millions of dollars annually, the employment of hundreds of personnel, and the involvement of educational institutions throughout the country" (Punches, 1985, p. 62). Ultimately, "Congress reauthorized ESEA in 2002 as NCLB, they replaced the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of ESEA) with Title III of NCLB" (Mavrogordato, 2012, p. 464).

For many educational insiders and lobbyists, the common perception at the time centered on the proposed solutions established by *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). These proposed solutions claimed to embody the magic bullet for improving public schools in America (Albrecht, 1984). Therefore, an emphasis on "the real keys to improving education"

involved ensuring students were more "involved in the learning process and paying more attention to the cultivation of higher thought processes" (Albrecht, 1984, p. 684). In essence, the argument against the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (NCES) report rested on apprehensions embodying the professed ideologies driving education's intended purpose. This overall ideology gravitated around the conception that "What is alleged to be good for the college-bound must be good for all, and that means more science, more math, more computers—for everyone" (Albrecht, 1984, p. 685). Another pivotal report titled "Perspectives on Education in America" was published in the May/June 1993 issue of the Journal of Educational Research; this report raised additional concerns regarding American public schools (Huelskamp, 1993). Many stakeholders maintained their stance regarding the report's compelling nature due to its offering of a "healthy antidote to school critics' sweeping and unfounded claims" (Stedman, 1994, p. 133).

**Improving America's Schools Act of 1994**

One of the most favored bipartisan approaches to education reform was that school superintendents and leaders dealt with involved parents' participation levels in schools (Johnson, 1997). Set to expire in 1993, "the Clinton Administration proposed significant new directions for the program" (Johnson, 1997, p. 1767). The IASA bill, signed into law in 1994, included many of these recommendations. As amendments to the Title I federal government program, Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) built on these longstanding efforts to increase parents' participation level. A former professor of psychiatry at the Child Study Center at Yale University, Dr. James Comer, offered the following assertion regarding the longstanding root of the incoherence between schooling and parenting. Comer maintained the disconnect is "not caused by economic and cultural differences between parents and teachers [but by]

organizational arrangements that impede cooperation and perpetuate ‘teachers’ and parents’ stereotypes, misperceptions, and lack of understanding of mutual needs” (Johnson, 1997, p. 1762). Such discrepancies endure into the 21st century. However, the turn of the 21st century also brought a litany of changes that further expanded the role of a school superintendent once again (Dee et al., 2010; Houston, 2001; McCausland, 2008).

## Superintendent in the 21st Century (2001–Present)

Fresh off the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999, and amid the concerns regarding a computer programming shortcut leading up to the year 2000 (i.e., Y2K), school superintendents serving in the early 21st century undoubtedly had little foresight regarding what they would face in the months and years ahead (Houston, 2001). Despite the lack of a widely prescribed role conceptualization for school superintendents serving in the 21st century, Houston (2001) recalled a school board president he served with who told him that his job as the “superintendent was to be a quick-healing dartboard” (p. 429). To cast a more positive light on the profession, Houston equated it to “that of a fire hydrant to a dog” (p. 429). According to Houston, “The reality of the modern superintendency is that it is both exciting and exasperating” p. 429). Either way, such comparisons portray what quickly became an era of fluidity that is yet to be concretely defined.

### The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The events that transpired on September 11, 2001, as McCausland (2008) put it, “were a watershed in American history” (p. vii). Amid the fears and uncertainties regarding what was in store for America due to this tragic event and its inevitably nebulous aftermath, school leaders dealt with stresses brought forth by NCLB of 2001 (Dee et al., 2010). When passed in 2002, NCLB became “the most far-reaching education policy initiative over the last four decades”

(Dee et al., 2010, p. 149). Proponents of NCLB emphasized how "publicizing detailed information on school-specific test performance and linking that performance to the possibility of meaningful sanctions can improve the focus and productivity of public schools" (Dee et al., 2010, p. 149).

It would take more than lip service, though, for this arranged goal to manifest itself into a widespread reality for schools across the nation (Fritzberg, 2003). Critics at the time, for instance, underscored how NCLB's slogan would not teach a student how to read, write, or think critically. Refrains and mantras aside, school superintendents and their respective districts faced the latest federal mandate that would predictably cast many of their communities in a less than ideal light. As the results poured in from NCLB's inaugural year in place, school district leaders found themselves trying to explain the discrepancies between their received ratings at the state level compared to the federal level. In due course, the "all-or-nothing approach to sub-group success" steered school superintendents having to explain why they were "misrepresented as failing due to sub-group success" (Fritzberg, 2003, p. 41).

As a means of holding states accountable for ensuring proficiency in reading, math, and science, NCLB (2002) led to creating learning standards and assessments that measured students' degree of proficiency (Hanushek, 2009). Though afforded the autonomy to develop these standards and assessments, states answered the federal government's determinations regarding "what actions should be taken when schools fail to make sufficient progress" (Hanushek, 2009, p. 802). Preliminary studies of NCLB's effectiveness cast light on the lack of scientifically credible evidence supporting its ambitious claims. These stressors, among others, brought forth by NCLB, crafted the framework for the participants in Monahan's qualitative study of mentoring's influence on inexperienced school leaders.

**Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015**

On one side of the aisle, NCLB (2002) critics accentuated what they perceived as an overreliance on standardized testing and lack of state or local autonomy (Chenoweth, 2016). On the other hand, NCLB proponents advocated for its success by proposing a crucial role in helping close the achievement gap. Regardless, the changes brought on by NCLB that Monahan used as a prerequisite for the selection of her participants were largely unraveled by 2015 (Conaway, 2018; Ferguson, 2016). When Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Obama administration's efforts to leave its mark on educational policy reform resulted in success. ESSA offered four principles, as follows:

1. States must articulate what they expect students to learn
2. Schools must help all their students meet or exceed standards
3. States should regularly assess to measure whether schools are teaching the standards
4. States must make information about schools, including assessment results, available to educators, students, parents, and communities. (Chenoweth, 2016, p. 39)

Another significant change resulting from ESSA's enactment (2015) that school superintendents have dealt with is how their school districts are held accountable (Conaway, 2018). Under ESSA, the federal government granted states "far more autonomy to determine how schools are held accountable for student performance" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 72). As presented, ESSA also afforded local school districts the responsibility of determining the kind of support they deemed necessary (Rothman & Marion, 2016). ESSA offered states an opportunity to test-drive different assessments instead of utilizing a single evaluation. Many critics contended the single evaluation system "failed to capture all the competencies students need to develop and in some cases has constrained instruction and created a backlash against all forms of testing"

(Rothman & Marion, 2016, p. 37). According to Ferguson (2016), the shift in power from the federal level down to the individual state level was "a direct response to years of complaining by local educators that the school improvement models dictated by the federal government did not fit the unique needs of their communities" (p. 72). Given these fundamental alterations in federal mandates concerning school accountability, effective school superintendents dissected and implemented responses to such changes (Ferguson, 2017).

Before the passing of ESSA (2015), the USDOE applied a much more prescriptive identification process regarding low-performing schools that school superintendents in Monahan's study would have endured (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). Each state educational agency (SEA) under ESSA afforded an individual "educational strengths and assets to build upon, different needs to address, and a unique set of laws to follow and traditions to expect" (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016, p. 29). This approach contrasted with the prior method, which focused on compliance and a school's mandated use of provided funds. Thus, school superintendents under ESSA found themselves contending with factors such as "capacity issues, the delicate nature of stakeholder engagement, and local politics" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 72).

Upon its initial implementation, ESSA proponents anticipated it would finally propel education as a unifying force and stop the division and political gridlock (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). If school district leaders were influential in equipping teachers with the data analysis literacy skills and resources required of ESSA's (2015) demands, teachers utilized these skills as "a pull mechanism that motivates schools of education to change" (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016, p. 46). Given President Obama's second term reality of coming to a close shortly after ESSA's passing and the impending presidential election of 2016, a season of inevitable change was on the horizon (Ferguson, 2016; Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). In turn, many

elected officials around the country and in the state of Indiana ran on platforms that reinforced "the vital role education plays in the life of every American, but sadly that's not a bet worth making" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 73).

**ESSA's Involvement in the 2016 Election**

Despite ESSA (2015) being in its infancy leading into the 2016 presidential campaign season, a sundry educational sector stakeholder publically expressed their displeasure with the perceived lack of emphasis placed on education throughout the Democratic and Republican debates (Galston & Hendrickson, 2016). With that said, presidential frontrunners Donald J. Trump and Hillary R. Clinton correspondingly bolstered broad promises and themes regarding the K–12 educational system. For instance, in Rotherham's 2016 article, he underscored the primary ways education mattered throughout the 2016 presidential election campaign season. Rotherham moreover pointed out Clinton's emphasis on the importance of early education and childhood, which many voters well received, "especially women, that she understood their issues and values" (para. 3). Rotherham also emphasized how Trump "hammered on school choice because it fits with the message he was trying to build about his business instincts, radical change and individual empowerment" (para. 6). In due course, the Republicans took over the White House in January 2017 as President Donald J. Trump became the 45th president of the United States of America.

**Appointment of Elisabeth Dee DeVos**

Elisabeth Dee DeVos's appointment as the 11th U.S. Secretary of Education signaled President Trump staying true to one of his significant educational policy reform pledges as an advocate for school choice (Ferguson, 2017). Widely known for her unwavering support of school choice and charter programs, many public school advocates grew weary of DeVos's

appointment. Under DeVos's looming leadership, many public educators feared reallocating federal funds for public schools. Given ESSA's (2015) embryonic stage, when DeVos took over as the secretary of education, public school leaders had additional concerns regarding what would occur regarding ESSA's use (Cheuk & Quinn, 2018). Despite being unable by law to compel states to change their respective rules, speculation surrounded whether DeVos would seek additional federal funds for charter schools and research related to the school choice initiative (Ferguson, 2017). "DeVos is "an ardent supporter of school choice, charter schools, and vouchers, a fact that has many traditional public school advocates on high alert" (Ferguson, 2017, p. 74).

**Governmental Changes in Indiana**

As a microcosm of the larger political setting, the state of Indiana underwent a whirlwind of educational reforms since 2012 when Monahan published her research (Hartzer, 2014). Under the then-Republican superintendent of schools, Tony Bennett, Indiana became one of the first states to adopt the Common Core standards (Carlson, 2018). Bennett and former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels "led an education reform overhaul that expanded charter schools and launched a vigorous voucher program that gave tax dollars to private schools" (Carlson, 2018, para. 11). Mike Pence, a former conservative radio and television talk show host, turned congressman, then entered the picture. When term-limited Mitch Daniels retired from his position in 2012, Pence participated in the 2012 gubernatorial election, where he ultimately defeated John R. Gregg in Indiana's closest gubernatorial election in 50 years.

Meanwhile, a successful grassroots campaign launched Glenda Ritz into office over incumbent superintendent Bennett (O'Connor, 2012). Ritz notoriously ran her campaign against Indiana's adoption of the Common Core Standards. Shortly after this announcement, Governor

Pence signed a law into effect that delayed the implementation of Common Core Standards for a year (Nicks, 2014). By 2014, Indiana became the first state to officially withdraw itself from the use of Common Core standards.

Subsequently, the Indiana State Board of Education, then chaired by Ritz, approved its own set of standards that sought to blend the Common Core Standards with Indiana's previously used state standards (Nicks, 2014). Like her predecessor, Ritz successfully acquired an additional waiver approved by the USDOE in August of 2014, thereby extending the 2012 release. However, Superintendent Ritz and Governor Mike Pence had a known power struggle—the extent to which included differing perspectives on who controlled the state board of education (Strauss, 2016). During this time, the school superintendent chaired the board, and the governor appointed its members. On June 5, 2015, Governor Pence and Superintendent Ritz's contention heightened when Ritz announced her candidacy for governor of Indiana. As Strauss stated, Ritz was defeated in the 2016 Indiana superintendent of schools' election and ultimately withdrew from the gubernatorial race. Governor Pence's gubernatorial reelection campaign came close when he became the running mate for eventual President Donald J. Trump.

Dr. Jennifer McCormick, who previously served as superintendent at Yorktown Schools, won the Republican party nomination at the state party convention on June 11, 2016. At the time, many educational stakeholders hoped that this changeover in leadership would "usher in a less contentious era" (Schneider, 2019, para. 11). Unfortunately, the battles extended beyond partisan lines. The players had changed, but the disputes endured. How should students be tested? Should the results from high-stakes assessments be used to evaluate schools and their respective teachers? How should funding streams be directed? Last, as Schneider (2019) emphasized,

stakeholders still disagreed on “who should be in charge of governing education in Indiana” (para. 11).

As of 2017, state-level changes continued full steam ahead as the legislature in Indiana successfully voted to terminate the state superintendent of education being an elected position, thereby making it an appointed position (Schneider, 2019). By 2018, Dr. McCormick, 22 months after her election, declared she would not be running for a second term. When she announced her decision not to seek a second term, McCormick shared that she came into the office thinking the job was about doing “what’s best for kids” (Schneider, 2019, para. 14). Later in her response, McCormick followed up with a chilling reflection concerning her former self in which she specified, “I was so cute. I was so naïve” (Schneider, 2019, para. 14). As of 2021, the governor appoints the superintendent of schools in Indiana. It is doubtful that McCormick will be on the shortlist for the job.

**ESSA’s Impact on Indiana Superintendents**

Considering the depth of public education changes at a federal and state level throughout the second decade of the 21st century, I interviewed the IDOE’s Director of School Turnaround, Robin LeClaire. I asked LeClaire what ESSA’s passing and other relatively recent legislation meant for Indiana superintendents and their respective school districts. LeClaire (personal communication, October 8, 2019) touched on three fundamental ways ESSA affected school superintendents’ responsibilities: ramifications related to accountability, transitioning to using a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and using Title IV monies for improving school conditions for student learning. As for the complications related to accountability, LeClaire stressed the sizeable changes to Indiana’s accountability system from the federal A-F system to a method of exceeds, meets, approaches, and does not meet classifications. As LeClaire pointed

out, this change was more than a semantic one. For instance, changes to the comprehensive school improvement (CSI) identification process led to a heightened focus on the bottom 5% of school performance. Another critical change concerning the non-inclusion of a school's accountability grade of an F as part of the evaluation process involved within a school's identification as CSI. LeClaire additionally noted the significance of superintendents paying close attention to the differences between the state and federal systems as there are consequences for both entities.

In addition to these functional federal changes to education at the federal and state level, LeClaire addressed how Indiana superintendents also dealt with the sizeable changes made to Indiana's standardized testing starting in the 2018–2019 school year (R. LeClaire, personal communication, October 8, 2019). Regarding these vicissitudes, LeClaire offered the following remarks: "Add ILEARN and what that could mean moving forward—we have a system that requires schools to be up to date with a new changed assessment, held to old state accountability, and updated ESSA accountability" (R. LeClaire, personal communication, October 8, 2019). Further compounding the repercussions propelled by these changes, LeClaire was rather foreboding in commenting on the inevitable impact these financial ramifications will ultimately have on acquiring federal improvement monies.

The MTSS focus overflows from emphasizing that the whole child brings academic growth initiatives coupled with deliberate behavior, social and emotional support. The IDOE works with school leaders to improve school conditions and deliberately maximize student learning (R. LeClaire, personal communication, October 8, 2019). LeClaire underscored how school district leaders and the IDOE must establish and implement plans that reduce bullying and harassment incidences and reduce discipline practices that remove students from the classroom.

Also, LeClaire emphasized how the IDOE utilized several funding streams, such as Title IV, technical assistance funds, and other appropriated funds, to implement Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) systems in conjunction with culturally responsive discipline practices.

Despite not coming up in the interview with Robin LeClaire, another significant change that Indiana superintendents face is implementing the Graduations Pathway Policy from the Indiana State Board of Education (SBOE) in December of 2017 (Cox, 2017). According to the Graduation Pathways Panel, the graduation pathway changes accounted for "our rapidly changing, modern economy – including a strong academic foundation, intellectual curiosity and a passion for lifelong rigor" (Cox, 2017, para. 8). Such activity includes establishing "higher expectations for all students – with the foundational belief that every student is capable of achieving personal success" (Cox, 2017, para. 8).

Students starting in the graduating class of 2023 must thereby satisfy three graduation pathway requirements to earn a high school diploma, as follows: possess a high school diploma, successfully learn and demonstrate employability skills, and demonstrate the acquisition of postsecondary-ready competencies (Cox, 2017). With these alterations to Indiana's graduation requirements, high school students receive increased emphasis on project-based learning, service-based learning, work-based learning, alterations in pedagogy, school structure, and other critical changes in course availability and scheduling.

Starting with the class of 2019, seniors who did not pass the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) assessment could opt into the State Board of Education's proposed Graduation Pathways requirements (Herron, 2020). The Graduation Pathways provide students with alternative ways to demonstrate post-secondary readiness rather

than earning the cut scores on the ISTEP+ assessment. Although some students did take advantage of the opportunity to graduate by being an early enrollee in Graduation Pathways, the graduation rate for the class of 2019 declined from 2018. Due to the pandemic that transpired in 2020, Indiana schools across the state grappled with awaiting Governor Holcomb's debriefings, executive orders, and the class's eventual lightening of graduation requirements of 2020 amid the mandated shut down of schools (Lanich, 2020). As a result, observation of data trends from the second year of ILEARN and the passing of Graduation Pathways requirements is at a standstill (Herron, 2020).

**School Voucher Programs in Indiana**

As public school district superintendents throughout the state of Indiana guide their districts through these educational reforms, another major factor at play was the fiscal ramifications brought on by the school voucher programs (Schmeltz, 2020). Like the nation as a whole, Indiana experienced an increase in the number of voucher bills passed from 2010–2018 (Austin et al., 2019). Approximately 182,700 students in the United States received vouchers—over 35,000 such students were in Indiana. Such efforts built on the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (ICSP) authorized in 2011; ICSP serves more than 20% of students receiving vouchers across the country.

Regardless, alterations to educational funding streams fueled by these programs and initiatives financially impact public schools across Indiana (Schmeltz, 2020). School districts face a growing need for marketing their given programs to keep the average daily membership (ADM) funds they are accustomed to operating on and thereby sustain staffing, resource allocation, and line budget items. With the augmented options for school choice, including the

emergence of online public schooling, school district superintendents are advertising, promoting, and selling what their respective schools have to offer students as a means of remaining relevant.

**21st Century Students**

In addition to an uptick in school choice options and the necessity of leading a school district with a broadminded marketing perspective, school superintendents face changing staff and students from a generational standpoint (Elmore & McPeak, 2017). Topical expansions in motivational theory, psychology, sociology, brain-based research, restorative practices, drug trends, substance abuse, social media use, and a litany of related changes combine for unchartered territories on a qualitative level as well. A significant volume of published literature abounds regarding how best to educate students in the 21st century. Educational authors and presenters, such as John Spencer, Tim Elmore, Dave Burgess, Joy Kirr, Matt Miller, Kasey Bell, Jennifer Casa-Todd, Cris Tovani, Tamara Letter, speak at schools around the country and the state of Indiana on such matters. Dr. Lori Desautels of Butler University and her team of researchers and practitioners work with teachers throughout Indiana to self-regulate, co-regulate, reset the amygdala, foster trauma-sensitive cultures, and utilize brain-based learning approaches. Furthermore, authors, such as Andi McNair, emphasize the significance of choice and voice by applying principles exemplified by Google and like-minded companies. As the narrative unfolds, school leaders lead their districts through these sorts of vagaries in addition to the legislative, political, social, and educational mandates and expectations.

**eLearning in Indiana Public Schools**

Another critical area a school leader must address stems from the growing emergence of eLearning, which brought a refined implementation strategy for schools related to traditional approaches to seat time (Frost, 2020). Therefore, superintendents make proactive decisions on

when to take advantage of eLearning days, whether it be a substitute for make-up days resulting from bad weather, flu or illness breakouts, election days, staff professional development several other reasons. Throughout much of the spring term of 2020, Indiana school superintendents responded to all schools' shutdown and later waived standardized assessments and teacher evaluations, per Governor Eric Holcomb's executive orders (Goodan, 2020).

### School Safety

New threats from juuling and vaping fueled supplementary revisions to safety-related measures (McMinn & Jin, 2019). Correspondingly, many social media outlets and increased accessibility to students' technology brought an assortment of trepidations regarding privacy for students and staff members (Martin et al., 2018). First, "no single explanation captures the complexity of the process that leads an individual to violence" (Bast & DeSimone, 2019, p. 11). That said, school leaders are responsible for ensuring that staff and students are safe, protocols are reviewed continuously or revised, and those early warning indicators are systematically monitored.

## Elements of Organizational Change

As current and aspiring school leaders approach the quarter-century mark of the 21st century, they are, like their predecessors, encountering a litany of never-before-encountered crucibles. As the abridged history of school superintendent role conceptualizations delineates, change remains the constant. At times, such changes are relatively small, and other times they are forceful (Monahan, 2012). Regardless of the case, the published literature on school change is full-bodied. The following sections of this literature review offer some of the main points of emphasis found in the field of organizational change.

## Leading and Managing

Given the inevitability of organizational change, school district leaders are responsible for maintaining a conscious awareness of when organizational change is essential (Thaler et al., 1997). Organizational changes have a habit of becoming compulsory when people inside or outside of a given organization "experience a mismatch between organizational performance and processes" (Thaler et al., 1997, p. 320). School district leaders are thereby assumed, in due part to their position within the given organization, to suggest what changes should occur and to "promote change in understanding" (Thaler et al., 1997, p. 317). To do so, school district leaders are "empowered by the institution which gives the change agents the possibilities, required resources, and the power to engage in change" (Thaler et al., 1997, p. 317). However, such interactions' essence relies on the fluid relationship between involved parties and the inflicted changes' nature. Whether a school district leader's empowerment stems from a formal hierarchical structure or develops organically, the job's heart necessitates they "engage in many roles and relationships" (Thaler et al., 1997, p. 318) for conducted changes to be efficient and effective. Often, the process of doing so becomes a careful balancing act on the change agent's behalf. This balancing act overflows from the complex demands generated by policy changes and the nuances involved in consigning the myriad of responses, interpretations, and interactions at the micro-level.

## Leadership

As Marzano et al. (2005) indicated, leadership theories and approaches extend back to human civilization's earliest recordings. "Regardless of the theories used to explain it, leadership has been intimately linked to the effective functioning of complex organizations throughout the centuries" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 5). The interworking of such linkages, however, in some

measure depends on the contextual factors at play. For instance, Wright (1940), in response to the context at hand, thereby called for the presence of leadership that is adept and energized if American democracy and the American public school system seek to prevail. In his address, Wright (1940) also declared, “The greatest problem is that of discovery and training for such leadership” (p. 3).

Regardless of variables that characterize one era or situation and differentiate from the other, leaders must be capable of being malleable (Wright, 1940). Such malleability, Wright (1940) contended, results from a conscious recognition that “leadership is a growth, not a product to be turned out” (p. 3). Wright (1940) also insisted that a “real leader is willing to sacrifice oneself for the common good” (p. 4). As Deal (1986) suggested to school leaders who were responding to educational reform initiatives throughout the 1980s, “the basic shape of schools and the core of schooling remains intact once the whirlwind of activity subsides” (p. 1). Frequently, “administrators continue to administer schools in familiar ways, teachers teach as they were taught, and students behave and learn as most of us always did” (Deal, 1986, p. 2). Deal’s observations provided further insight into how the existing divide between the “intentions of educational reformers and schools’ organizational realities” firmly remains intact (p. 2). Leadership, in this fashion, coexists within these worlds.

**District Leadership Stress**

Despite the burgeoning body of scientific research on stress and the technological advancements used to actuate the origin of stress and how it influences the human body, stress is a long-held phenomenon (Kyaw-Myint & Strazdins, 2015). With this frame of reference in place, it is vital to note that “people cannot be stressed or [be] put under stress” (Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982, p. 128). As a biochemical reaction that occurs “within the [human] body, stress is simply

one possible reaction to pressure, which may be positive or negative" (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982, p. 128). As a result, stress does not cause the human body to react—stress is literally "the body's reaction" (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982, p. 128). Although there is a conditional threshold that, when reached, is harmful to the human body, "A certain amount of stress is necessary to everyone" (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982, p. 128).

Bureaucratic behavior and changes brought on by reforms that impact education at the macro and micro levels affect educators and educational leaders in unique ways (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982). As Kaiser and Polczynkski proposed, a direct contrast in how the human body reacts to changes and reforms could stem from one's orientation, whether that be a bureaucratic or goal-oriented focus. Together, the presence of bureaucratic and goal-oriented approaches may combine to create homeostasis. "Bureaucratic forces keep the organization from meandering; goal-oriented forces keep the organization moving toward higher-order achievement. Although neither force can succeed alone, the presence of both forces makes stress inevitable" (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982, p. 129).

District-level leaders are accountable for leading so that this equilibrium between bureaucratic and goal-oriented approaches maintains its form between the two vying dispositions (Kaiser & Polczynkski, 1982). Increases in time demands, accountability, and ever-changing leadership roles become a facet of the district-level school administrator's responsibilities (Gamson & Hodge, 2016). As Monahan (2012) specified, these types of sources often lead to perceived "stress in administrative practices and beliefs" (p. 20).

As Monahan (2012) consummated, "There are two ways district leaders can perceive tensions caused by growing demands, positively accepting the demands or by viewing the demands as leadership barriers" (p. 21). One's leadership style may play a role in inducing how

demands associated with a given occupation are perceived (Dale & Fox, 2008). For instance, Dale and Fox emphasized the importance of leadership styles relative to their employees' commitment to an organization. Given the perceived importance of leadership styles, Dale and Fox urged that leaders should "understand how their behavior might influence a worker's commitment to the organization" (p. 112). Specific leadership styles are thereby studied to understand better the degree to which one's leadership style matters concerning constructs, such as an organization's success and employee satisfaction (Hamstra et al., 2014). Achievement goals serve as an additional construct studied by researchers. Such purposes are known as "standards of competence employees pursue in their work, have far-reaching consequences for employee and organizational functioning" (Hamstra et al., 2014, p. 413). Hamstra et al. (2014) additionally concluded that "leadership style plays an important role in the achievement goals followers adopt" (p. 413).

**Reform**

Regarding the school superintendent's role in light of inevitable reforms, "There seems to be a consensus that reforms in American schools cannot be realized without school superintendents acting as catalysts" (Ireh & Bailey, 1999, p. 22). Lehman (2015), for instance, contended, "In view of everything that's happened in education reform since 1983, it's time to ask ourselves why it is that thirty-one years of unprecedented struggle have produced such meager results" (p. 27). As discussed, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a landmark report, *A Nation at Risk,* in 1983 (USDOE, 1983). The report acknowledged many effective school superintendents worldwide while also making sure to point out some of the alleged problems impacting school district leadership (Hoyle, 1989). In Hoyle's

(1989) words, “We have been reminded of these problems in the passing parade of education reports that began in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk* (p. 376).

According to Lehman (2015), “What America needs more than anything else is a massive, systematic, narrowly focused, all-out effort to improve the quality of instruction” (p. 27). Reforms will inevitably materialize in the future as unforeseen obstacles surface. Resultantly, aspiring school superintendents must evolve their dispositions and skillsets. Hoyle (1989) also avowed that preparation for 21st-century school superintendents must move away from the “university-based, research-oriented preparation model that produces Ph.D. degrees in favor of [a] professional-studies model that is more intellectually challenging and more practical” (p. 377). Over 20 years later, Dr. Terry McDaniel and other researchers echoed these sentiments' genera (T. McDaniel, personal communication, April 21, 2020).

**Culture**

In light of the vast measure of published literature surrounding the topic, Gruenert (2008) distinguished between school culture and school climate and made a strong case for the differences between the two constructs beyond mere semantics. Gruenert acknowledged the similar characteristics between culture and climate as he elucidated how they express two distinct concepts. Gruenert recognized the presence of school culture operationally dating back several decades and discussed how “its early use denoted the ethos, or spirit, of an organization” (p. 57). However, Gruenert likened school culture to an organization’s “attitude” (p. 57). Gruenert additionally emphasized the attribution of school culture to the “collective mood, or morale, of a group of people” (p. 57). However, when attributing culture to happiness and considering a happy teacher a better teacher, Gruenert drew a line in the sand.

According to Gruenert (2008), “If happy people truly perform better, then leaders must create conditions in which happiness thrives” (p. 57). Therefore, with this distinction in mind, a conversation concerning a given school's culture should gravitate toward how a given school leader approaches nurturing a given environment. How a leader fosters the school environment is where many leaders fall short, given their over-reliance on extrinsic rewards. “Bringing doughnuts to the faculty lounge on Fridays may help a few teachers wake up quicker, but this act will not affect the morale of the building” (Gruenert, 2008, p. 57). As an alternative to doughnut Friday-type extrinsic rewards, Gruenert proposed activities to generate a more favorable climate. Even for those who express their utmost confidence in the supremacy of token events, such as doughnut Fridays, Gruenert noted a reality beyond any single person’s control—culture always wins.

Since culture always wins, leaders must understand what contrasts climate with culture and the shaping of climate by culture (Gruenert, 2008). “Climate is the main leverage point for any culture, which means that if school leaders want to shape a new culture, they should start with an assessment of the climate” (Gruenert, 2008, p. 58). Fortunately, Gruenert also tendered some optimistic news, “Changing the climate can be accomplished without much effort, suggesting that it is somewhat out of our control” (p. 58). Should schools aspire to improve and school leaders be a part of these improvements, it will take more than these extrinsically motivated events. Last, Gruenert emphasized the significance of leaders consciously distinguishing between what culture and climate have in common and how they differ. “To implement a strategy designed to change our mood, or climate, is certainly not the same as one that targets our belief systems or culture” (Gruenert, 2008, p. 59). When addressing topics like

culture and climate with fidelity, a much deeper conceptual understanding and practical application of these constructs must be undertaken by the respective school district leader.

## Leadership

As a social construct, leadership is "an object of persistent scrutiny by social scientists" (Ireh & Bailey, 1999, p. 23). Despite the limited consensus on what it means as a social construct, Gardner (1990), among others, discerned the precariousness of attempting to describe leadership so that it leads one to maintain it is more patterned and orderly than it ends up being in practice. The absence of an acute demystification of leadership likely contributed to the lack of a consensus regarding the findings. Two common denominators unite the many definitions surrounding the construct known as leadership. Traits of leadership within schools echo leadership traits in the non-educational realm (Marzano et al., 2005).

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that leadership is a central theme in conversations surrounding the topic of overhauling K–12 education and educational reform (Spillane, 2003). Also, "shifts in the policy environment over the past couple of decades that have attempted to forge wide-ranging changes in classroom instruction are likely to afford classroom teaching and student learning a central role in educational leadership research" (Spillane, 2003, p. 344). In an era governed by educational reform initiatives, distributed leadership approaches have gained momentum due to educational leaders' complexity. However, categorizing leadership styles comes with the risk of drawing unsubstantiated conclusions (Ireh & Bailey, 1999). For this reason, Ireh and Bailey recommended a research design or mode of inquiry such as qualitative research for addressing the "relationships of specific areas of school leadership and district characteristics during planned change implementation" (p. 30).

As Monahan (2012) noted, “The leadership role can cause leaders to take on more responsibility than they can successfully complete” (p. 19). Therefore, a starting point in determining leadership's role within a given organization is defining leadership as a construct. What is leadership? Regardless of the domain or contextual era, “leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group toward setting and achieving goals” (White & Greenwood, 2002, p. 30). However, how one goes about leading is much more convoluted when applied in practice. In an attempt to unpack trends and patterns in the ways leaders go about leading, scores of leadership styles have materialized. Two such leadership styles harvesting prodigious attention from researchers and practitioners in the field are transactional and transformational leadership. These two leadership styles were brought into vogue by James MacGregor Burns during the latter part of the 1970s.

**Transactional and Transformational Leadership**

Burns’ (1978) study centered on what he considered a significant necessity in need of being further addressed, “a hunger for compelling and creative leadership” (p. 1). Despite these purported paroxysms, Burns regarded the pursuit of leadership as a means of seeking “to cage and tame it” (p. 9). Burns bridged the roles of followers and leaders and sought to “deal with leadership as distinct from mere power-holding and as the opposite of brute power” (p. 3). In doing so, Burns identified two cardinal leadership forms: transactional and transformative. Burns considered most leaders at the time as taking on transactional leadership approaches, given his perceptions of how leaders approach their followers as they intend to exchange one concept for the other. Also, Burns regarded transformative leadership, on the other hand, as a more complex and potent approach bearing in mind the leader’s acknowledgment and utilization of an “existing need or demand of a potential follower” (p. 4). According to Burns, a transformative leader

"looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower" (p. 4). Transformational leadership, Burns maintained, abetted an environment that builds relationships on "mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents" (p. 4).

However, Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) denoted a key element missing from Burns's (1978) work, namely an explanation of the internal processing that generates both types of leaders' actions. For instance, Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) differentiated transactional leaders and transformational leaders in qualitative ways by proposing they are "different kinds of individuals who construct reality in markedly different ways, thereby viewing themselves and the people they lead in contrasting ways" (p. 649). For that reason, transactional leaders fundamentally tend to "engage their followers in a relationship of mutual dependence" (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, p. 649). "To be an effective transactional leader, [therefore, one] must regularly fulfill the expectations of their followers" (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, p. 649).

On the other hand, transformational leadership often stems from "deeply held personal value systems that include such values as justice and integrity" (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, p. 650). For Burns, such values were considered end values, which implied they are non-negotiable and unalterable. On those grounds, Kuhnert and Lewis attributed the concept of charisma, thereby being synonymous with the type of transformational leader advanced by Burns. As Kuhnert and Lewis (1978) thereby concluded, "Thus, key behaviors of successful transformational leaders may include articulating goals, building an image, demonstrating confidence, and arousing motivation" (p. 650).

Constructive personality theories propose that people vary in how they "construct or organize experiences about themselves and their social and interpersonal environments"

(Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, p. 650). Therefore, motivational theories further complicate transactional and transformational leadership beyond heuristics. Substantive research issues brought on by the conscious application of constructive and developmental ideas "to transactional and transformational leadership, in turn, liberates researchers from a static view of leadership; it emphasizes leaders' development over the course of their lives" (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, p. 654). A more in-depth analysis and focus on the inner workings of the relationship between leaders and followers, in turn, preempt additional areas of research for future study.

**Total Quality Management Model**

Feigenbaum (1956) predicted intensification of competition resulting from the reality that "customers—both industrial and consumer—have been increasing their quality requirements very sharply in recent years" (p. 93). Dating back to the early 1980s, however, the institution of a managerial discourse known as total quality management (TQM) offered a different approach (Giroux & Landry, 1998). TQM was swiftly "heralded by governments, major corporations, and business media as the most effective and elegant way out of the economic crisis and into the global market" (Giroux & Landry, 1998, p. 183). Williams (1993) submitted his thoughts regarding TQM through what he described as an "unusually candid insight into the corporate minds (if not the souls) of a number of institutions of higher education" (p. 373). Before evaluating whether TQM fits its designated purpose, Williams specified the requirements for identifying and communicating what the purported purpose occasions. Naturally, questions arose, such as whether the TQM system should be a management tool to increase productivity, ensure that customers are happy, and cut down waste. Alternatively, others inquired if the TQM system's intended use should be a tool for making people better, developing professional ethics,

and providing moral education. Resultantly, the literature on TQM principally focuses on addressing these differing intents (Giroux & Landry, 1998).

Giroux and Landry (1998) differentiated between these proposed intentions by offering a classification of what is meant by control. On the one hand, the schools of thought referred to by Giroux and Landry were regarded as "rational and normative" (p. 185). Both of them ultimately share the common goal of customer satisfaction but go about it differently. "To summarize, the rational school presupposes that individuals want to do a good job" (Giroux & Landry, 1998, p. 187). On the other hand, the normative school emerged from Crosby's zero-defect theory originating in the 1960s. "In summary, the normative school's basic hypothesis is that poor quality can largely be attributed to worker negligence and to company-wide carelessness" (Giroux & Landry, 1998, p. 188).

Whether financial, organizational, or social, such situations are often born out of a "corporate or individual frustration and fear" (Williams, 1993, p. 373). Even when not engendered in response to an urging crisis, TQM concerns itself with its institutions' attitudes with the inception of changes. In due course, however, TQM's failures were credited to factors such as an organization or leader's lack of understanding the model's true nature, lack of commitment from the top leadership member(s), and an overall lack of rigor during the implementation of TQM (Giroux & Landry, 1998). Therefore, TQM's success tends to rely on crucial factors Williams (1993) indicated, such as unwavering dedication, commitment, humility, and tact. At best, "TQM may very well be a valuable antidote to complacency and, as such, offer an effective way of developing a sense of common enterprise and interest" (Williams, 1993, p. 374).

When determining TQM's theoretical effectiveness as a scientifically sound leadership approach, Giroux and Landry (1998) outlined vital literature surrounding its critique and ultimately call into question the universality of TQM's concepts. Psychologically, concerns regarding the emotionally charged nature of *quality* as a concept relating to "personal feelings of success and failure, self-esteem, and the fulfillment of parental expectations, which are subsequently transferred to authority figures" (Giroux & Landry, 1998, p. 192).

**Servant Leadership**

Another leadership style prevalent throughout the published research was servant leadership. Servant leadership, popularized by Greenleaf, offers a unique approach to leadership in which a leader's focus is not on one's gifts but on using one's skills to make a difference and, in turn, create a positive change (Wis, 2002). By serving rather than imposing, Greenleaf's theory was that a servant leader could empower their team rather than merely controlling them. As Rigsby (2006) professed, a leader's service towel must be much greater than one's ego. Only then, Rigsby contended, can a leader go from making a mere impression to making a real impact.

Wis (2002) applied the servant leader paradigm to conductors as a leadership model. According to Wis, a conductor using the servant leadership concept empowers ensemble members through positive influence, goal setting, and a vision for success. Unlike conductors, school superintendents cannot start and stop the school district's progression with a single gesture or move of the baton. However, school superintendents and conductors share the role of making "the large scale decisions regarding choice of repertoire, curriculum, and program design, as well as the day-to-day decisions focusing on the methodology" (Wis, 2002, p. 17) within their respective domains.

At best, “legitimate leadership helps to mitigate the common organizational problems of absenteeism, high turnover, and low morale simply because it is relationship-oriented and built on authority” (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 163). Proponents of servant leadership actively endorse it as a legitimate leadership style built on love through loyalty, teamwork, and dignifying employees. Regarding servant leadership attributes, Udani and Lorenzo-Molo (2013) correlated integrity, spirituality, exemplary character, humility, simplicity, authenticity, courage, responsible morality, people-centeredness, vulnerability, and gracefulness under pressure as critical characteristics commonly found in servant leaders. Suppose school superintendents “understand, develop, and sustain an interior life defined by the development and practices of virtues” (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013, p. 389) such as those listed above. In that case, personal strategic planning efforts assumedly become part of a servant leader’s disposition and leadership approach.

**Situational Leadership**

Situational leadership serves as another oft-discussed leadership style throughout the published research. As White and Greenwood (2002) illustrated, the key to understanding leadership may rest on comprehension of “the relationship between the amount of direction and control a leader gives and the amount of support and encouragement a leader provides” (p. 30). Blanchard and Hersey et al. (1996) added a third essential dimension to this two-dimensional leadership model. The third component within situational leadership is the leader’s developmental level, often regarded as maturity. Situational leadership theory focuses on leaders’ possession of a methodology that meshes their leadership style with followers’ development levels (White & Greenwood, 2002). When Gardner described the leadership process, he similarly emphasized the role of persuasion as a means of inducing “a group to

pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers" (Gardner, 1990, p. 1). As a result, "leaders should be thought of in the context in which they exist, in their functional setting, and based on the system over which they preside" (Ireh & Bailey, 1999, p. 23).

Given the organizational complexity of school districts, Ireh and Bailey (1999) heartened against resorting to an assumption that "any single dimension of organizational effectiveness" (p. 22) will automatically lead to prolonged improvement or sustained success. However, history disclosed the fundamental role school superintendents play in "second-order changes that bring about new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of doing things into new ways of solving persistent problems" (Ireh & Bailey, 1999, p. 22). The proposed curvilinear relationship between task behavior and relationship behavior, presented by Hersey and Blanchard (1996), may therefore serve as a crucial determining factor in evaluating the interplay between leaders and team members.

Instead of viewing the development level among these constructs in a binary fashion, situational leadership views the level of maturity concerning the specific task or activity at hand (White & Greenwood, 2002). White and Greenwood (2002) also offered two definite elements that make up the construct of one's developmental level: task maturity and psychological maturity. Task maturity involves one's capacity to complete a given task. In contrast, psychological maturity refers to one's mental state in maintaining the self-confidence and self-respect to achieve a specified mission. With that said, both realms of maturity levels embody the "ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for detecting their own behavior—the extent to which a subordinate is willing and able to accomplish a specific task" (Ireh & Bailey, 1999, p. 24).

As opposed to advocating for a supreme leadership style, situational leadership, as its name suggests, emphasizes the significance of commissioning "the right mix of directing and supporting behaviors necessary to fit the development level" (White & Greenwood, 2002, p. 30). The rudimentary conception of situational leadership theory, as initially presented in Hersey's (1975) research, was thus built on the premise that "leaders should begin to reduce their task behavior and increase relationship behavior" (pp. 72–73) as the follower's level of maturity increases. For the more significant part of a half-century, the Center for Leadership Studies (2020) has utilized the situational leadership theory as a research-based model for ensuring leaders "engage in effective performance conversations that build trust, increase productivity and drive behavior change" (para. 1).

**Leadership Frames**

Moen (2017) advocated for using leadership frames to implement conscientization. Conscientization, grounded in Marxist critical theory, emphasizes the need for acknowledging perceived societal and political contradictions. According to Freire (1968), "an attitude of critical doubt is legitimate . . . through critical reflection on the human-world relationship and . . . the relationships between people implicit in the former" (p. 97).

Bolman and Deal (2008) employed the four frames when analyzing organizations: structural, political, human resource, and symbolic. According to Bolman and Deal, often, members of an organization view the organization they are a part of through one or two of these positions. Additionally, applying the frame(s) within a given organization illustrates an individual's situation respective to the others (Moen, 2017). When considering all four frames, "a greater concern is given for different members of an organization" (Moen, 2017, p. 29). "Conscientization can occur through all parts of an organization" (Moen, 2017, p. 29). As a

result, lead investigators can implement such changes. The structural frame itself stems from "Mintzberg's . . . five structural configurations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisional form, and adhocracy" (Moen, 2017, p. 29). With this content in mind, "The sharing of power and leadership in an all-channel network allows for everyone's values to be considered and employed" (Moen, 2017, p. 30).

The political frame involves the struggle within an organization as vying individuals or groups struggle to acquire power (Laudicina, 1992). The political frame considers the emphasis on a leader cutting through the red tape, overcoming inefficiencies, and making up for the lack of supervision over public funds. Ethical decision-making within the political frame becomes increasingly complicated since the political frame "is the view of organizations as arenas within which the pursuit of individual or group interest and resource scarcity inevitably generate competition, conflict, and the pursuit of power" (Laudicina, 1992, p. 391). Within the political frame, managers must network, negotiate, and build coalitions to maintain a sense of order effectively within this arena.

The human resource frame is a product of Bolman and Deal's (2008) argument regarding the pattern followed by workers to protect themselves and thereby "avoid directly addressing core issues and problems, while advocacy and inquiry workers emphasize common goals, communicate openly, and combine advocacy with inquiry" (Moen, 2017, p. 30). Moen contended that this principle stands true beyond theory. According to Moen, workers "seek to protect their psyches based on their own oppression" (p. 30). Only through non-judgmental listening – what Freire (1968) regarded as revolutionary action – can emotional security workers be provided with fidelity.

According to Bolman and Deal (2008), the symbolic frame connects itself to organizational identity. According to Moen (2017), "When the organizational identity is based on combating oppression, a culture in which the objective-problematic situation can be addressed will become normalized" (p. 31). Laudicina (1992) commented on what makes the symbolic frame most intriguing. As Laudicina maintained, the "eclectic assortment of ideas drawn from sources as diverse as organizational anthropology and symbolic interactionism" (p. 391) is what allows for an augmented use of this particular frame.

**Experienced and Inexperienced District Leaders**

As Monahan (2012) pointed out, Marzano et al. (2005) offered two distinct levels to explain the differentiation in how experienced and inexperienced district leaders influence their respective school districts. The first distinguishing level involved the focus of the district leaders. "If the focus of the district leader is not on improving student achievement, the district leader will have limited impact on student achievement" (Monahan, 2012, p. 66). The second distinguishing level involved the district's goals regarding student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). Monahan (2012) also referenced the unique way in which an experienced school district leader carries the capacity to comprehend "all the implications involved in change initiatives and carefully leads the district while always being aware of all stakeholder needs" (p. 30).

The meta-analysis performed by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) focused on examining findings from 27 studies dating back to 1970 (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The scrutiny of each study utilized "rigorous, quantitative methods to study the influence of school district leaders on student achievement" (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 3). At the time, McREL researchers marketed the study as the most extensive quantitative examination on superintendents to date, with 2,817 districts studied in conjunction with 3.4 million students.

Four key findings emerged as follows: (a) district-level leadership matters, (b) effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts, (c) superintendent tenures are positively correlated with student achievement, and (d) the research reveals a surprising and perplexing finding of defined autonomy. Also, the leadership responsibilities offered by Waters and Marzano (2006) are as follows:

1. Goal-setting process: The superintendent involves board members and principals in the process of setting goals.
2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction: Goals for student achievement and instructional programs are adopted based on relevant research.
3. Board alignment with and support for district goals: Board support for district goals for achievement and instruction is maintained.
4. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction: The superintendent monitors and evaluates the implementation of the district instructional program, the impact of instruction on achievement, and the impact of implementation on implementers.
5. Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals: Resources are dedicated and used for the professional development of teachers and principals to achieve district goals.
6. Defined autonomy in the superintendent relationship with schools: The superintendent provides principals autonomy to lead their schools, but expects alignment on district goals and resources for professional development. (p. 15)

As proposed by Monahan (2012), “Experienced district leaders will have a better understanding of responsibilities associated with change initiatives and understand the importance of coaching and mentoring inexperienced leaders toward successful behavior

practices" (p. 31). Another critical aspect distinguishing experienced leaders is their possession of having what Blumberg (1989) referred to as craft knowledge. As for school administrators, theories or anthropologies are limited in their scope since "craft is learned in day-to-day practice" (Benveniste, 1990, p. 99). In addition to the emphasis Marzano et al. (2005) placed on observing education and educational leaders as both an art and a science, Blumberg's sole focus on craft underscores the importance of recognizing the pivotal role experience plays in garnering leadership abilities. Like a burgeoning potter who learns a given practice by serving as an apprentice under a master potter, so, too Blumberg advocated the school leader gleans wisdom from experience. Benveniste (1990) pushed back by countering that the academy analyzes and simplifies what principals and school leaders do regularly. That said, Benveniste contested that theoretical products often fail to match the "real world problems [leaders] encounter daily at their desks" (p. 97).

## Leadership Standards

A conversation surrounding school district leaders' evaluation begins with discussing the leadership standards and metrics used to conduct such appraisals. The establishment of school superintendents' leadership standards unofficially dates back to Phi Delta's seminal publishing of The School Superintendent's Creed in 1941. In total, there were 33 statements offered in the creed ("School Superintendent's Creed," 1941). Each statement started with "I will" ("School Superintendent's Creed," 1941, p. 254), followed by a proclamation. Such proclamations concentrated on maintaining desirable relations with one's board of education, instructional personnel, administrative personnel, and patrons. Even though much has changed since the initial publishing of these leadership standards nearly three-quarters of a century ago, remnants of these "I will" statements remain intact. Since that time, several organizations have published their own

sets of leadership standards that continue being refined and adjusted following changes brought forth by educational reforms and other related factors.

**IISLC and PSEL Standards**

Dating back to the mid-1990s, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) adopted a new set of educational leadership standards (Murphy & Shipman, 2001). As Monahan (2012) noted, "The standards were derived through the research between educational leadership and productive schools as measured by outcomes of students, and through the current trends in society and education associated with leadership" (p. 32). In November of 2015, however, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; J. Murphy et al., 2017). The PSEL replaced the ISSLC standards after a decade of being in place (J. Murphy et al., 2017). With that said, the PSEL standards supplement "the solid foundation that the 2008 ISLLC standards provided—especially their emphasis on school mission, vision, and core values" (J. Murphy et al., 2017, pp. 21–22). Correspondingly, the PSEL standards profoundly accentuated several "themes that were touched on only briefly in the earlier document" (J. Murphy et al., 2017, pp. 21–22).

One substantive alteration the PSEL standards made to the ISLLC standards derived from the conscious decision pointedly to treat issues relating to ethics, equity, and culturally responsive schooling as their respective topics instead of grouping them (J. Murphy et al., 2017). Moreover, the PSEL standards offered "more detailed guidance related to leadership for curriculum, instruction, and assessment; they give more attention to the need for school leaders to create a community of care and support for students" (J. Murphy et al., 2017, p. 22). Another key variance between the PSEL standards and their predecessor derived from the PSEL standards' detailed description of the responsibilities held by school leaders. Such

responsibilities focus on developing the “professional capacity of teachers and staff, and they stress the value of engaging families and community members in student learning” (J. Murphy et al., 2017, p. 22).

The PSEL 2015 standards are as follows:

1. Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values. Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and each student's academic success and well-being.
2. Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms. Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
3. Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. Effective educational leaders strive for educational opportunity equity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
4. Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
5. Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students.
6. Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel. Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.

7. Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff. Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
8. Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community. Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
9. Standard 9: Operations and Management. Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
10. Standard 10: School Improvement. Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being. (J. Murphy et al., 2017, p. 22)

J. Murphy et al. (2017) credited the PSEL standards for their optimistic portrayal of leadership. Their description of the standards noted the focus on "potential, growth, and support in conjunction with a focus on educational rigor and accountability" (p. 23). Compared to the ISLLC standards, the PSEL standards rely much less on a deficit-based perspective. Regardless of such vagaries, however, only time will divulge how they are prioritized and brought to life in more meaningful and significant ways.

**Accreditation in Indiana**

In addition to the utilization of standards for evaluating school leaders at the building and district levels, schools in Indiana undergo a performance-based accreditation process that has undergone iterative changes in its own right. In Indiana, all public schools must receive accreditation, while nonpublic schools may opt to seek accreditation (School Accreditation

System, 1989). Schools may receive a Full, Provisional, Provisional: Legal Standards, or Probationary status per Indiana Code. To better communicate these changes in a streamlined fashion, the IDOE recently published a new website called INview. INview offers public information on the performance and progress of Indiana Schools. Ideally, the platform's streamlined design provides stakeholders, community members, and parents snapshot data on schools' metrics that they are potentially interested in having their children attend.

The administrative bodies overseeing school districts' accreditation process in Indiana have seen their fair share of changes over the last few years. After the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools dissolved in 2014, its primary and secondary accreditation functions merged into AdvancED. AdvancED, who partnered with Indiana's North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, identified seven leadership standards (Ranbom & Tyler, 2019). Each of which, as Monahan (2012) pointed out, directly aligned "with leverage points from research to provide important information for building leaders which will directly impact the instructional core" (p. 34). Three domains organized these performance standards—leadership capacity, learning capacity, and research capacity.

As of November 2018, AdvancED and Measured Progress, two leading education nonprofit organizations, merged and rebranded themselves by changing their corporate name to Cognia (Ranbom & Tyler, 2019). In time, the changes brought forth by Cognia may affect the direction Indiana goes regarding its evaluation and accreditation practices. Depending on the approach taken and what changes occur, school district leaders will recalibrate and adjust their practices accordingly to remain compliant and engage or empower their respective team members. As of the fall of 2019, however, school district leaders were tasked with adjusting to another change. The IDOE started using the same Indiana Content Standards for evaluating

district-level leaders—initially published in 2010. These standards included core and supplementary content and skills for district leaders. There are five core standards, and the sixth standard is entirely additional. The standards are as follows:

1. Standard 1. Human Capital Management: School district leaders use their role as human capital managers to drive improvements in building leader effectiveness and student achievement.
2. Standard 2. Instructional Leadership: School district leaders are acutely focused on effective teaching and learning, possess a deep and comprehensive understanding of best instructional practices, and continuously promote activities that contribute to the academic success of all students.
3. Standard 3. Personal Behavior: School district leaders model personal behavior that sets the tone for all student and adult relationships in the district.
4. Standard 4. Building Relationships: School district leaders build relationships to ensure that all key stakeholders work effectively with each other to achieve transformative results.
5. Standard 5. Culture of Achievement: School district leaders develop a districtwide culture of achievement aligned to the district's vision of success for every student.
6. Standard 6. Organizational, Operational, and Resource Management: School district leaders leverage organizational, operational, and resource management skills to support district improvement and achieve desired educational outcomes. (IDOE, 2010, p. 1)

## Mentoring and Coaching Practices

Grissom and Andersen (2012) indicated that school superintendent turnover is a well-known crisis. As previously referenced, one of the AASA's significant findings was that "more than half of respondents have served in their present position for less than five years, with less than 11 percent surpassing 10 years" (Rogers & McCord, 2020, p.13). It is imperative to note that "high-profile examples abound of reform-minded superintendents whose tenures saw gains in student test scores but whose time in office was cut short by public pressure and tumultuous school board relations" (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1147). Grissom and Andersen thereby underscored the requisite for researchers to focus their attention and resources on the antecedent. As Grissom and Andersen resolved, one such precursor could be building "supports for superintendents faced with increased administrative complexity in more challenging local contexts" (p. 1175).

One such focused support for district leaders encompasses coaching and mentoring opportunities for school district leaders, whether informal or formal. Once relatively inexperienced school district leaders encounter "administrative complexity in more challenging local contexts" (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 1175). After experienced school district leaders mentor or coach their inexperienced colleagues during these times, such stresses may be positively influenced (Monahan, 2012). Comparatively, recent findings in affective neuroscience and biology, concentrating on well-documented research performed on leadership and stress, offer a holistic approach to developing and sustaining leaders (Alem et al., 2018). "Stress has been shown to affect a wide range of cognitive and non-cognitive skills" (Alem et al., 2018, p. 2).

When encountering challenges, unknowns, or ramifications brought forth by reforms; new school district leaders could particularly glean from other experienced leaders due to the complexity of the position's requirements (Boyatzis et al., 2006). As Monahan (2012) suggested, "The new district leader can gain knowledge from the mentor/coach as well as observe successful practices during times of challenging and stressful educational reform" (p. 35). These mentoring opportunities can occur organically, but there also needs to be a deliberate and formal nature to the process. Mullen and Cox (1997) emphasized how educational leaders "combat feelings of isolation, competition, and abandonment" (p. xv) by collaborating and partaking in mentoring or coaching experiences.

Monahan's (2012) study utilized a resource developed by the NASSP called *Mentoring and Coaching: Developing Educational Leaders*. Despite its initial publishing in 1997, Monahan effectively referred to 15 of the 18 skills delineated in this document as the foundation for the interview questions that framed her qualitative study. For each skill, NASSP also offered illustrations of necessary actions concomitant with efficacious mentoring and coaching self-development skills. Monahan utilized the first 15 skills when formulating the interview questions' foundation when interviewing each participant. Due to their specified group-oriented focus, Monahan did not include the following skills when developing the interview questions: dyadic interaction key behaviors, small group communication key behaviors, and extensive group communication key behaviors.

With this context in place, the leadership skill thereby grounds itself in the leader's aptitude to "motivate and guide people to accomplish a task or goal" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 37). Behaviorally, this skill necessitates the leader to recognize when a group requires direction. The leadership skill also utilizes the given leader's ability to guide the team in

the presented direction needed to reach such successes. Moreover, the leadership skill encompasses a command to enable effectively the course of action required to accomplish the designated purpose. Last, leadership skills involve generating or supporting worthwhile professional development opportunities through coaching and meaningful rewards.

**Problem Analysis**

The problem analysis skill emphasizes the leader's capacity to "identify the important elements of a problem situation and seek relevant information to determine possible causes and solutions" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 37). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to hone in on vital issues of a given problem, thereby determining the degree of additional evidence (if any) was essential before expending the resources to obtain the required information. The leader must also retain the capability and temperament needed to substantiate all connecting information. Last, the leader must facilitate a root cause analysis to classify all possible causes and potential solutions.

**Judgment**

The judgment skill focuses on the leader's capacity to "reach logical conclusions and make high-quality decisions based on available information" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, p. 37). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to use apposite judgment when making resolutions. Ultimately, decisions must base themselves on "who and what will be affected" (NASSP, 1997, p. 28). Leaders must also retain the prudence needed to scale the organization's probable bearing of decisions. As Monahan proposed, "Key elements of aiding good decisions include prioritizing, analyzing information, and developing decisions that have logical conclusions (p. 38).

**Sensitivity**

The sensitivity skill was based on the leader's capacity to "perceive the needs and concerns of others; resolving and diverting conflicts; dealing tactfully with persons from different backgrounds" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 38). Behaviorally, this skill necessitates the leader to recognize and respect the acuities, emotional states, and desires of individuals within the given organization. Monahan (2012) stated, "A leader must communicate and reflect the feelings and thoughts of those in the organization and be sensitive to the diversity of each member" (p. 38).

**Organizational**

The organizational skill grounded itself in the leader's capacity to "use time and resources effectively to accomplish short and long-term goals" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 38). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to set work priorities, monitor work, and delegate specific jobs to those best suited for a given task. Furthermore, a foremost defining factor of the leader's success rests on the leader's capacity to foster an established continuum of commitment from an organization's members toward the designated purpose and goal.

**Delegation**

The delegation skill maintains the leader's capacity to "effectively assign projects and tasks to the appropriate people giving clear authority to accomplish them and responsibility for their timely and acceptable completion" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 38). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to make conclusive decisions regarding what to delegate, to whom something ends up delegated and instituting explicit guidelines for completing the assigned task. As Monahan emphasized, the leader is responsible throughout the delegation

process for regularly communicating, persistently monitoring delegated tasks, and looking for feedback from members.

**Planning**

The planning skill relies on the leader's capacity to "clarify a goal or objective and develop a strategy to accomplish the desired results" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 38). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to garner pertinent and distinct information and ascertain definite resources required. Moreover, this skill involves pinpointing people from the organization essential to the organization's capacity to complete the process. The leader must also develop measurable outcomes with built-in alternative planning when implemented feasibly.

**Implementation**

The implementation skill was based on the leader's capacity to "carry out programs and plans to successful completion" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 39). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to follow-through with one's implementation in a timely and efficient manner. Monahan addressed the need for a leader to "foresee issues and try to alleviate conflict during the implementation" (p. 39). Concerning the celebration of the implementation progress, Monahan emphasized that it is an equally integral segment of the process that is "as important as the planning of the process" (p. 39).

**Evaluation**

The evaluation focuses on the leader's capacity to "examine how outcomes compare with previously defined standards, goals, and priorities" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 39). The evaluation skill requires a leader to objectively and subjectively evaluate the progress of staff, goals, objectives, initiatives, and other related measures. Such evaluations should, thereby, systematically occur in formative and summative ways. The progress monitoring thus occurs

through means that are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method design. Last, the evaluation skill hinges on the leader's conscious awareness of "the differences by establishing policies for evaluations that are communicated to all involved and are measured by both pre-and post-evaluation models" (Monahan, 2012, p. 39).

### Express Clear Ideas

The exploring clear ideas skill established itself on the leader's capacity to "express ideas clearly in writing, to write appropriately for different audiences" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 39). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to communicate with all involved stakeholders in a professional manner suitable for the rhetorical situation at hand. To do so, otherwise, potentially fleeting thoughts, plans, and proposals may be limited or muted in their delivery.

### Self-Development

The self-development skill relies on the leader's capacity to "identify and create a set of Key Behaviors to build a desired skill" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 40). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to gain a mindful consciousness of what needs advanced and an ability to remain committed to a self-reflective lead learner mentality. However, such actions and behaviors unite with the organization's needs as a whole. A sentient identification of one's needs in conjunction with deliberately sharing such needs with colleagues, mentors, and coaches for feedback is what self-development relies on for its ongoing evolution.

## Handling Resistance to Change

The handling resistance to change skill was built on the leader's capacity to "bring about change in a school through anticipating problems, meeting needs, and sharing decision making" (NASSP, 1997, p. 37). Also, there are four basic work needs of people: the "need for clear

expectations, need for future certainty, need for social interaction, and need for control over work environment" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 80). The leader must meet these needs. Behaviorally, this skill required the leader to "invite feedback from all stakeholders, especially those who do not agree with the change" (Monahan, 2012, p. 40). With this preface in place, this skill required leaders to "emphasize change with all members' involvement toward a common goal" (Monahan, 2012, p. 40). Hallowell (2011) made the following conclusive statement regarding change:

> At a conscious level, change triggers our fear of the unknown. Because we don't know what change will bring and can't control it, we tend to fear it. Anything that threatens our feeling of being in control triggers fear—or anger—or both. (p. 92)

As Hallowell illustrated, a leader's ability to manage team members' and stakeholders' emotions through changes that transpire is a crucial asset to leading effectively.

## Giving Feedback

The giving feedback skill rests on the leader's capacity to "give clear, specific feedback" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 40). Hattie and Timperley (2007) underscored the significance of feedback, which should come second to instruction and "is one of the most powerful influences on learning" (p. 104). Feedback does not occur often enough. As a result, feedback "needs to be more fully researched by qualitatively and quantitatively investigating how feedback works in the classroom and learning process" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 104). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to understand the perception of feedback by members of an organization. (NASSP, 1997). "Feedback is also the process of giving suggestions of approaches a person could practice changing behaviors and outcomes in the future. A leader needs to focus on the individual's behaviors, not the individual himself or herself" (Monahan,

2012, pp. 40–41). The separation of the deed from the doer is an absolute requirement should feedback be delivered in an approached manner.

**Creation of New Ideas**

The creation of new ideas skills leverages the leader's capacity to "get a group to suggest multiple solutions to a problem or opportunity and select the best idea for implementation" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 41). Behaviorally, this skill necessitates the leader to be the vehicle creating or introducing new ideas. To do so, the leader must "see a need for a new idea and then develop opportunities from stakeholders" (Monahan, 2012, p. 41). When a leader's stakeholders offer input, a leader can develop a plan that thereby cites "any unfavorable scenarios associated with the new idea" (Monahan, 2012, p. 41).

**Team Building**

The team building skill orients itself around the leader's capacity to "create and maintain a high performing team" (NASSP, 1997, as cited in Monahan, 2012, p. 41). Behaviorally, this skill requires the leader to "enlist members who have complementary skills" (Monahan, 2012, p. 41). Rather than viewing one's team members as prospective threats to one's leadership or merely reproducing characteristics and skills held by oneself, a leader should look for team members with complementary skills. However, when looking for what is complimentary, the focus places itself on the organization's goals and objectives. Through deliberately shared responsibilities and joint ownership of the outcomes, an organization's team's strength thereby impels it to successfully navigate stressful times brought on by reform efforts and secondary changes. Regarding the purpose of mentoring and coaching during times of stressful reform efforts, Monahan asserted that such measures could "improve the quality of leadership in school districts, as well as develop highly qualified leaders" (p. 41). Through formally or informally

leveraging experienced leaders' experiences and proficiencies, "District leaders will provide professional development opportunities for leaders, creating a connection between leadership theory and practice" (Monahan, 2012, p. 41).

When implemented effectively, "Ample opportunities will materialize during the mentoring process to develop the mentee's administrative perspectives and abilities to deal with challenging responsibilities" (Monahan, 2012, p. 41). Experiential learning, especially when coupled with deliberate mentoring, offers new leaders the ongoing support, constructive feedback, and encouragement to assist the mentee. In turn, Monahan emphasized that improvements in leadership quality benefit the organization by creating "collegial working environments for staff, which can then enhance students' learning environments" (p. 42).

## Summary

This literature review offered an abridged contextual synopsis of how the local level school superintendent position metamorphosed since the inception of public schooling in America during the mid-17th century (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). The normative role expectations of local school district superintendents delineated the rise of local-level school superintendents (Callahan, 1996; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). A detailed appraisal of the 21st-century local school superintendency appraised how school superintendents evolve amidst major federal education reforms, including the NCLB in 2001 and its replacement, ESSA, in 2015. ESSA's embryonic development stage correlated with a presidential election, and a new U.S. Secretary of Education appointment was also accentuated (Ferguson, 2017). Given the increased autonomy at the state level afforded by ESSA, this literature review zeroed in on Indiana and the state-level political changes leading up to ESSA's enactment and the initial impact this reform had on school district leaders.

Since this research study's scope involved practicing Indiana school district leaders leading up to ESSA's (2015) enactment and the years to follow, a more detailed analysis of the state-level political changes provides additional context. In particular, critical remarks from the IDOE's Director of School Turnaround were summarized as a means of further contextualizing the current educational landscape encompassing the district's school leaders serve in the present (R. LeClaire, personal communication, October 8, 2019). Other key levers impacting public education in Indiana since Monahan's study included an overview of the school voucher programs, generational changes in the student body, the role of E-Learning, and school safety (Elmore & McPeak, 2017; Frost, 2020; Goodan, 2020; McMinn & Jin, 2019; Schmeltz, 2020). These recent developments collectively illustrated some of the significant stressors that could impact practicing school superintendents in Indiana.

This literature review also explored organizational change elements, including differentiation between leading and managing (Waters & Marzano, 2005; Thaler et al., 1997). Additionally, this literature review offered a synopsis of critical findings surrounding district leadership stress and school district leaders' responsibilities in leading through significant reforms and changes (Dale & Fox, 2008; Gamson & Hodge, 2016; Hamstra et al., 2014; Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982; Monahan, 2012). Supplementary researched constructs such as reform, culture, and climate were accentuated (Gruenert, 2008; Hoyle, 1989; Ireh & Bailey, 1999; Lehman, 2015). A review of leadership included an analysis of leadership styles such as transactional leadership, transformational leadership, TQM, servant leadership, situational leadership (Blanchard & Hersey, 1996; Burns, 1978; Feigenbaum, 1956; Ireh & Bailey, 1999; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987; Rigsby, 2006; White & Greenwood, 2002; Williams, 1993; Wis, 2002).

Major leadership frames, popularized by Bolman and Deal (2008), were further explored to implement conscientization amid the variables surrounding leadership styles (Freire, 1968; Moen, 2017). Contrasts between experienced and inexperienced district leaders stemmed from differentiating their respective levels of influence, focus, and impact on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2005; Monahan, 2012). Leadership standards for school superintendents and district leaders dating back to the mid-20th century illustrated trends throughout school superintendents' evolutionary development (Monahan, 2012; J. Murphy et al., 2017; Ranbom & Tyler, 2019). Last, the analysis of mentoring and coaching practices led to additional conclusions (Alem et al., 2018; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Monahan, 2012).

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

This chapter establishes the research methodology utilized within the qualitative research study regarding experienced school district leaders' perceptions of mentoring in times of stressful educational reform. Additionally, this chapter addresses the applicability of utilizing semi-structured interviews with experienced school district leaders as a means of researching this topic. Applying a grounded constructivist worldview leveraged the collaborative nature of learning within a social context. The research plan, including the methodology, worldview, researcher, participants, and data analysis, is central to this chapter.

## Research Question

For this qualitative case study, the guiding research question was: What are experienced school district leaders' perceptions of their informal and formal mentoring experiences in times of stressful educational reform?

## Methodology Selected

Research, Creswell (2009) maintained, often begins with a guiding question. Researchers and practitioners often research to quench the insatiable thirst to know something. Stake (2010) assented, researchers' questions often stem from attempting to make sense of social and personal matters. In response to such questions, researchers partake in inquiry and deliberate study to understand a phenomenon through chosen research methods. For some researchers, the guiding

question is expansive; however, other researchers utilize a much more targeted focus. For instance, Karl Popper attempted to quench his insatiable thirst to find a theory that explained everything (Maxwell, 2017). Later known as the falsifiable principle, Popper utilized a systematic approach to proving things wrong as a means of advancing scientific knowledge. "When finally a scientific theory is falsified empirically, the task then becomes to think up an even better theory, which says even more about the world" (Maxwell, 2017, p. 8).

Thomas Kuhn's research stemmed from an interest in better comprehending Aristotelian science (Naughton, 2012). As a result of his study, Kuhn became known as "the man who changed the way the world looked at science" (Naughton, 2012, para. 1). When normal science no longer seems to fit with reality as anomalies pop up more frequently, Kuhn maintained that a crisis ensued as accepted truths and paradigms are challenged or replaced (Kornmesser, 2014). Only then, Kuhn suggested, may research more accurately reflect reality or perceived truth. Through refining and expanding knowledge, scientific disciplines grow and mature. From there, sub-disciplines emerge, and researchers further seek the truth and new knowledge that aims at quenching the insatiable thirst to answer guiding questions and enhance social developments.

Researchers utilize varying methodological approaches and inquiry methods to quench their insatiable desire to know something. Two significant research approaches used when studying the social and individual world are quantitative and qualitative research (Yilmaz, 2013). Although quantitative research broadly relies on attributes and measurements considered more linear and statistical, qualitative analysis relies on refining theories and experiments through employing a lens focused on human perception and understanding (Stenius et al., 2017). Qualitative studies are suitable for research driven by goals based on "examining the actual, ongoing ways that persons or organizations are doing their thing" (Stake, 2010, p. 2). That said,

qualitative research operates under the assumption that "reality or knowledge are socially and psychologically constructed" (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312).

As the purpose of this research relied on examining school district leaders' perceptions of mentoring during times of stressful educational reform, a qualitative approach embraces the concept of context-sensitivity. The qualitative research method separates itself from many other types of research given the "belief that the particular physical, historical, material, and social environment in which people find themselves has a great bearing on what they think and how they act. Interpreting acts through drawing on those larger contexts" (Smith, 1987, p. 175) and following-up with a "conviction that human acts are context-sensitive" (Smith, 1987, p. 175) built the foundation of this qualitative study. In turn, the nature of this study enabled me to "develop a close, empathetic relationship with the subjects being studied" (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313).

Given qualitative research's interest in "process, context, interpretation, meaning or understanding through inductive reasoning" (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313), I studied the role of mentoring during stressful times by apprehending and communicating participants' experiences. Recognizing that methodological positions inform a researcher's methods for administering a study, this research utilized interviews with participants to accomplish its overall purpose (Atkinson, 2017). Although an online survey may have offered a snapshot to verify the consistency of patterns found in participants' responses to posed questions, conducting interviews propelled me to move beyond the role of a "faceless replicate" (Smith, 1987, p. 175). In so doing, I investigated the perceived role mentoring plays during times of stressful educational reform (Hammersley, 2000).

When determining the type of interview to use for this study, I considered conducting a structured, unstructured, or semi-structured interview with participants. Whereas a structured interview would mainly prevent discrepancies in how questions are presented to participants and streamline the data analysis process, a structured interview posed the risk of fostering redundancy. Also, I was concerned about the off-putting nature present in some structured interviews. As a result, I chose to utilize a  less structured interview format. This format offered more flexibility in approaching mentoring during stressful times and allowed me to post follow-up probing questions. In so doing, I fostered a more natural environment for participants. Despite the semi-structured interview format creating a more cumbersome analysis of the data, these added realms of depth and comfortability necessitated its use.

For such reasons, this research utilized a semi-structured interview process, known as an informant interview (Atkinson, 2017). A semi-structured interview with each participant afforded me an orderly process that aids in determining themes while leaving room for exploring participants' lived experiences. Given the expansive nature of participants' experience within this topic's umbrella, the interviews' structured aspect limited the overall scope by encouraging participants to stay focused on the interview questions (See Appendix A). As Atkinson (2017) emphasized, this approach aided in the process of comparing and contrasting overall responses from each interview when constructing a "more complete and rich picture of the subject at hand" (p. 72). Given my active involvement throughout the interviewing process, I stitched the narrative together with a level of precision that may not have otherwise been achievable without the probing follow-up questions and my proximity to the data.

## Worldview

For this study's determinations, I applied a grounded constructivist worldview. Within this worldview, "knowledge is the result of the questions posed" (Kumar, 2011, p. 525). Under this worldview, learning "is equated with modified mental structures or schema" (Kumar, 2011, p. 527). Therefore, the worldview assumed mentees and mentors learned through interpreting a given activity as a learning activity when no "prior experience of learning or knowledge construction" (Kumar, 2011, p. 527) was cognitively present. Applying this worldview also presumed that different kinds of knowledge resulted from diverse sets of questions. That said, I considered the construction of mind-worlds an "active process of knowledge construction" (Kumar, 2011, p. 527). As a result, one's involvement in mentor-mentee relationships fostered a form of metacognition in which formal and informal mentoring or coaching experiences fostered an activation of metacognition through an awareness of thought processing while engaged in these relationships.

Employing a grounded constructivist worldview also assumed the possibility of useful knowledge and skills resulting from one's active involvement in mentor-mentee relationships. Therefore, I approached socially constructed knowledge to comprehend different social conventions associated with the art and science involved in district-level school leadership positions. Similarly, I focused on the role of useful knowledge as a means of helping those involved in formal and informal mentoring or coaching gain better control of their given worlds (Kumar, 2011).

Rather than assuming the presence of a fixed body of knowledge surrounding school district leadership, applying a grounded constructivist worldview leaned on the active facilitation of knowledge construction through a "fluid knowledge-base of the society" (Kumar, 2011, p.

528). As Creswell (2013) emphasized, a grounded constructivist lens helps qualitative studies that utilize open-ended questions whereby interviewees can thoroughly and freely articulate their experiences and perceptions. For this study's purposes, a grounded constructivist worldview allowed me to listen carefully to what interviewees describe in their responses and interpret the findings based on the context of their perspectives.

Resultantly, this study sought to serve as a potential resource for education stakeholders at all grade levels. In particular, this study's design had new, aspiring, and experienced school districts in mind as mentor-mentee relationships involve all experiential levels. As a researcher, my insatiable desire to further explore the role mentoring plays in one's ability to traverse stressors engendered by reforms fueled the research successfully. I reflected on the quantitative numbers and percentages concerning school superintendent turnover in conjunction with my professional and educational journey as an educational leader and student. After reading several journals and articles and speaking with varying stakeholders, I reached out to the IDOE to secure preliminary data on the turnover of chief school district leaders in Indiana. At the time, I was told 306 out of 388 Indiana chief executive leaders, who served in 2018, returned in 2019 (R. LeClaire, personal communication, April 20, 2020).

After additional research and speaking with several experts involved in the field, it became evident that school superintendent openings will predictably arise in the years to come. That said, an absence of confirmed research surrounding the need for "deeper discussions about the conditions necessary for superintendent longevity and effectiveness" (Broad Center, 2018, p. 13) corroborated my insatiable thirst for further exploring this perceived crisis (Rogers & McCord, 2020). After reading Monahan's (2012) study and triangulating it with other available data points, I recognized the need for conducting this research. By helping fill in the research gap

surrounding this phenomenon, it may encourage further qualitative studies on the topic. This research may also engender a larger-scale follow-up study with a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, which could provide more data to garner a richer understanding of what connects school superintendent effectiveness and sustained success.

## The Researcher

I have worked in public education for ten years, and I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education and English, along with a Master of Arts in English. I have worked as a district-level school leader in Indiana for the past four years. I did not have any direct relationship with participants that could have otherwise presented possible conflicts of interest. I was trained in the skills necessary to carry out the study as designed, including completing all required coursework for the Ph.D. in educational leadership at Indiana State University.

Concerning participant perceptions, I was mindful of personal biases and assumptions. Also, I remained vigilant concerning these shortfalls when conducting the interviews and deciphering the outcomes. For instance, I was conscious of my perceived belief in the role experiential learning plays in developing a superintendent’s ability when leading a district in making key, timely decisions regarding complicated or perplexing situations that come up. As a practitioner in the field, I was also mindful of my overall concerns regarding what occurs after a changeover in district leadership and how a new superintendent’s lack of experience may further induce stress. Like Monahan (2012), I was also cognizant of my assumption that mentoring or coaching may reduce a school leader's pressures throughout this transition. Unlike Monahan, who acknowledged negative experiences she endured regarding a new district leader, I have not personally endured new district leadership's negative repercussions. Instead, I acknowledged my service in a district leadership position under an experienced and highly effective school

superintendent's direct authority. This study's overarching aim thereby centered on empowering other researchers to "obtain more meaningful findings" (Burton-Jones, 2009, p. 446) and assist the research community in dealing with method bias's ramifications stimulating the measured use of research results.

## Participants

The criterion I used to select the superintendents and district educational leaders was similar to Monahan's (2012) study of this phenomenon. The IDOE supplied a list of qualified school district leaders in Indiana who met the following criteria: possess 10+ years of school district leadership experience; possess a valid superintendent's license in the state of Indiana; served in a school district leadership role for at least one full academic year under the enacted ESSA (2015) replacement of NCLB (2002). One central variant from Monahan's study was that all candidates must have served for at least one full academic year under the enacted ESSA (2015) replacement of NCLB (2002). These criteria were confirmed and agreed upon by all committee members during the dissertation proposal process.

In addition to using a list randomizer to safeguard candidates' selection from potentially latent subjective matters, I also ensured that at least five candidates were men and five were women. I ensured the distribution of locales represented by participants. The randomized list of qualifying school district leaders received an email invitation until the participant criteria were met (see Appendix B). Next, I used my secure Indiana State University email address to contact the first 10 eligible subjects who met the participant criteria (see Appendix B). I sought consent to participate (see Appendix C), identified investigators (see Appendix D), and sought agency approval from each participant's respective school's appropriate administrator before conducting any research (see Appendix E).

Subjects excluded from the study did not meet the stated criteria: 10 or more years of district leadership experience, valid Indiana superintendent's license, and at least one full academic year of leadership under the enacted ESSA (2015) replacement of NCLB (2002). As agreed upon by all committee members during the dissertation proposal process, participants that did not meet these criteria would not directly address the study's stated purpose or research question. For this study, excluded participants did not represent an experienced school district leader's definition.

## Data Analysis

Before acceptance into the study, participants submitted a signed Informed Consent form. All Informed Consent forms were signed and sealed before starting the first semi-structured interview. I received two copies of the Informed Consent form. Each participant received one copy, and I maintained the additional copy. All participants had extended consent to participate in the study as they signed a written consent form before the study began (see Appendix C). I collected the written consent form before starting the recorded semi-structured interview with each participant. Additionally, I archived the documents and made them a part of the dissertation study documentation for my private use.

For eligible subjects, who elected to participate, I sent a second email (see Appendix D) that requested a preferred date and time of their preference for our private recorded Zoom meeting. I used my secure Indiana State University email address to send participants a copy of the Informed Consent form (see Appendix C). Each subject determined the exact time and place of the scheduling, the time and location of the meeting of their choice, and at a time of their preference to ensure they were most comfortable. Each session was approximately one hour in length through a secure, recorded Zoom meeting and focused on the semi-structured interview

questions (see Appendix A). Recording these Zoom sessions provided a complete record of the interviews and permitted me to preserve a neutral and attentive stance without the pressure of taking excessive notes. Moreover, such recordings in Zoom helped transcription of audio content, making keyword searches of the transcribed audio possible.

Before asking any questions during the interview, I verbally reminded participants that they might decline to respond to any questions they did not want to answer. I also reminded them that there was no consequence if participants elected to withdraw from the study, and they would not lose any benefits to which they would otherwise be authorized. I discussed consent forms at the onset of each recorded interview. Also, I invited participants to ask questions during this time.

Confidentiality of all participants, their school districts, or any information that could lead to participants' identification was maintained as data were coded for use and accessed only by me. I detached all identifiers from the data to further safeguard confidentiality. Any information acquired in association with this study from participants remains confidential and will be disclosed only with the participant's authorization or as compulsory by law. No participant names came up, nor did individual identification of participants occur in any manner or during the interviews. Such information will continue to remain confidential. Participants were able to choose pseudonyms, or I notified them I would select a pseudonym for them. Open and axial coding further enhanced this qualitative research's trustworthiness as I applied a formalized and software-based procedure to analyze and interpret the qualitative interview data. I cross-checked codes using NVivo 12, a robust qualitative data analysis software program structured to organize, store and evaluate data. Securing respondents' confidentiality will remain

of utmost importance, and I entreated participants to treat all information shared for the duration of the interview as confidential.

At the commencement of interviews in batches of two or three, I utilized the audio files and referred them back to the Zoom recordings' closed captioning to transcribe and cross-check participant responses. That said, I also notified participants of audio tapings' importance to collect valid and reliable data. After the interviews commenced and the generative themes emerged, I followed up with each participant via email (see Appendix F). During 30-minute follow-up meetings with each participant, I allowed participants to appraise their transcripts before sharing the preliminary derived themes that emerged from the raw data.

Data collected in this study will remain stowed in a locked filing cabinet within my office for the mandatory three-year period. All data collected, including recordings, will be shredded and destroyed at the end of the required storage period. Confidentiality of all participants, their school districts, or any information that could lead to participants' identification will be maintained. Data were coded for use and accessed only by me.

Securing all data files on an external drive locked in my home office cabinet further protects participants' information. I will be the only one with access to the locked cabinet. If a participant wanted to withdraw before data analysis, I would have destroyed all information and data associated with this participant. Withdrawal from the study was to be allowed until the point of data analysis. Again, I implored participants to treat all information shared for the interview's duration as confidential. Also, participants had the right to examine material preceding the study's concluding oral defense and could do so by filing a written request to me.

## Summary

This methodology offered an overview of the primary method and design of research for this qualitative case study involving the influence of informal and formal mentoring of new district school leaders and superintendents in stressful education reform times. Additionally, I repeated this study's research question: What are experienced school district leaders' perceptions of their informal and formal mentoring experiences in times of stressful educational reform?

The criterion for selecting the participants of this study was detailed, along with references to the appendices that provide additional detail regarding the methods used to communicate the study's intent. This chapter also outlined the data analysis procedures implemented to safeguard data's further validity and reliability and protect participants' information.

# CHAPTER 4

## DATA ANALYSIS

This qualitative study focused on experienced school district leaders' perceptions of mentoring during times of stressful educational reform. Conducting a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon was dictated by numerous factors, including Monahan's (2012) recommendations for better understanding the impact of formal and informal mentoring on new or aspiring school district leaders. Moreover, suppositions presented by the Broad Center (2018) and the AASA (2020) advanced the need for further identification of critical variables concerning school superintendent tenure and effectiveness (Rogers & McCord, 2020).

At present, the "churn of K-12 executives" (Superville, 2018, para. 5) remains intact. Per the 2019–2020 Superintendent Salary Study, over half of respondents noted serving in the position for fewer than five years; only 11% reported serving more than 10 years (Rogers & McCord, 2020). Information provided by the IDOE illustrated a 5.11% decrease in the percent of returning Indiana traditional public school superintendents returning in 2016 compared to 2019. Whereas 88.97% returned in 2016, only 83.86% returned in 2019. That said, this research sought to evaluate further if "support educational leaders receive from mentors/coaches may be the determining factor in how they embrace the latest reform and work with their school communities" (Monahan, 2012, p. 6).

This purpose was endeavored by conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced school district leaders who were currently serving in Indiana. Semi-structured interview questions emphasized this study's topics (see Appendix A). Eligible participants for the study met the following criteria, as confirmed and agreed upon by all committee members during the dissertation proposal process:

- Five men and five women;
- 10 or more years of district leadership experience;
- At least (2) candidates currently serving in an urban/metropolitan area;
- At least (2) candidates currently serving in a suburban or rural area;
- Possession of a valid superintendent's license in the state of Indiana;
- Serving in a school district leadership role for at least (1) full academic year under the enacted ESSA (2015) replacement of NCLB (2002).

After securing a list of eligible participants from the IDOE and randomizing the list to safeguard research bias, eligible participants received an invitation to participate voluntarily in the research study (see Appendix B). Upon receipt of each participant's consent to participate (see Appendix C), the appropriate supervisors provided agency authorization (see Appendix E). Participants joined in a private recorded Zoom meeting at a date and time of their preference (see Appendix D).

Following the protocols for interviewing suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), each interview utilized a semi-structured format (see Appendix A). After providing necessary information about the interview and a brief introduction to help interviewees settle into the discussion, a series of opening questions further put participants at ease before asking content questions. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) advocated, the content questions "parse the central

phenomenon into its parts—asking about different facets of the central phenomenon" (Crewswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 267). Also, follow-up questions asked participants to add more information or clarify a statement pertinent to the study's topic. The closing instructions offered participants an opportunity to ask any concluding questions. Last, I reminded participants of the study's confidentiality and briefed them on the next steps to follow.

Following the observation and interview protocols for data recording recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I further safeguarded the study's qualitative validity and reliability. I notably utilized a grounded theory method within this broad methodological umbrella to stay close to the data throughout the analysis process (Charmaz, 2007). I focused on participants' subjective perceptions and experiences, but I remained conscious of my research values, beliefs, and the tentative conclusions I had in mind concerning mentor-mentee relationships.

Besides taking field notes throughout the interviews, choosing to record the interviews fostered an environment where I could engage more deeply in conversations with each participant. Charmaz (2007) referred to one-time intensive interviews in qualitative research as part of the "quest for intimate familiarity" or "inside knowledge of the studied phenomenon" (Charmaz, 2007, p. 78). Besides taking field notes and transcribing interviews in batches throughout the data collection process, I further organized the analysis data. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) upheld, qualitative research's data analysis process resembles peeling layers of an onion back by segmenting and taking the data apart. Throughout the data collection process, field notes and data provided by the IDOE afforded additional raw data layers to triangulate for the study.

Part of this extraction process entails winnowing the data, which involves “a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 268). The qualitative analysis framework, which helps validate the information, involves first organizing, preparing, and reading the raw data for coding. As is the case in grounded theory, generating categories of information (open coding) and selecting categories before positioning them within a theoretical model (axial coding) enables categorizing segmented sentences and paragraphs. After bracketing categories with terms, generative themes resulted from significant findings from the provided data. Generative themes thereby resulted from reflecting on the practices of each participant’s working theory of conduct and detailed experiences. In follow-up recorded Zoom meetings, each participant learned the generative themes (see Appendix F). At this time, participants confirmed these generative themes’ accuracy and conveyed their interest in reading the study once available.

As delineated in the sections to follow, such themes displayed multiple participants’ perspectives supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence. In addition to the coding process, adding layers of complex analysis led to interconnecting themes within each case and between cases. Fortunately, I was able to form complex connections among themes and go beyond description and theme identification. Creswell and Creswell (2018) regarded these traits embodied in “sophisticated qualitative studies” (p. 270). Therefore, the detailed discussion of interconnected themes to follow affords a comprehensive analysis of participants’ perceptions concerning the role mentoring plays in their development and effectiveness as school district leaders in the 21st century.

Utilizing the framework described above, Chapter 4 offers the findings from the semi-structured interviews with the 10 experienced school district leaders. The talks concentrated on

participants' involvement with educational reforms, reflections on their professional maturation processes, and perceptions of the role mentor-mentee relationships played in their leadership development and practice. In place of participant names, pseudonyms afforded anonymity to protect participants' identification. Participants are referred to by a first name in place of actual participant names. First names have no known ties to actual participant information that may otherwise jeopardize their anonymity. The following section provides a brief overview of each participant's demographics.

## Participant Demographics

### Dennis

Dennis is a man who currently served as superintendent of a rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 1,250 students. He served for 30 years in education, including 17 years in administrative roles and nine years as superintendent. Dennis did not have an informal or formal mentor when first becoming a school superintendent. Dennis described his central office as relatively small. For instance, Dennis was the only licensed educator in the central office. Additional central office personnel included a treasurer, deputy treasurer, and secretary who also functioned as the board secretary. Dennis defined his predominant leadership style as "very collaborative" and confirmed that he was presently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

### Edward

Edward was a man who currently served as superintendent of a comparatively large suburban school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 9,300 students. Edward served for over 36 years in education, including 18 years in administrative roles and 11 years as superintendent. Although Edward acknowledged having a mentor when he first became a

principal, he did not have a mentor as a new school superintendent. Edward described his central office as being “extremely lean” for a school of its magnitude. That said, Edward’s central office included several assistants who served in operational and curricular roles. Edward referenced his human relations director, who served in the operating and curricular realms. Edward termed his predominant leadership style as “collaboratively decisive” and confirmed he was currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Troy**

Troy was a man who currently served as superintendent of a moderately sized rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 3,000 students. He served 17 years in education, including 10 years in administrative roles and eight years as superintendent. Troy spent four of his eight years as superintendent in a different district. According to Troy, he did not have a formal mentor when he first became a superintendent. Troy did have a mentor when he first became an administrator. Troy’s central office consisted of a business manager and a clerical staff; the clerical staff played distinct roles for the corporation enabling it to operate with fidelity. Troy moreover discussed the ensuing directors who served in his district: curriculum, technology, maintenance, transportation, school safety, testing, and federal grants. Troy labeled his predominant leadership style as a servant leader; however, he underscored other traits vital to his leadership style. The main associated attributes included his collaborative nature, approachability, and inclusive decisiveness. Troy confirmed he was currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Norma**

Norma was a woman who currently served as superintendent of a comparably small rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 1,000 students. She served for 30 years

in education, including 19 years in administrative roles and five years as superintendent. When asked if she had a mentor upon first becoming a superintendent, Norma confirmed that she did have a mentor. Additionally, Norma initiated the relationship and esteemed this person as her existing mentor. Norma described her central office as "comparatively thin" for a school of its size. Even though Norma was the lone certified educator in the central office, she credited her administrative assistant, business manager, and human relations payroll specialist for the pivotal roles to keep the district afloat. Norma characterized her predominant leadership style as "leading from the middle" and confirmed she was presently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Rita**

Rita was a woman who currently served as superintendent of a proportionally large suburban school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 10,500 students. She served for 38 years in education, including 20 years in administrative roles and seven years as superintendent. When asked if she had a mentor when first becoming a superintendent, Rita promptly affirmed that she did have a mentor. On her first day as superintendent, Rita received a call from another female superintendent in the area. This superintendent told Rita, "this is the hardest job you will ever do," insisted Rita, "never hesitate to call." At present, Rita considers her mentee a close friend, colleague, and mentor. Rita delineated the cabinet-level positions and administrative layers that composed her leadership team. Rita specified her predominant leadership style as "inclusive and collaborative" and noted she was currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Leonard**

Leonard was a man who currently served as superintendent of a comparably large urban school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 16,500 students. He served for nearly 30 years in education, including 25 years in administrative roles and 11 years as superintendent. When asked if he had a mentor as a new superintendent, Leonard paused and asked if he could elaborate on his tenure as an assistant superintendent. Leonard recognized his former superintendent for mentoring him and credited this person for preparing him for the position. Before officially beginning his tenure as superintendent, Leonard took it upon himself to reach out to 11 neighboring superintendents. Leonard sought to cultivate new relationships with his soon-to-be colleagues and glean from their experiences. In turn, Leonard took each of them out for a meal of their choice. Leonard referenced several members of his central office. Leonard's central office staff included four assistant superintendents, several directors, coordinators, a chief financial officer, and a chief communications officer. Concerning his predominant leadership style, Leonard recognized himself as a relational leader and confirmed his present involvement in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Bonnie**

Bonnie was a woman who currently served as superintendent of a comparatively small rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 650 students. She served for 24 years in education, including 14 years in administrative roles and five years as superintendent. When asked if she had a mentor as a new superintendent, Bonnie referenced having a formal mentor assigned to her from the IAPSS. Further, Bonnie accredited her former superintendent for serving as an informal mentor throughout her tenure as superintendent. Bonnie's former superintendent remained a close confidant, colleague, and mentor. Bonnie was the sole district

administrator within their central office organizational staffing structure. Bonnie referenced her business office and the directors who oversaw student learning, special education, title grants, transportation, and maintenance. Bonnie characterized her predominant leadership style as "relationship-driven" and pointed out her desire to be a transformational leader. Bonnie confirmed her present involvement in a mentor-mentee relationship with a smile on her face.

**Ronald**

Ronald was a man who currently served as superintendent of a relatively small rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 470 students. He served for 23 years in education, including 16 years in various administrative roles and 10 years as superintendent. When asked if he had a mentor as a new superintendent, Ronald acknowledged having a formal mentor from another district. Ronald sought a mentor to guide him precisely through the budget process. Ronald referenced his business manager and directors of technology, operations, and food services regarding his central office personnel. Ronald defined his predominant leadership style as "team-oriented through collective decision-making" and confirmed he was currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Florence**

Florence was a woman who currently served as superintendent of a comparably small rural school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 650 students. She served for 15 years in education, including 10 years in administrative roles and seven years as superintendent. When asked if she had a mentor upon first becoming a superintendent, Florence acknowledged working with her former superintendent on the budget. Despite feeling comfortable with the budgeting process, Florence saw value in the "comfort of somebody else there to look over your budget because that is a huge deal if you make a big mistake with your budget." Florence also

regarded her legal counsel as an existing mentor. Florence was the sole administrator within the central office but credited her secretaries for their pivotal roles in keeping the district afloat. Florence characterized her predominant leadership style as a servant leader and confirmed she was currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship.

**Christine**

Christine was a woman who currently served as superintendent of a moderately average-sized suburban school district in Indiana with an ADM of approximately 2,500 students. She served for 35 years in education, including 21 years in administrative roles and three years as superintendent. Christine extended her gratitude as she had two mentors before becoming a superintendent. Both mentors stuck with her throughout her initial years of being a superintendent. One of whom was Christine's former superintendent, and the other mentor was a formal arrangement established by the school district. Despite being formal, Christine had a working relationship with this mentor and credited a comfortability layer to benefit the relationship. Christine noted that she became "a little emotional, just thinking about both of them because they were just two of the finest educators I have ever known."

Christine's central office consisted of herself and an assistant superintendent; the assistant superintendent was primarily in charge of curriculum and instruction. Christine also referenced her finance director, payroll specialists, and human relations specialist. Additionally, Christine characterized her predominant leadership style as relationship-oriented and drew attention to her leadership approach's situational nature. Christine confirmed her present involvement in a mentor-mentee relationship.

## Comparison of Sample Demographics to Population Demographics

Given qualitative research's potential to refine a theory through the lens of human perception and experience, this study's extracted data yielded rich and nuanced understandings of participants' experiences and social interactions concerning their tenured experience as educational leaders. The unique and valuable forms of knowledge presented by participants through this data may apply to a larger population despite its relatively small sample size. As it takes more than one tool to build a house, producing the full range of knowledge surrounding a phenomenon, such as further exploring mentor-mentee relationships in a district leader's ability to endure stressors engendered by reforms, necessitates quantitative and qualitative data.

The representative sample afforded me the ability to abstract collected information before weighing how it may apply to a larger population. Based on the IDOE (2020) data, Table 2 illustrates the participants' years in education compared to the population of superintendents serving in public or private schools in Indiana.

Table 2

*Indiana Superintendent Experience in Education: 2020–2021*

| Group | Median | Range of Years | Average Years |
|---|---|---|---|
| Population | 26 | 0–51 | 26.0 |
| Sample | 20 | 15–38 | 27.8 |

As illustrated, the average years of experience between the sample and population remained relatively close as the population of school superintendents in Indiana had served for an average of 26 years in education, and the 10 participants as a sample for this study served for 27.8 years in education.

Table 3 illustrates the locales of participants' school districts compared to the population of traditional public and non-public schools in Indiana. As shown in Table 3, participants' randomization disallowed a fully-aligned distribution of traditional public school locales. That said, the participant criteria were met with fidelity as outlined.

Table 3

*Traditional Public School Locales in Indiana: 2020–2021*

| Group | Rural | Town | City | Suburb |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Traditional public | 16.97% | 20.35% | 24.86% | 20.58% |
| Sample | 50.00% | 10.00% | 10.00% | 30.00% |

As shown in Table 4, the distribution of superintendents in Indiana who identified as male superintendent was substantially higher than those who identified as female superintendent. However, securing the eligible list of participants maintained an equal distribution between male and female superintendents by design.

Table 4

*Indiana Superintendent Gender: 2020–2021*

| Group | Male Superintendents | Female Superintendents |
|---|---|---|
| Population | 76.61% | 23.39% |
| Sample | 50.00% | 50.00% |

## Themes

After reviewing the transcripts and field notes of the 10 participants' semi-structured interview responses, the following six themes materialized:

1. Experienced school district leaders perceive a disconnect with legislators and confront stressors engendered by educational reforms.
2. Experienced school district leaders discernibly filter educational reforms through the lens of their district's vision, mission, and values.
3. Experienced school district leaders consciously exercise a growth mindset in their leadership practice.
4. Experienced school district leaders ardently collaborate with their peers, legal counsel, and professional service providers.
5. Experienced school district leaders *diagnosticate* mentoring as a foremost aspect of their job responsibilities.
6. Experienced school district leaders revere mentoring as a duty irrespective of whether they had a mentor as first-year school superintendents.

**Theme 1: Experienced School District Leaders Perceive a Disconnect with Legislators and Confront Stressors Engendered by Educational Reforms.**

Regardless of the particular reforms referenced during their interviews, participants unequivocally conveyed an underlying frustration with a perceived disconnect between school leadership and legislators. Such frustrations were particularly prevalent among the participants representing rural districts. However, participants on behalf of the larger districts resonated with such concerns. Troy, a rural superintendent, offered the ensuing sentiments that embodied participants' overall angst:

> It is the career pathways model today. Two years ago, it was college and career readiness assessments. Before that, it was ISTEP. It is non-stop. There will be some new assessment, which will be the next new thing that we will do to schools, and it will fix

> everything. Simply put, our legislators do not understand it. You have got to be patient. You have got to stick with one mark. Let schools adjust to that mark before changing it on them once again.

Participants conferred their concerns with moving targets, disjunctions, incoherencies, and other related external pressures resulting from educational reforms throughout the interviews. Based on participant responses, the reforms mentioned throughout the interviews carry the potential to serve as crucial stressors for school district leaders.

Leonard, who served in an urban district roughly 5.5 times larger than Troy's district, spoke at length about his concerns with reforms and how the disjointedness impacted students regardless of what sort of school they attended. That said, Leonard fervently advocated on behalf of all school leaders by publicly sharing these misgivings with legislators each time the occasion arose. Leonard stated,

> I argued against many of the reforms over the years, because I think we continue to put up some unnecessary barriers for students. I think we are doing so; I know we are doing so because of reasons other than what is best for children. There is too much big money involved in decision-making. The big external money tangled in some of the testing vendors we are utilizing play far too big of a factor in legislators' decisions, even though nobody would ever admit it.

Regardless of the school district's size and locale, participants openly discussed various reforms adversely bearing on their leadership practices, as these two cases demonstrated. As pointed out by participants, many such reforms result from the perceived disconnect schools have with legislators at the state and federal levels. Given the time restrictions and varying

experience levels of participants, some of the reforms participants mentioned were more insular than others but carried a weightiness to them nonetheless.

### *Response to Intervention (RTI) Implementation*

One insular reform mentioned came from Dennis as he reflected on his early days in administration when implementing the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. As a multi-tier approach to identifying the support students need, the RTI process started within the Individuals with Disabilities Act (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2004). In theory, the RTI framework promoted a methodology for identifying students with specific learning disabilities to accelerate learning for all students.

Dennis recalled his thankfulness that special education ultimately had "a seat at the table in the general education classes." Dennis underscored the necessity of this reform but critiqued its implementation and referenced legislators' disjointedness at the time. As a result of such disjointedness, Dennis commented on the immense amount of stress implementing RTI caused him as an educator. Dennis also utilized the implementation of RTI as an example of what occurs when legislators do not deliberately take into consideration critical differences between school districts. For instance, Dennis mentioned how different an implementation plan for RTI is for a district partaking in a cooperative education program compared to a district that attempted to administer in-house services. According to Dennis, one-size-fits-all reforms carry with them the capacity of causing noteworthy stress to those left responsible and accountable for ensuring the fidelity of their implementation.

### *Evolution of Technology*

A second insular reform mentioned by participants dealt with how technological reforms continue to impact their leadership practices. Two participants brought up technology's evolution throughout their educational careers elaborated on the varying ways technology impacts their leadership and respective districts. Bonnie recalled the first email she sent, which reminded her of her emotions when the school technicians delivered the first Gateway computer boxes to their classrooms. At the time, Bonnie commented to her colleagues, "Ok, so this is the thing to do now." Then, Bonnie outstretched her arms during the interview and asserted, "Heck, you know, I used to have dry skin from chalkboard dust, you know, and now everything is electronic. So, it is amazing." Looking back, Bonnie acknowledged how "technology is a fundamentally embedded part of what we do. So, clearly, that transformation has been massive."

Notwithstanding her thankfulness for technology, Bonnie also emphasized how her school district's topographical locale caused significant equity issues. Due to networks not being available, many staff members and students alike cannot access the Internet from home. Although Bonnie and her staff found pragmatic ways to resolve this issue under ordinary circumstances, the forced school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a hand of cards unlike any they had drawn before. When Governor Holcomb signed Executive Order 20-08, the stay-at-home order required all schools to shut down as of March 6, 2020 (Exec. Order No. 20-08, 3 C.F.R. Page, 2020).

Although e-learning allowed many schools to resume their practices remotely and went so far as to deploy mobile hotspots so that staff and students had Internet access; such services were not an option for many staff and students in Bonnie's district. Despite this reality, Bonnie was responsible for deriving a plan in which students and staff partake in e-learning. When

provided with a one-size-fits-all solution, like mobile hotspots that are not available in her area, Bonnie was left with difficult decisions to make in light of stay-at-home executive orders and other legislative pressures. Again, those types of context-based scenarios add layers of complexity to the implementation of legislators' reforms and decisions. Even when done with the best intentions or out of necessity, the stressors engendered by school district leaders are inevitable.

Rita served in a large suburban district with roughly 16 times the number of students as Bonnie's district. However, she also expressed how the reliance on technology presented obstacles for her school district. Apart from mandated school shutdowns, as Bonnie referenced, Rita pointed out another stressor engendered by technology's evolution. As Rita put it, society's reliance on technology and the prevalence of social media creates "such an interesting web with which we have to navigate." Whereas Rita had the resources and infrastructure due to mobile hotspots positioned throughout the city that provided Wi-Fi connectivity, technology's evolution impacted her district in its respective manner. For instance, the sheer size of Rita's district necessitated a full-time personal relations staff who:

> spends much time checking our social media platforms and reviewing everything out there to get a pulse, so we know what needs to be communicated or addressed. We must be proactive and know when things are boiling up to address them.

Rita's school district's size afforded her the availability to have staff in place who could stay on top of social media; however, that was not a reality for many superintendents in smaller school districts.

### *Social-Emotional Learning*

A third insular reform mentioned by a few participants pertained to social-emotional learning. Although the term "social and emotional learning" (SEL) dates back to a 1994 meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute, SEL continues expanding its footprint on educational endeavors (Hoffman, 2009). For instance, participants referenced the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and other related organizations that expand the field's depth and breadth. A few participants also mentioned expanding Indiana's social, emotional, and behavioral wellness programming, including SEL Competencies.

As illustrated by the 2015 release of the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice,* SEL endures by expanding its influence over varying sectors, including that of the educational sector in the United States of America and countries worldwide (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As SEL has expanded its footprint, participants expressed concerns regarding legislators' increased involvement in such matters and their accompanying regulations surrounding SEL-related policies and mandates. As well-intentioned as such policies and directives are, in theory, participants shared a few ways these reforms carry with them the capacity to serve as critical stressors when implementing or responding to them with fidelity.

Leonard accentuated his appreciativeness for the "SEL focus coming back so that we can also focus on children's well-being and their ability to self-regulate." Congruently, Rita referenced how "the inclusion of social-emotional learning has been a big push." Nonetheless, Rita cited the "unfortunate politicization" of SEL, diversity, inclusion, and equity. Despite working on these SEL-related matters throughout her tenure, Rita recently dealt with "some new and interesting twists." Rita maintained such twists complicated implementing reforms, thereby fostering a fertile environment whereby stressors may flourish. Education, as Rita noted, is

"steeped in tradition." As a result, Rita stressed the complexities of effectively implementing such substantive changes, especially since "everyone has been to school," thereby feeling vindicated to counter such changes.

Rita also provided an example of how she shared published research on the adolescent brain that highlights why changing school start times may benefit secondary students. That said, Rita accentuated the pervasive mentality from some parents and community members who operated from the mindset of "It was good enough for me, so why isn't it good enough for my kid?" Given this pushback, Rita underscored the significance of educating parents and community members on such matters and choosing their battles based on what is best for students. Otherwise, educators run the risk of falling prey to what Rita referred to as "educational malpractice." Rita elaborated on this reality by declaring, "We do not expect doctors and surgeons to follow the same practices because we know so much more about medicine. It would be malpractice to do things the way you did 20 years ago. The same holds for education." Rita conveyed her ability to charter these territories successfully; however, she communicated her concern for those who were not in her tenured position to do so or lacked the resources.

### *Changes in School Funding Formulas and School Finance*

A fourth insular reform a few participants addressed dealt with school funding formulas and school finances' effect on school operations. For instance, Christine stressed that the "fiscal resources just are not the same as they used to be, which poses challenges." Looking back over his decade tenure as superintendent, Ronald considered the changes in school funding "the biggest thing I had to deal with thus far as a superintendent." In Ronald's words, school funding alterations have "made life very challenging for every school corporation but especially rural districts with low enrollment." To further solidify his point, Ronald brought up a recent custody

battle of a family with children who attended his school. Ultimately, the children were forced to leave his school district, thereby causing the district to lose over $25,000. These monies are budgeted based on enrollment numbers.

Whereas Ronald knew his district well as its superintendent for over 10 years, he expressed his concerns for those who did not have these infrastructures, relationships, and networks in place. Should new school district leaders need to problem-solve and quickly derive solutions to these sorts of issues, Leonard highlighted the added challenges they have in successfully doing so. Leonard is at a point in his tenure that he knew to whom he could "truly speak to confidentially" as he "knows whom to trust" and has a strong network in place. Unfortunately, as Leonard maintained, this reality may not exist for other newly hired superintendents who inevitably experience such distress.

### *School Accountability*

Apart from these four comparatively insulated reforms brought up by participants during the interviews, the remainder of the reforms discussed throughout the interviews concentrated on school accountability matters. All 10 participants discussed school accountability and the web of corresponding dynamics it encompassed. Ronald specifically discussed changes to Indiana's A-F Model, including P.L. 286-2013, which required the State Board to establish new A-F categories and standards for assessing school performance. Leonard noted that Public Law 221 (P.L. 221) identified Indiana's comprehensive accountability system for K–12 education, which the Indiana General Assembly initially passed in 1999.

Within the broader realm of school accountability, participants elaborated on their perceived disconnect with legislators and the bureaucracy barriers standing in the way of leading their districts with fidelity. According to Troy, educational reforms involving moving targets

with standards, high-stakes assessments, and school accountability "have been an absolute train wreck." Troy likened this observed disjointedness to the tedious pursuit of "chasing after shiny objects." Speaking of the disjuncture between these factors, Troy summed up the mutual trepidations shared by all 10 participants:

> I think that has been an absolute train wreck. And the reason why I say that is when you continuously move the target, whether it be the standards, the assessment, or how you utilize the assessment to measure schools. Our state and our counties have a very short attention span, and it is a constant pattern. Every year or two years, we are changing one of those three things. If they want the standards changed, you change the standards, but then the assessment will be on the docket. And then someone has the next great idea of how we will measure schools and their effectiveness. There seems to be an incredible disjointedness regarding the perception that those three things go together and that you need a crystal clear curriculum. In contrast, these three factors should align with rigorous but transparent assessments that allow you to make meaningful growth so students can learn.

Dating back to the ESEA signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, funding for primary and secondary schools gets funneled through varying metrics—such metrics emphasize high standards and accountability (Gamson et al., 2015). Passed initially during a time with great optimism about the government's ability to help the poor, ESEA since became what many researchers consider "the most important piece of education legislation in U.S. history" (Gamson et al., 2015, p. 1). Despite changing the course of U.S. public education over the last 60 years, ESEA, along with its multitude of amendments and reauthorizations, changed U.S. public

education in countless ways. Along the way, ESEA's low profile "stems, in part, from the contemporary fashion of giving legislation catchy titles" (Gamson et al., 2015, p. 1).

Throughout the 21st century, NCLB (2002) and its replacement ESSA (2015) reauthorized ESEA. All but one participant specifically referenced NCLB and ESSA as major reforms that engender stressors in their leadership practices. Gamson et al. (2015) offered an extended metaphor to conceptualize why these stressors were prevalent in educational leadership practices around the country. According to Gamson, ESEA is equivalent to framing the inside walls as this frame provides an overall blueprint and shape. Unfortunately, the original design and materials became obscured over the years as so much has been built around them. When the walls need repairing, or a load-bearing wall requires identifying before adding another addition, the frame's importance resurfaces. As exemplified by participants through their dealings with NCLB and ESSA, stressors result from the building spree legislators and policymakers embarked on adding several new wings to the home in a relatively short period.

**No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** Concerning NCLB, Edward illustrated how "the carrot and the stick approach to making schools better" inherent in NCLB incentivized monies as a means of motivating educators to improve education. However, when implementing NCLB, Edward noted that it added unnecessary friction between teacher unions and school administrators. Such contentions were left up to the school administration to resolve. That said, several participants detailed how they had since been able to tame these frictions through investing a great deal of sweat equity into the process. Participants explained that improved administrative relations with teacher unions largely stemmed from identifying a common enemy. According to Edward, the common enemy identified involved the "bureaucratic paperwork put into effect by the state legislature." Correspondingly, Leonard echoed these sentiments:

> In 2002, when the No Child Left Behind Act came into play, it transformed everything and truly shifted education. Not in a good way. I think we significantly stifled our teachers' professional opportunities and professional expertise when we shifted their focus to ultimately preparing students to be good test-takers.

Norma congruently reflected over the last 20 years in education and remarked, "The biggest factor that changed the game morale-wise, high-stakes-wise is the testing, the focus on it, and the degree of emphasis in the grading."

Two participants pointed out NCLB's repercussions not explicitly mentioned in other participants' commentaries. As stated by Norma,

> Because of the No Child Left Behind Act, requirements aligned with accountability and testing took a profound focus on mathematics and language arts instruction, particularly at the elementary level. And then, you know, there was an abandonment of social studies education.

Also, Christine recollected being a building principal when NCLB was first applied. She elaborated on how stressful it was to implement from a building principal's perspective. Christine emphasized the stress-induced from factoring in growth for high-achieving students. As stated by Christine, "I thought, oh my gosh, there is nowhere to go but down at some point. And how do you make kids that are at the higher end grow? Meanwhile, how do you help kids who have such tremendous obstacles?" As Christine reflected over NCLB's initial implementation, she remarked, "I suspect NCLB may have been well-intentioned, but the expectation that it is a one-size-fits-all is not appropriate. I felt the crushing weight of NCLB."

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** As for NCLB's replacement, ESSA, participants offered mixed responses to how it differs from NCLB and what types of stressors resulted from

NCLB's shift away. Speaking of the stress-induced by NCLB, Norma noted that ESSA "revved it up" even though she "saw some of that coming in a decade or 15 years ago too." Norma snickered before recounting an exchange she recently had with a colleague about "how fun it was" at one time before the disjointed aftermath of NCLB and ESSA were in full effect. However, Norma's tone hastily shifted as she followed up with a sobering remark about not hearing that word "fun" nearly as often.

Ronald added another tier of disruption regarding ESSA and its timing with the teacher shortage. As stated by Ronald,

> ESSA put us in a challenging situation, and we are looking at instrumental and effective teachers, and then we have become a school or state where we are on a teacher shortage. So, not only are you trying to find a highly effective teacher, you are trying to find a teacher that's qualified in general.

Ronald also reiterated the need for legislators to utilize students' and staff members' perspectives when considering the impact of altering assessments, accountability, effectiveness, and metrics on staff and students. In Ronald's words, "It is frustrating when you are sitting here, and you are trying to deal with the policies that come out and not knowing what the game plan is; that is probably the biggest thing I see."

When considering ESSA compared to NCLB, Florence pointed out a discrepancy between the federal government's added flexibilities that states can leverage and how Indiana legislators have responded to them. As stated by Florence, "I think the federal government was offering more flexibility to states, and I do not think Indiana took advantage of it." Alternatively, Christine stated, "I feel like ESSA has a little bit better breathing capacity for educators, but I do not think it is a substantial difference." Leonard conveyed mixed emotions when speaking of

ESSA, “I have been pleased to see some of the SEL focus coming back so that we can also focus on children’s well-being, ability to self-regulate, and build some of those employability skills.”

In the same way, Florence underscored the frustrations brought forth by federally mandated programming as it felt like “we can or cannot do something because it is federally mandated.” That said, Florence acknowledged she “did not notice or pay attention to how much the federal government was involved in it before as ESSA came about.” Given ESSA’s relative state of infancy, participants gave the impression they were cautiously optimistic about the added flexibilities or breathing room offered by ESSA and what may mean the future of education. Having been five years since the enactment of ESSA, published studies affirmed participants’ mixed emotions on ESSA. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2020) recently published their findings after studying the first year of ESSA’s implementation in 10 states, including Indiana. One of their conclusions indicated that “states have used ESSA’s flexibility to take wildly varied approaches to school ratings and school improvement” (para. 3). In particular, the report maintained findings that offer foreboding data on students of color in all 10 states being much more likely to attend low-rated schools. Speaking of this report’s findings, one reporter portended, “Ominously, the disparities deserved don’t even capture the effects of 2020’s unprecedented K–12 event, the coronavirus pandemic” (Mahnken, 2020, para. 4).

**Theme 2. Experienced School District Leaders Discernibly Filter Educational Reforms Through the Lens of Their District’s Vision, Mission, and Values.**

All 10 participants affirmed that NCLB, ESSA, and other insular reforms had served as stress sources in their leadership practices. In an abode of comedic relief, one participant inched his way up to the camera and pointed to his receding hairline before rhetorically asking me if I thought these reforms had caused him stress. That said, a second theme arose from how

participants responded to the question, as mentioned earlier, about reforms serving as stressors in their leadership practice. As interviews progressed, it became increasingly evident that each participant sought out pragmatic ways of filtering educational reforms. Regardless of the district's size, locale, or the structure of its central office, each participant knowingly served as a buffer. As buffers, participants shield their stakeholders from potential stressors and categorize reforms to lessen their negative impact personally and professionally.

In so doing, each participant conveyed an unwavering commitment to prioritizing their district's overall vision, mission, and values over compliance-based mandates and policies. Educational reforms and disjointedness between schools and legislators, participants maintained, fueled these reforms. Participants expounded on different ways they categorized and filtered reforms to lessen the negative impact of reforms on stakeholders and their leadership approaches. By safeguarding their stakeholders from stressors and classifying reforms strategically, participants knowingly empowered their districts to stay on course. The district's designated goals and prioritized focus areas served as mile markers for each participant to keep them on track and progress in what they deemed to be the right direction.

Participants operated as a buffer according to their leadership style, personality, and other variables unique to their district. For instance, Dennis buffered his staff from stressors brought forth by reforms through employing an overall strategy with his leadership team's design. Dennis's problem-solving approach also limits the potential stressors that may otherwise arise from reforms. As mentioned, Dennis designated his team as "a tight-knit group that is very often together." To cultivate this mentality, Dennis met with his team of administrators weekly as they discussed "what is going on globally and asks what questions we have moving forward for the next week." According to Dennis, this approach filtered the macro-level external pressures

through a funnel that leads to his district's vision, mission, and goals. Similar to how a strainer routinely extracts solids from a flowing liquid through some punctured metal, mesh or wedge, Dennis funneled reforms by concentrating his team's efforts on what impact such matters could foreseeably have on their districts' immediate needs and overarching goals.

Edward categorized reforms, legislative mandates, and other external demands by approaching them as safe or urgent. As Edward detailed, "If it is urgent, we know that it is important and will work hard towards accomplishing that. If it is safe, my job is not at risk if I do not achieve that goal." Using this simplified categorical approach, Edward maintained equilibrium as the district's chief leader. In turn, Edward also fostered an environment in which clear communicational channels prohibited mixed signals or gaps in translation. Edward also accentuated how categorizing reforms hinged on serving the schools since "the important work is in the classroom." As a result, Edward buffered his staff from what he considered "unnecessary DOE and state mandates." Rather than fretting over stresses induced by compliance-based reforms and mandates, Edward tactically categorized reforms and mandates to maximize the time spent on matters that advanced their district goals. According to Edward, "We are focused on important work; I would rather spend time after school talking about how they are going to intervene with the kids, having a class talk about strategies."

The following remarks, offered by Edward, further cemented the participants' inclusive attitudes regarding their conscious discernment of filtering reforms through the lens of their district's vision, mission, and vision:

> We do not have an initiative every year. Nor do we try responding to what is happening. I have learned that you bleed a lot when you are on the cutting edge. I mean, there have been several times where the states put an initiative in place, and people jump very

> quickly. Six months later, it went goodbye. So we do not budge on some of these things. And, you know, there were some people say, should we do it? I will wait and see. We do not need to be first. When I was younger, I used to think that it was good to be first and get prestige. I no longer think that. I am patient to watch a few other people step on their toes and work through it and do those things.

Like the other participants, Edward exuded a patient and mature disposition throughout the interviews. At the same time, Edward and his counterparts expressed an overall concern for new superintendents or school board members. As participants described, it is not easy to ascertain the complexities of serving as a school district leader in the 21st century without being in the seat.

Troy's litmus test for categorizing reforms hinged on ensuring he and his stakeholders were "uncomfortable about the right things." Troy customarily asked his administrators and teachers if they were getting uncomfortable about the right types of things or if they were moving the metric solely "because someone down in Indianapolis thinks, well, this is the next shiny object we should be shooting for." As opposed to being uncomfortable for the sake of being uncomfortable, Troy intentionally framed reforms around the district's aspirations and what they deemed to be areas of significance. Troy served as a superintendent in another district before; he expressed learning from his experience at another district that these conversations must occur early and often.

As a superintendent of a rural school, Norma explained how her overarching leadership style enveloped her approach to discerning the most effective and efficient way of categorizing reforms. Norma, as stated before, "leads from the middle." As an aside, Norma acknowledged talking with her mentees about her method for filtering reforms not necessarily serving as a one-

size-fits-all best practice they should emulate by default. Since there is no job she has not done within the school corporation or that she would not do if needed, Norma effectively leveraged her understanding of matters. Norma discussed how this approach aligns with her personality and is thus a natural fit for her. Norma stated,

> I am confident that my district's people will say, but she takes charge and makes decisions. Even though I would consider myself leading from the middle, I still take charge. I do not always have to drive the bus. I am on that bus. Sometimes I am in the back seat, sometimes the middle. So that is how I would describe my leadership approach.

Given Norma's leadership style and the type of district she serves, she also acknowledged filtering reforms through the lens of contextual factors that were unique to their school community and corresponding needs. Norma limited the stress passed on to her stakeholders by deliberately emphasizing the legislators' disconnect. According to Norma, she reiterated how legislators "do not get the context of socioeconomics, special education populations, and English Second Language populations." As a result, Norma identified a common enemy and established what she perceived as the root of the issue, thereby leaning into her stakeholders' contextual needs and desires. In so doing, Norma effectively maintained a barrier around the school district. Within this barrier's walls, stakeholders felt supported and protected, which lessened potential stressors' negative impact. Additionally, this approach provided Norma with an in-house support system that empowered her to advocate for their district and energized her on a personal level.

Rita likewise pledged to fight for students and teachers. As stated by Rita, "I spend much time down at the statehouse lobbying for good ideas or against bad ideas." Rita also mentioned that "whenever there is a new legislative mandate that is not good, it rises to the surface." Rita

stayed abreast of proposed mandates and strategized with her colleagues and stakeholders how proposed legislation may impact the district. Based on Rita's responses, her stakeholders assuredly trust that she was transparently filtering such reforms with their best interests in mind. That said, Rita also spoke at length about maintaining equilibrium. As will be discussed, her colleagues' network played a crucial role in doing so.

Rita offered her staff, parents, and community members professional development opportunities that provide an overview of what reforms they face and the potential stressors that may result from them. From there, Rita seeks input and derives a plan for how their school district will handle a given reform. Rather than allowing the narrative surrounding their school district to exist independently, Rita had a voice in her school district's ongoing story. Speaking of her teachers, Rita said, "They have already got their plates overflowing." Recognizing this inevitable reality, Rita deliberately worked to "find that balance for providing support for them without overwhelming them." Rita calculatedly shielded her teachers from external stressors through filtering reforms and mandates in this fashion. Rita recognized how maintaining an equilibrium "truly does impact our work, our mental health, and our physical health."

Leonard likewise took it upon himself to lobby for school districts to represent what is best for schools of all shapes and sizes. He fervently cultivated relationships with legislators, elected officials, and policymakers as a means of proactively protecting schools from potentially harmful repercussions brought forth by reforms. As a representative of an urban school district, Leonard also educated his board on the perceived biases and detriments of reforms that negatively impacted or reflected their school district. Like Rita, Leonard refused to allow external parties to control his school district's surrounding narrative. For instance, Leonard

deliberately communicated his district's story to stakeholders, community members, and legislators. Leonard stated,

> As a result of this approach, our board has not gotten caught up in letter grades. They understand the biases that come with how our accountability system currently grades schools and that there are factors outside of our school district's control that are the walls in which our students enter that are significant contributors to the grades given based on the test scores.

Leonard accentuated how "the continued external pressures we are receiving primarily from legislators and chambers of commerce are causing us to focus on what is best for children truly and to push them to their most significant potential." Only then, Leonard upheld, can they ensure the filtering of reforms matriculates in a fashion that fosters healthy changes within schools. Leonard was very deliberate about what was allowed through the filters and what they worked diligently to keep out. Again, the patience conveyed by Leonard appeared to derive from his decades of service as an educator and educational leader.

Bonnie highlighted how part of their school district's vision statement entailed offering world-class opportunities with small-scale relationships. Bonnie affirmed,

> We do not want to rob our students of having a world-class sort of experience, even though they attend a small rural school district. All of our efforts are toward that end of realizing the same.

As Bonnie noted, reforms and potential stressors get filtered through a prevailing mindset of what they could do to give the students the best educational experience possible. Recognizing their relatively limited resources, Bonnie capitalized on what she considered their secret sauce—the power of relationships.

As is the case with the other participants, Bonnie's filtering method aligned with her leadership style. By leveraging their favorable student-teacher ratio and maintaining close relationships between staff, students, parents, and community members, Bonnie maintained a strong pulse where her district's vision, mission, and values intersected. These intersections become a natural landing point, which enabled Bonnie and her district leaders to maintain equilibrium. In so doing, Bonnie did not chase after the next shiny object, as Troy articulated during his interview.

Bonnie utilized a methodology she learned from her mentor, known as system-to-system meetings. These meetings identified the intersections to land out and thereby keep them from dead-end roads or roundabouts that do not lead to a destination. Through these meetings, Bonnie brought together each sector of their school corporation's experts. Once together, they collaboratively worked through an efficient way of filtering reforms based on their district goals and the available resources. Although some ideas might be useful in theory, the monies may not be available. Alternatively, the infrastructure may not be in place. By leveraging her directors' areas of expertise and making sure everyone had a seat at the table, Bonnie maximized their district's resources. It effectively addressed external stressors that could otherwise derail them from accomplishing their overall mission and vision.

Ronald, who also served in a small rural district, dealt with the implications of reforms "on a day-to-day basis." Speaking of reforms and potential stressors that could negatively impact their community, Ronald mentioned, "They affect us—daily, weekly, and monthly." That said, Ronald attributed the communicational flow within his school district as the main reason they could successfully filter reforms and stay afloat. Like Edward mentioned, Ronald thereby protected the fidelity of what went on in their school buildings and classrooms. "I can get our

folks together and get what is best for our kids figured out in a rather quick fashion. I do not need to go through all the bureaucracy that may exist within other school corporations."

Like his colleagues, Ronald stayed abreast of current and proposed legislation that may affect his school district or get them off track. Ronald filtered reforms based on an unwavering desire to do "what is best for kids in our school" and underscored that "what comes out of Indianapolis or out of Washington, DC, is not always the best thing for kids." Ronald went on to say that often what comes out of legislation is "the best thing for somebody that's come up with the policy." Like Bonnie, the process Ronald used to filter policies revolved around aligning goals with realities, especially related to fiscal matters. Ronald referenced an adage he often used with mentees when explaining the role finances play in decision-making, "Do not give away the farm." When asked to elaborate, Ronald explained that "there are only so many dollars available, which means dollars translate to personnel and staffing." When making decisions on how to respond to reforms or what the best way to deal with legislation entails, Ronald looked at the big picture. Although it is all about students and their success, Ronald is realistic when considering the human capital and monies available depending on which route they take in response to such external pressures or changes.

According to Florence, her filtration process for categorizing reforms and minimizing stressors' potential impact stemmed from her encompassing leadership motto. As stated by Florence, "My motto is, how can I serve others rather than how can they serve me?" As several other participants mentioned, Florence leveraged her background experiences in the district as a means of taking things off other peoples' plates. Before becoming a superintendent, Florence was a building administrator in her current district. At that time, Florence worked under a superintendent, who also served as her mentor.

Given the district's small size coupled with her tenure there, Florence had earned her stakeholders' trust. "If I have a principal out, I will go over to their office and fill in. If I have a cook who is out, I will cook. If we need a bus driver, I will drive the bus." For Florence, they apply an all-hands-on-deck approach to filtering reforms. Florence responded to potential stressors with a mentality of "How can we get through this as a team?" Florence filtered macro-level reforms through the lens of what she experienced on a day-to-day basis. Like several of her rural superintendent colleagues, the small district size afforded Florence a firm understanding of the district's pulse, given the amount of time she spent with boots on the ground.

Last, Christine leaned on her 35 years of experience as an educator when offering a unique take on how she discernibly filtered reforms within her district. As stated by Christine, "Regardless of the reform, I think there is a foundational piece to leadership that is hard to qualify." Rather than getting caught up in the reforms that come her way, Christine zeroed in on what she could control. Christine underscored the strategic approach she took when communicating with her internal stakeholders. Christine also reiterated how "messy district-level leadership could be" and how imperative it was to steer the conversation surrounding her school district, as several of her colleagues mentioned. According to Christine,

> Teaching is an art and a science. I think there is an art and science to leadership, too. There are certain things that you are tight on. This is how we are conducting business. There is also a human side to leadership. You know, where you have to be a little bit looser. Leadership cannot be a one size fits all approach – practical leadership bases itself on how the circumstance impacts a given decision. As long as this person's prestige or attorneys do not impact the decision and do what is right by our district, we filter reforms effectively.

As a leader, Christine thereby categorized reforms with an element of craft, recognizing the artisanship involved in navigating the murky waters that encompass district-level leadership. By simplifying reforms through the lens of what her district stood for and why they maintained these stances, Christine maintained equilibrium. Christine also referenced having served in a different community, thus using those experiences to better contextualize and differentiate among needs.

**Theme 3. Experienced School District Leaders Consciously Exercise a Growth Mindset in Their Leadership Practice.**

Once participants had an opportunity to get situated within the interview's framework and had engaged in deep reflection on their leadership experiences, they responded to a perceptive question concerning whether they had effectively dealt with the reforms mentioned above. Apart from the participants' responses to the question itself, participants' verbal thought processing and nonverbal cues led to a third theme's emergence. For instance, each participant mulled over their response for a moment or two. Some participants removed their glasses; others looked away from the screen as they contemplated their responses. A couple of participants tapped their fingers against the desk or fiddled with a writing utensil. Ultimately, however, participants looked back into the camera and offered concessions or additional contextual parameters in response to the posed question concerning whether they had dealt with reforms successfully to this point. In due course, all 10 participants affirmed their overall success in dealing with the reforms mentioned above. Observing participants mull over their responses and, listening to how they articulated their rationales, it became evident how each participant consciously exercised a growth mindset in their leadership practice.

Carol Dweck's (2016) implicit mindset theory, later popularized by her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, focuses on where one's intelligence comes from and whether

intelligence can change. A belief in cultivating mindsets serves as the backbone of a growth mindset. A growth mindset "leads to a host of different thoughts and actions, taking you down an entirely different road (Dweck, 2016, p. 15). Those with a growth mindset, Dweck ascertained, tend to be "more oriented toward learning" (p. 15). A fixed mindset involves "a belief that your qualities are carved in stone" (Dweck, 2016, p. 15). Based on this theory, one's perspective can alter what one strives for and how success is defined. On the same token, one's perspective can change how failures are perceived.

As the following excerpts illustrate, participants were hesitant to praise their efforts or celebrate their successes. Instead, participants engaged in deep reflection and defined success by viewing their perceived failures and stresses as purposeful learning experiences. Although participants were not satisfied with their efforts, their advantageous leadership approach drove them to stay the course in pursuing their district's vision, mission, and goals. In so doing, participants acknowledged their resiliency and the sustained effort it took to get where they were as successful experienced school district leaders.

Troy's response to whether he had effectively dealt with reforms and the stressors they induced exemplified the spirit of participants' shared sentiments. As stated by Troy,

> At times, yes. At times, no, I would like to think. More often than not, the answer is yes. However, I know there have been times where I have reflected on an evening after speaking with legislators or communicating with teachers about something new that we have to implement. And you reflect upon that. I could have done better. I could have led my team better or communicated that better. I could have communicated that to legislators where it was perceived critically. These are constructive growth opportunities. So, I think you have to always be in that space to reflect on how you can be a better

> communicator and a better leader, whether it be with your team, your legislators, your board, or your community. I would, I guess, if I were grading myself, I give myself a B. I certainly have room for growth and am certainly not where I aspire to be or where I have had other mentors lead me and demonstrate for me, but I am sufficient to continue doing what I am doing.

Norma offered a corresponding reflection:

> I think I could say that I have had some success. And then there is another area that I have not experienced much success. I have found success in getting our district messaging out repeatedly, and it is genuine because I believe it. For instance, I genuinely believe in the importance of not judging a school or a student on a test score. When I was in charge of a building, our teachers, our community, and our students knew that I believed in them. It is not just high stakes. Though I have still been unable to raise those achievement scores in any significant fashion, I am still disappointed in that regard.

Alternatively, as stated by Rita:

> I think we have done a pretty good job, but at the same time, there is so much more work to do. When I look at where we have come, where we were and where we are now, and where we want to be, it is a constant cycle of educating and building that community. We are continually cycling parents through our school community. So, it is never-ending. And we are continually getting new community members in and new business leaders. And so, it is vital to continue those conversations. Right now, we have got some people who are pushing back on some of the initiatives that we started years ago. I mean, that is always there. And that capacity to slip back always exists. And so we can never settle, you know? You can never rest because someone can destroy it the minute you do. It is a

> fragile system. Sometimes, as we know, the vocal minority gets much attention. That is why you must work hard never to allow that to happen and just lose ground.

Rita additionally referenced an ambassador program she started for their community members. Within this ambassador program, they pulled together a group of community members for a year-long course that showed some of their school district's behind-the-scenes operations. Rita intentionally invited people who openly challenged their practices as she firmly believed the only way to grow is by being challenged. For several years, the program has been in place. As a result, hundreds of community people have served as ambassadors to the district. In Rita's words,

> The most important thing that we have done to continue our momentum and not lose ground is that we embrace always being challenged. So we have a sound system that can be exhausting, but it is a sound system right now. So we will keep plugging away at it.

As stated by Bonnie,

> You know, we show up every day, and we do the very best we can every day. Every day we show up with an unwavering commitment to having students be our focus; their achievement and success are what we are all about as a district. We check off procedural components and submit reports. Apart from those trivialities that need managing, we are always checking ourselves to make sure we are doing the right work.

As stated by Christine,

> Like any position you take, you never know what the job entails until you are actually in it. And there has not been a single job that I have not gotten to that I thought, what have I done? As a superintendent, we had a failed referendum in my first year. That was pretty sobering. And I learned a lot. At the time, though, it was negative stress. However, again,

> I learned so much – that failure helped us come back and win the referendum twice the dollar amount. So yeah, that was a good thing, but there are some things I wished I would have known going in.

As the semi-structured interviews progressed, it grew increasingly evident how similarly participants processed their responses to multiple interrelated questions. Regardless of whether participants were aware of Dweck's (2016) work or consciously employed a growth mindset, the reflective thought process exemplified by their responses demonstrated their persistence and utilization of a growth mindset. That said, participants exuded a sense of sure-handedness while concurrently validating an uncanny ability to embrace their vulnerabilities. Based on their responses, participants were not afraid to take risks and were willing to own their faults without giving in to them. Participants did not allow failures or challenges to prohibit them from leading their districts with confidence. As experienced school district leaders who had collectively served in education for over a quarter of a century, this disposition appeared to be a characteristic indicative of those who can excel in the profession.

**Theme 4. Experienced School District Leaders Ardently Collaborate with Their Peers, Legal Counsel, and Professional Service Providers.**

In addition to discernibly filtering reforms and employing a growth mindset, participants also clarified that their effectiveness and success to date were not possible without others' aid. No matter the strength of one's filtration process or the mental fortitude one may have as a leader, participants recognized their reliance on collaborative networks. Participants' ardent collaboration with peers, legal counsel, and professional service providers afforded the emergence of a fourth theme resulting from this study.

Discussing various topics throughout the interviews, participants referenced their active participation in collaborative networks with colleagues, legal council members, and professional service providers. Over time, as Dennis maintained, experienced school district leaders form a "cadre of people that you can reach out to" for guidance and when bouncing ideas off one another. Troy similarly accentuated the prominence of having a network of colleagues in the same boat. For instance, Troy indicated, "I have a network of colleagues that I lean heavily upon as unique circumstances arise, whether it be personnel or student excellence-related."

Likewise, Rita stressed her gratitude for the superintendents' cohort around her. Rita highlighted this group's benefit, providing the capacity to lean on one another or pick one another's brains when dealing with a complicated issue. Speaking of her cohort, Rita held,

> The superintendents in our county are tight. We meet monthly. We have a text chain. And I am telling you what; we talk daily during this COVID pandemic. Oh my gosh, I mean, it is a tough job. To have a team of people you can call on to strategize with and problem-solve situations, which is incredibly important.

Rather than competing with one another, Rita underscored the reality of superintendents otherwise being "out there on an island." Whether dealing with snow delays, fog delays, cancellations, or whatever the situation may be, "you will get annihilated if you are on an island by yourself." Moreover, Rita pointed out the danger in being "chewed up and spit out on social media" should one superintendent not follow-suit with others in a designated area. Thus, Rita maintained, "We try to coordinate everything. You must build that safety net; there is power in numbers."

Bonnie, who served as superintendent of a small rural district, prioritized the need for one's network to expand beyond districts in relative proximity to one another. Bonnie echoed

Norma's sentiments in underscoring the importance that one's network includes colleagues who served in communities with similar demographics and locales, regardless of location. In Norma's words, a school district may be "25 road miles but a thousand cultural miles." Having served as an assistant superintendent at a much larger district before becoming a superintendent, Bonnie recognized that context matters. As Bonnie stated,

> A small rural school district superintendent's role is almost entirely different from the same title in a moderate or large district. Out of necessity, I am very much involved in everything. So I am either doing it or a part of it because we have to. But, you know, my colleagues who are in moderate to larger sized districts, it is as if their job is just fundamentally responsibility, fundamentally different responsibilities than my own. It is quite extraordinary. Same title, but different responsibilities.

Correspondingly, Florence led a group of superintendents in her area, including schools of varying demographics and locales. Within this larger group, she broke off and worked with similar-sized districts on collaborative projects that they otherwise would not be able to partake in, such as pooling into consortiums and applying for shared grants. Like several of her rural colleagues, Florence heavily leaned on her legal counsel for advice as she did not have other district administrators to collaborate with or delegate responsibilities to accordingly. As stated by Florence, "Even though I know a lot of the legal answers, you still feel better and more comfortable talking to legal counsel." Speaking of her legal counsel, Florence emphasized how she "trusts her completely" and that she "has been my mentor to this day."

Ronald, who also served as superintendent of a small rural district, accentuated collaborating with professional service providers, like the IAPSS and the Indiana Association of School Business Officials (IASBO). Despite serving as a superintendent for over a decade,

Ronald said this of his collaboration with such providers: “I have no problem asking questions. I would rather ask a question and get the answer than to kind of stumble around and try to, you know, reinvent the wheel, so I steal it with permission.” Correspondingly, Bonnie, who also served in a rural district, referenced a formal mentor through IAPSS, which her community frequently worked with on essential matters. Working so closely with IAPSS, Bonnie drew attention to the availability of resources and how helpful it was to work with people from various parts of the state. Through IAPSS, Bonnie sought guidance when dealing with the realities of there being “all kinds of layers from the district-level perspective.”

Edward, who served in a large suburban district, pointed to his active involvement in a suburban schools’ coalition. Edward additionally referenced some of the successes they had at the state level though they had not seen this success at the federal level to date. Leonard, who served as superintendent of a large district, also accentuated the careful line drawn in the sand when distinguishing between school districts. Notwithstanding the unique differences that differentiate districts, Leonard drew attention to how professional organizations can divide schools to their detriment. According to Leonard, “I think the legislature has done a phenomenal job in dividing us, which goes back to my earlier comment about the loss of collegiality. The legislature found a crack in districts with different communities and types of students.” Leonard went on to say,

> We did not have a small and growing suburban association, an urban schools’ association, and a small and rural school association. We did not use those very distinctive groups advocating for their community or their configuration.

Legislators, Leonard maintained, divide schools “with the dollars that we receive for students and complexity index and all of those things. Money is sometimes the root of all evil.

We have yet to come back to having a united front." As a result, Leonard went out of his way to actively participate in and lead statewide and nationwide groups that further expanded his network.

Although most participants expressed their gratitude for their local network of colleagues, one participant in particular reflected on her first years of becoming a superintendent and how difficult it was not to have this network in place. When considering some of the reasons why turnover rates remain high for superintendents, the collective emphasis gleaned from experienced practicing superintendents drew attention to the imperative roles such networks play in one's perceived success. Norma reminisced about first becoming a superintendent and offered a much more foreboding remark concerning her experience:

> When I was first here, my neighbors and colleagues were competitors; they would stab me back. They would, and I am not trying to be a gossipy person. Yeah, they did not help me one bit, and I do not know why. That is why I am extra helpful to a new person in town. However, the whole school competition thing got to be something I could not handle. So, I removed myself from being in a circle with them.

Throughout the interview, regardless of the focus of a given question, I noticed how participants seamlessly transitioned between three essential groups of people that played integral roles in their sustained success as influential educational leaders. As the interviews progressed, it became evident that participants relied on this cadre of colleagues as peers. Thus, participants recognized the need to have people in their lives in the same boat navigating the waters alongside them and rowing in the same direction. There is a grave danger in a school superintendent operating on their island given the power of numbers to Bonnie's point. However, participants also referenced two other groups of people that played critical roles in their leadership practices.

Participants also relied on others, who were either more experienced or more knowledgeable, on some issues. Third, participants accentuated the need for building capacity in others, who were either not as skilled or knowledgeable in some matters. These two referenced groups led to the fifth and sixth themes generated by this study as they concerned mentor-mentee relationships.

### *Characterizations of Participants' Mentor-Mentee Relationships*

This section affords a brief synopsis of how participants' responses concerning mentor-mentee relationships shaped this study's final two themes. Half the questions asked during the interviews dealt with varying interrelated aspects of mentor-mentee relationships. Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on their involvement as mentors and mentees. When asked if they were currently involved in a mentor-mentee relationship, all 10 participants noted they were presently serving as a mentor to at least one mentee. Participants' descriptions of their relationships with mentees also afforded a litany of thought-provoking follow-up questions throughout the interviews. All 10 participants acknowledged serving as a mentor or coach since becoming a district leader. Most of them also served as mentors during their time as building administrators. When asked to quantify the number of mentees participants had since becoming a district leader, I received mixed responses. Although some participants could approximate and offer a number, others made it clear there were too many mentees over the years to quantify with fidelity. Given these relationships' natures, as they vary in formality and duration, no definite conclusions were drawn from these responses.

That said, the following examples illustrate some of the variances in how participants described their mentor-mentee relationships. Dennis's mentees were primarily building administrators within his district. Dennis emphasized that he and his mentees were "tight-knit and very often together." Similarly, Norma brought attention to how enjoyable these

relationships were, and she reiterated the mutual respect embedded within them. Norma also described how there was an ease to her mentees' relationships. One of Norma's mentees is a superintendent at a neighboring district. Norma did not utilize a schedule or anything structured through this informal relationship. However, Norma also mentored a new principal within the neighboring superintendent's district. This relationship, by comparison, was much more structured and formal. Norma maintained a schedule with the new principal and encouraged him to "reflect on the good things that have happened and the not-so-good things."

Given commonalities in their districts' demographics and locales, Norma saw an added value in discussing context-sensitive matters with both mentees. Although she initially reached out to the superintendent as a colleague, Norma took on a mentoring role. In hindsight, Norma's experience in the role led the new superintendent to view her as a mentor. That said, Norma mentioned her mentee "does not have any qualms calling me about something, and I do not have any qualms about calling her." Pragmatically, Norma thus perceived this mentor-mentee relationship—beyond semantics—as mutually beneficial to both parties.

Leonard described his relationship with new superintendents he mentors as starting professionally but often developing into genuine friendships. Although there was only one superintendent within a school district, Leonard recognized the need for having a mentor who could serve as a sounding board. There are times when things need discussing with someone who knowingly has more experience on a given topic and thereby becomes more than a colleague in the same boat. For this reason, Leonard kept an eye out for newly hired superintendents and tried making an effort to contact them as soon as possible. Some new superintendents responded repeatedly, and others chose to forego the invitation. Either way, however, Leonard rested assured, knowing he extended an invitation to others as a colleague. Sometimes, however, this

simple email or phone call turns into an informal mentoring relationship that lasts for years after that.

When describing his mentoring relationship with his building administrators, Ronald stated they "have a great relationship; I would hope they think that too." When asked what made it great and why he perceived it to be positive, Ronald stated, "Honesty and also standing by them as long as they are following school board policy in the law, I am going to stand by them." Other participants, however, made a point of illustrating that their relationships with mentees were wholly dependent on the mentee. For instance, Florence mentored other superintendents newer to the profession. Florence focused on matters very different from a superintendent who had come up through the district's ranks from a new superintendent who had not worked in the community before. Other participants also underscored how a mentee's aspirations impact the nature of mentoring relationships. Mentors open their horizons to matters they may not otherwise need to be privy to in a secondary role for mentees with aspirations of becoming a superintendent. For those who may not have such ambitions, relationships focus more on their existing leadership practices and the position in which they serve.

### *Participants' Perceptions of the Benefit Having a Mentor Had on Their Early Years in District Administration*

Seven participants had a mentor during their first years as a district-level administrator. All seven participants who had a mentor acknowledged the benefit of having one. Two of the three participants, who did not have a mentor, insisted on how beneficial it would have been to have a mentor. Some participants had multiple mentors, and others focused on one person. Participants regarded these relationships as formal and informal. Although some participants had a formal mentor assigned to them by the district or as part of a professional program, such as

IAPSS, others sought a mentor for specific purposes. Throughout these conversations surrounding mentor-mentee relationships, several iterations of nuances surfaced. Two main themes emerged as I spoke with participants about how mentor relationships started, whether educational reforms serve as sources of stress for mentees, mentees' leadership styles change over time, and other related follow-up questions. These two themes are detailed below.

**Theme 5. Experienced School District Leaders Diagnosticate Informal and Formal Mentoring as a Foremost Aspect of their Job Responsibilities.**

Regardless of whether participants acknowledged having a mentor as a new superintendent, all 10 participants recognized their current involvement in serving as mentors. Whether formal or informal, participants detailed their experiences as mentors to teachers, aspiring administrators, building administrators, directors, assistant superintendents within their districts, superintendents at other communities, or school board members. For instance, Dennis expressed his hope that mentoring "would be the nature of the job for whoever is in this role." As a result, Dennis aimed for his relationships with mentees to "always seem informal."

Edward correspondingly revealed that mentoring was a "constant and ongoing" function of his daily job responsibilities as superintendent. Although "the formal mentees come and go" for Edward, "mentoring is informally always about how you can be a better leader. When a principal makes the tough decision, you say, what did you learn from this? I see that as mentoring." Edward went so far as to declare, "I think mentoring is the main part of my job." Edward referenced what he referred to as "leading up" since he also mentors the school board members. Edward held a leadership summit annually. Here he mentors them on how to lead when not in a defined authority position. Regarding the informal mentoring that transpires within his district, Edward insisted that "it seems so purposeful but just collaborative, conversational."

Troy reflected on why he served as a mentor; he prioritized mentoring as a critical ingredient needed to execute his job responsibilities with fidelity. Based on the learning experienced as superintendent at his former district, Troy recognized the necessity of serving as a mentor to be the most effective leader possible and lead the most effective team. Troy insisted that his mentees not become clones or feel a need to embody all of his leadership characteristics regarding these relationships' intent. According to Troy,

> I want my folks that we have on our team to be independent thinkers and prepare to handle any scenario that gets brought their way. I want them to think differently from me, but I want them to act on the same page. We know you are only as strong as the people around you, so you want to take the folks you have and make them better as opportunities present themselves.

As a former point guard on the basketball team, Norma equated her role as a mentor to when she played point guard and led four other basketball players. Though naturally competitive by her admission, Norma recognized the necessity for other players to fulfill their roles to be successful. As Norma specified, "I want to have everything I can in my supply bag to give myself the best chance of succeeding." Again, Norma clarified how these relationships go above and beyond those she works with as colleagues regularly. Although she may be able to survive as a superintendent without serving as a mentor, Norma equated the necessity of mentoring as a means of thriving as a leader. In so doing, Norma builds capacity in others that benefits the school district. However, she also mentors others outside of her community. From that regard, Norma considered mentoring as a fundamental aspect of her role as the school district's chief leader.

Similarly, Rita underscored the vital role informal mentoring played in her personal and professional development as an effective school leader. Additionally, Rita brought attention to the necessity of mentoring should her team grow organically and systematically. Like Norma, Rita regarded mentoring in the same light as coaching. As Rita noted, a coach offers her players different skills and advice depending on their needs, personalities, and positions. So, too, should a mentor coach her mentees differently, depending on their strengths, characters, and aspirations. Like players on a team, Rita reiterated the importance of remembering that mentees require varying kinds of support should they grow and succeed in their respective roles and their leadership capacities moving forward. As a mentor, Rita often found herself "providing a listening ear. They come with lots of questions and concerns. Sometimes, they do not want advice. They just need somebody to listen." Other times, however, Rita recognized the need to provide more than a listening ear since "it only takes you a few times to get burned." In Rita's words, "I think that is just part of leading and learning." Again, Rita could not disassociate her job as superintendent from that of a mentor or coach, further illustrating a commonality among participants. They viewed mentoring as an essential aspect of their job responsibilities.

Leonard served as a mentor for teachers and administrators within his district, across the state, and throughout the nation. When asked why he prioritized the role of mentoring to this degree, Leonard focused on his drive to make each mentee the best version of themselves. Leonard equated his position as superintendent to that of a mentor. According to Leonard, "Leadership is not about having an office. Leadership is about what you do, where you are, and how to lead from any position you hold." Leonard drew attention to some school districts' administrative turnover around the state experience and contrasted that reality with his lack of turnover. Leonard accentuated that they "very rarely hire from outside the district when they

have an administrative opening." As a result, his role as superintendent was mostly to build capacity in his staff members as they would more than likely be the ones to fill future leadership roles.

Building capacity in others, Leonard stated, served as one of the main reasons mentoring is such a fundamental aspect of his superintendent's responsibilities. Despite being in a comparatively large school district, Leonard was intentional about mentoring staff members at varying leadership levels. As stated by Leonard,

> I also think it is essential for aspiring administrators, people coming up through the ranks, see that people in the superintendent's office are no different from anyone else. I still get up the same way they get up. I get dressed the same way they get dressed. My mother still calls me by my first name. I am just a guy. And I have my vulnerabilities like anybody else. So you know, I want them to be able to see that as much as possible. So I try to be very transparent and pretty open and vulnerable when I am having those conversations with them.

Bonnie reiterated informal mentoring and coaching's fundamental role in her day-to-day activities as superintendent. Bonnie stated,

> I see my role as being in service of the building leadership to be in service to their educators. And so, in that capacity and ways in which I can coach them to increase their capacity, to then be able to be their best leader.

Ronald likewise noted, "There is not a day that goes by where I am not mentoring and coaching someone." Ronald also focused his attention on the necessity of mentoring given the district's small size. Speaking of mentoring, Ronald said,

> It is a necessity. It has to in our environment. It is just the way it is. You learn to live that this is the way life is at a small school. It does not mean that the way life is at other schools.

Florence, who also served as a small rural superintendent, echoed these sentiments about the necessity of mentoring. Florence offered the following remarks concerning her mentees, "You know; I would rather them call me 10 times a day and walk them through how to handle something than they try and figure it out on their own, mess up, or make a mistake."

Christine underscored how her leadership style, as a relational leader, lent itself to recognizing "some people need more direction than others." Christine maintained it was her role to provide that sort of direction should the district operate at full capacity. Additionally, Christine expressed how vulnerable she was with her mentees and acknowledged, "There are many days I feel like a fish out of water." As a result, she intentionally focused on being approachable. Mentoring is a two-way street for Christine, and she deliberately made a point of continually showing her staff the importance of operating in this fashion. Her mentees recognized her sincerity when seeking their input. Christine said, "Some superintendents are very austere, and I think there needs to be an approachability to this position that there was not in years past."

As these excerpts and remarks illustrate, participants unanimously consider mentoring a fundamental aspect of what they do as school district leaders. Regardless of their district's size, participants intentionally mentor others within their communities to build their teams' capacity. In so doing, participants view the return on their investment as worthwhile since so many aspects of their roles are dependent on others fulfilling their duties with fidelity.

**Theme 6. Experienced School District Leaders Consider Mentoring Aspiring and New School District Leaders a Duty Irrespective of Whether They Had a Mentor as a Newly-Hired School Superintendent.**

Seven of the 10 participants accredited their success as new superintendents to being on the receiving end of one or more mentors, taking the time to mentor them informally or formally. Some participants acknowledged having had more than one mentor early in their superintendency. Mentor-mentee relationships varied as some arrangements were informal and organic, and others were formal and arranged. Of those who acknowledged having a mentor as a new superintendent, some participants acknowledged seeking a mentor, and others referenced having a mentor assigned to them through a professional organization or the school district. Despite these variances, all 10 participants keenly advocated for the necessity of new-to-the-job superintendents having an informal or formal mentor should they expect to lead effectively in this role and withstand the stresses that accompany the job. As delineated, the participants considered mentoring a fundamental aspect of their job responsibilities, but they also made it very clear that the role of mentoring went beyond necessity. In turn, the participants prodigiously revered it a duty to mentor new and aspiring school district leaders informally or formally.

A civic duty involves "a construct often representing an amalgamation of civic norms and expectations for what it means to be a 'good' citizen" (Mullinix, 2018, p. 199). Additionally, a civic duty often relates to "underlying civic norms that map onto a notion of obligation to others—which is closely linked to accountability and cognitive effort in making 'correct' decisions" (Mullinix, 2018, p. 199). Researchers often attribute prepositional duty within ethical

and etymological literary spheres with a directional function (Hayward, 2013). The directional part of prepositional duties aligns with the conventional understanding of civic responsibility. In such cases, prepositional duties align with community norms, authorities of the duties, or higher powers.

However, a lesser-studied aspect of prepositional duties entails a scenario in which the other person is the source of duty's "recipient or onward-directee, or, in the formal language of deontic logic, 'counterparty" (Hayward, 2013, p. 272). Participants in this study expressed a duty to mentor new or aspiring school district leaders who fell into the latter category as non-authorities to the mentor. Ethics and etymology aside, the duty to mentor their mentees was a theme worthy of further exploration. The following sections explore this theme by breaking participants into two separate groups: those who expressed having one or more mentors as a new district administrator and those who did not have one or more mentors as a new district administrator.

### *Participants Who Had One or More Mentor as a New District Administrator*

Even though Norma's school district paid for a mentor when she first became a superintendent, she reiterated her resolute aspiration to always be on her A-game and thereby would have paid for a mentor regardless. In addition to the formal mentor paid for by the district, Norma initiated a relationship with another mentor. This mentor had since retired from being a district administrator and was additionally a longtime friend of her father's. To this day, Norma considers this man a mentor and close confidant. Despite the informal mentor-mentee relationship, Norma's school district also paid for the mentor's legal services as a consultant. For instance, Norma called him when complex issues arose; she underscored how much she valued his professional opinion and overall perspective given his wisdom and experience.

Regardless of whether the district paid for his legal services, Norma felt confident he would do anything to assist her as he considered it his duty to serve and guide his mentees. Norma similarly felt a duty to help her mentees in the same way as she looked back at her first years of superintendence and realized the significance of having mentors played in her ability to traverse complex issues and situations as they arose successfully. When discussing her early years of superintendence as a mentee, Norma seamlessly transitioned and talked about her duty to serve as a mentor. Looking back at her first couple of years as a superintendent, Norma said,

> You do not even know what you are doing. You do not even know what to ask. So what I do with the other lady that I mentor is when there is a report due, or I see something come across my desk, I will give her a call and say, hey, have you done this? Sometimes she knows about it. Sometimes she does not. I do not want anybody to be left out to dry.

Norma was adamant that these mentoring relationships be in place before a new superintendent's first day on the job. As a result, Norma worked with her mentees to plan their first staff meeting, send their first staff email, and those sorts of things as they set the tone for one's leadership. Part of why Norma felt a duty to serve as a mentor stemmed from her recognition of how one's ego can otherwise prevent a new superintendent from succeeding long-term. When describing her informal mentee relationship with the newly hired superintendent, Norma stated, "I think there is mutual respect. There is ease, too – it feels very comfortable. She does not have any qualms calling me about something; I do not have any qualms about calling her."

Given that the superintendent Norma mentors was new to the area and thereby not familiar with the staff or board, Norma considered it her duty to spend a great deal of time helping her mentee to navigate these waters carefully. From experience as a mentor and mentee,

Norma recognized the importance of strategic and timely cultivation of these relationships. When asked to describe how her superintendent mentee was progressing, Norma made clear the superintendent

> is more aware of what she does not know, whereas, before one starts, they are in the dark. So, now she feels like she has a little bit of knowledge here or there, which is very helpful. However, a part of that is sitting in the chair.

At the end of our interview, Norma expressed her interest in the study's topic. She then shared what fueled her unwavering duty to mentor others. As Norma stated,

> I should say that I think I would have been reaching out to this person because it is my nature, but my neighbors and colleagues when I was first here, they were competitors; they would stab me in the back. They would, and I am not trying to be a gossipy person. Yeah, they did not help me one bit, and I do not know. That is why I am extra helpful to a new person in town. However, the whole school competition got to be something I could not handle. So I removed myself from being in a circle with them. And I was ecstatic when they hired this person because I thought maybe we could connect. And it has worked out well.

When speaking with Rita about her duty to mentor, she referred back to her educational leadership journey. Rita recalled how a mentor saw talents in her that she did not see in herself at the time. When confronted about these talents and challenged to capitalize on them, Rita's motivation to advance her leadership capacities flourished. That said, Rita walked me through the trajectory of her near-40-year experience in education. As a teacher, Rita never saw herself becoming an administrator since she loved teaching. At the time, however, Rita had a principal who mentored her. This mentor persistently told her how good a principal she would make

someday. Over time, Rita accepted the challenge that she otherwise likely would not have pursued. Later, as a building principal, Rita acknowledged her contentment with the role. When Rita's mentor suggested she pursue her superintendent license, Rita responded by saying, "Are you nuts? There is no way in hell I want to be a superintendent."

Looking back, Rita recognized, "If it were not for those people in my career who encouraged me, I would not be where I am today." As a result, Rita expressed her irresistible duty to give back to the profession by identifying talent and mentoring others. Rita mentioned how "there are many people that I see who have such amazing skills as teachers, but they also have that intuitive nature and the ability to build strong relationships." Rita also noted the prominence of identifying potential leaders who "can take on leadership roles and do things even when it is unpopular. When you see those kinds of people, you feel an urgency to start nurturing that." As the pool of candidates narrows, Rita feels an augmented duty to "identify those key people, encourage them, and show support to build capacity in them, so we continue to have a strong public education system in our country."

As the interview progressed, Rita went back and forth between her experiences as a mentor and mentee. At one point in the interview, Rita asked if she could share what happened on her first day as superintendent. On her first day, a well-respected female superintendent reached out to Rita and offered her cell phone number. The neighboring superintendent said, "This is the hardest job you will do. Do not ever hesitate to call!" From that point on, Rita considered this superintendent her most impactful mentor.

Regarding their relationship's maturation process over the years, Rita affirmed how they had an "extremely tight relationship." Since that first day on the job, Rita laughed and noted the two of them have shared many bottles of wine and picked one another's brains over countless

personal and professional topics that arose. Given her lack of experience when first assuming the role of superintendent, Rita quickly recognized how essential it was to have someone to lean on and collaborate with over the coming days, months, and years.

Now, as a seasoned superintendent, Rita expressed the weightiness of her duty in serving as a formal and informal mentor to aspiring and newly hired superintendents. When asked how this duty materializes in the mentor-mentee relationships, Rita discussed the mentee's variances. For instance, Rita offers her mentees career guidance, emotional support, and pragmatic ways to balance their lives. Rita provides a listening ear and is always willing to fulfill her responsibilities as a formal mentor when mentees request those services. However, organic mentoring relationships are the ones that Rita typically finds most fruitful. Rita's relationships with mentees started as formal mentoring arrangements but have since developed informally, providing added satisfaction to Rita that she deemed mutually beneficial.

As a large urban school superintendent who had served in district administration for many years under multiple superintendents, Leonard impressed, "I have always felt like it is critically important for me to give back." As a result, Leonard served out of duty to mentor new and aspiring superintendents. Leonard mentored at the local, state, and national levels. As a self-described relational leader, Leonard took tremendous pride in modeling what he expects. Therefore, Leonard prioritized mentoring because of his background as a young man, teacher, building administrator, and assistant superintendent. As an assistant superintendent, Leonard agreed with his superintendent that he would not apply for any positions until he applied within the district once his mentor retired.

Ultimately, Leonard replaced his superintendent upon retiring. As a seasoned superintendent, Leonard recognized the need to trust others. Through the years, Leonard learned,

"there are certain things that you cannot share with your community. Nobody can know them. There are things I do not even tell my wife." In part, Leonard credited his successful tenure to there being trustworthy people he can confidentially go to "any time of the day that would drop everything to assist and provide instant feedback." Knowing how invaluable these connections were in his leadership practice, Leonard felt a duty to serve in this capacity for others as a mentor and confidant.

Leonard also reiterated the necessity of newly hired superintendents navigating the position's politics carefully. They may not be aware of the dangers that could be detrimental to their sustained success. In Leonard's words, "Once your name is on the list, you do not get off the list. There are some susceptible spaces to navigate." With his mentees, Leonard thereby makes himself available by "trying to give them enough information to make an informed decision." Regarding how his duty to serve manifests as a mentor, Leonard affirmed,

> It has never been my goal in the mentorship program to modify someone's behavior or change how they are; I hope to make them the best of them. I want to help them be self-reflective enough to process their decisions and lead in a way that makes them as successful as they can be.

That said, Leonard did not feel a duty to change his mentees' hearts, dispositions, or ethics as he hoped to see such things before committing to a mentoring relationship. Last, Leonard shared that his most incredible mentor in life had been his father, who served as an educator for over 40 years. As many of his colleagues assented, Leonard acknowledged the reality of how many different hats he wore as a mentor. Mentorship, Leonard maintained, is an art and science. Variables such as who the mentee is and their aspirations are moving forward

influence how he approaches these relationships. Bonnie correspondingly made the following remarks concerns her duty to serve as a mentor:

> Oh, it is my responsibility. I have been given so much by folks that looked after me that it is just a no-brainer that I would want to return the same. And it is rewarding. It is so lovely when you see people you have worked with that are then off and fulfilling their dreams.

When asked how having a mentor early on in becoming a superintendent helped her, Bonnie said,

> I think that there is just a perfect correlation there. I think it is excellent teaching; great teachers are great modelers. So, you know, how my mentors modeled the work I observed, I watched and effectively adopted those dispositions and strategies that just really spoke to me as useful. Oh, my goodness, I would not be where I am without those influences. I do not think I would be nearly as successful as we are.

Similarly, when asked why he served as a mentor, Ronald noted,

> Because I believe in the payback and paying it forward, so to speak. You know, payback. I had two dynamite people who were veterans when I came in as a building principal who mentored me. They took me under their wing. And I am very appreciative of what they did for me. Again, I did not agree with everything they had to say or what they did. However, I learned from them. Sometimes they had made mistakes, or they did good things. I then looked at that situation, and I learned from it, good or bad. Every situation has a learning opportunity. It does. And if you are not taking advantage of that learning opportunity, you missed the mark.

Florence offered the following remark when asked why she felt it a duty to serve as a mentor to new and aspiring superintendents in her area, “I do not know how somebody could make it without it. I feel like it is my duty now to pass that on to the next person.” Christine likewise stated,

> One of my skill sets has always been how I can connect with people and see talent. I am proud that teachers I have worked with have gone into the principal's role because they felt like I encouraged them to get there or demonstrated leadership they respected.

When asked why she served as a mentor, Christine circled back to her experiences as an educator, principal, and aspiring superintendent. According to Christine, her duty to mentor stemmed from her experiences as a mentee. Christine had two mentors early on in becoming a district-level administrator. To this day, Christine gets emotional when speaking about these mentors’ role in her progression as an educational leader. Speaking of these two male mentors, Christine noted, “They were just two of the finest educators I have ever known.” Additionally, Christine vividly recalled being called into her former superintendent’s office. As nervous as she was about going down to his office, she was thrown off by what he had to say that day. Her superintendent was very direct with her; he told her she needed to acquire her superintendent’s license.

As some of her colleagues similarly mentioned, Christine’s immediate response was “No. I am not doing that.” However, Christine credited her mentor for being persistent. He echoed the following words to her, which she heard many times before but acknowledged the immense weight they carried: “To those who have much, much is expected.” Looking back, Christine acknowledged, “He was a tough man to work for at times.” However, she followed up by saying,

> I love him. I learned more from him than anyone else, and he made me better because he expected a lot from me, and I feel a responsibility to pay that forward. When you see talent in somebody, you need to let them know because sometimes they do not see it themselves.

Also, Christine reiterated the duty to help others achieve a goal and cultivate talents she sees in others.

***Participants Who Did Not Have One or More Mentor as a New District Administrator***

Participants who expressed not having an informal or formal mentor when first becoming a new district administrator also reiterated their sense of duty to serve as a mentor. Despite not having a mentor as a first-year district administrator, Dennis acknowledged having a mentor as a building principal. Dennis reflected on the indispensable role his superintendent played in his development as an educational leader. Concerning this superintendent, Dennis said, “He was instrumental in everything I did as a new administrator.” When asked what it was about this mentor that stood out to him from a leadership standpoint, Dennis noted he “never saw him in a cross way. He was never negative about anything.” Additionally, Dennis pointed out how readily accessible his mentor was, “No matter when you got in touch with him, he was always ready to talk to you and have a conversation. He never blew me off or anything like that.”

When asked if he perceived having a mentor as a new superintendent would have helped him, Dennis said, “Definitely, I mean, that is key.” Dennis went on to say,

> When you are first there, there is nobody in that group to say, hey, you really should be watching out for this or that. So, yeah, that would have been an essential factor. I mean, that would have been helpful. I described the person as my superintendent and mentor

> had retired by that time. So, they were not a person I could easily reach out to at that point.

For this reason, Dennis not only deemed mentoring a fundamental aspect of his job but additionally felt a sense of duty to serve in this capacity because of how much it would have likely assisted him had he had a mentor when first becoming a superintendent.

Like Dennis, Edward acknowledged having a mentor of sorts when he first became a building principal. Speaking of his mentor at the time, Edward said, "I pretty honestly worshipped the ground he walked on at that time, not knowing what I know now as my life experiences taught me so much more than I knew then." Before becoming a superintendent, Edward worked for six superintendents. Of the six superintendents he worked for, only one superintendent served a longer tenure than Edward has served to date. As he reflected on his time as a principal and district administrator under multiple superintendents, Edward said,

> I learned as much regarding what not to do as what to do as a superintendent. But, I do not know that anyone was a real mentor to me from a superintendent standpoint. People ask me how I got here. I tell them I read a lot. Also, there was a period for three or four years where I traveled around and went to different board meetings to see how the superintendent interacted with the board.

When preparing for becoming a superintendent, Edward also took it upon himself to call superintendents, who had recently undergone some friction but had since resolved the issue. As such, Edward acknowledged that he was thereby mostly self-taught. Looking back at his early years as superintendent, Edward stated, "Maybe that says more about me than those people I was around." As a superintendent, Edward also credited his sustained success to his patience. As

previously mentioned, Edward learned not to feel a pressing need to be first or seek esteem over the years.

As a superintendent who mentored building administrators in his district, Edward expressed a duty to mentor others as a means of continually building capacity in others. Whereas his peers traced their duty to mentor back to mentors they had over the years, Edward focused on building capacity rather than focusing on accountability. Rather than lauding his authority over others, Edward expressed, “I am alongside, not behind pushing.” Another critical aspect involved in why Edward felt a sense of duty to mentor others stemmed from the necessity of helping aspiring and new leaders learn the “burden of no.” When staff members apply for positions and do not get selected, they will often come to Edward and ask for their thoughts as leaders. At times, Edward utilized the “burden of no” by responding with something along the lines of,

> I think this is a good seat for you on this. But right now, I do not. I have not seen you demonstrate the skills that I think that you are ready to be a principal. To some people, the answer is no; it is just not now. And so do not be discouraged. While it is about building capacity, I think it is about honest conversations.

By mentoring others and being willing to have those honest conversations, Edward built his team’s capacity and strengthened his district’s power. Additionally, Edward spoke with staff members in his district whom he heard multiple concerning things spoken about and “levels up” with them. Edward referenced how some people were shocked to hear those things and become emotional. However, they were appreciative in many cases as they did not recognize others who viewed them as toxic. As a leader and mentor, Edward felt a duty to live out his motto that “you cannot complain about what you permit.”

Troy credited his former school district's hierarchical structure for his growth as an educational leader as a new district-level administrator. Additionally, Troy considered his former superintendent “the best superintendent ever.” When asked about what made this person such an effective mentor, Troy stressed the importance of being provided opportunities to make mistakes within a safety net, take ownership of initiatives, and be easily accessible by bouncing ideas off him without judgment. Regarding his rationale for mentoring an aspiring superintendent in his district, Troy stated,

> I only mentor her because she desires to grow and become a superintendent soon. There are some curriculum directors where that is their thing. If that were the case with my mentee, I might not possess the same desire to work outside of that box. So, I would not need to push her outside of her comfort zone as much.

Given his mentee’s aspirations to become a superintendent soon, Troy expressed his duty to push her outside of her comfort zone. He recognized the unique responsibilities that come with being a superintendent. When speaking with legislators and elected officials, Troy makes a point of including his mentee. According to Troy, these opportunities expand his mentee’s network and show her how he forged relationships. When Troy’s mentee saw things were not in her wheelhouse, he talked with her about refining her leadership style to feel confident. Troy perceived a “direct correlation between those who are the most reflective and the most effective.” Even though Troy considered his mentee “a rock star” and “an excellent communicator,” he felt a duty to provide his mentee with opportunities and experiences that build capacity. From experience, Troy knew how intimidating legislators, elected leaders, and even other superintendents could be and thereby expressed his duty to prepare his mentee for being comfortable in these environments.

## Summary

This data analysis provided a rich discussion of the following themes identified after reviewing the transcripts and field notes:

1. Experienced school district leaders perceive a disconnect with legislators and confront stressors engendered by educational reforms.
2. Experienced school district leaders discernibly filter educational reforms through the lens of their district's vision, mission, and values.
3. Experienced school district leaders consciously exercise a growth mindset in their leadership practice.
4. Experienced school district leaders ardently collaborate with their peers, legal counsel, and professional service providers.
5. Experienced school district leaders diagnosticate mentoring as a foremost aspect of their job responsibilities.
6. Experienced school district leaders consider mentoring a duty irrespective of whether they had a mentor as a newly hired school superintendent.

# CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUMMARY

As a researcher, I pursued emergent leads in a setting of interest and concern. That said, I recognized my perspective, experience, knowledge, and attentiveness in the study topic (Charmaz, 2007). As a result, this study examined experienced school district leaders' perceptions of mentoring during stressful educational reform times. To further explore this topic, I conducted a qualitative study, including semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced school district leaders in Indiana.

In so doing, I utilized a grounded constructivist approach to acquire intuitions into experienced school district leaders' subjective experiences and social processes. In particular, this research focused on the participants' perceptions of educational reforms, stressors engendered by such reforms, and the role mentor-mentee relationships play in an educational leader's capacity to endure stressors engenders by reforms. This study aligns with Charmaz's (2007) assessment that "our research needs to be theoretically informed, but not theoretically pre-formed" (p. 80). Therefore, I sensitized concepts referenced by participants that alerted me to look at the interviews' breadth and depth in isolation and as a whole.

Through the lens of a grounded constructivist approach, I triangulated the raw data from the IDOE, transcript interviews with participants, and the recorded field notes. In so doing, these data points formed the study's foundation. Additionally, the analytic questions asked while

processing the raw data served as the theoretical scaffolding applied throughout the iterative data analysis phases. By preserving my stance as a researcher, I committed to the writing process and nurtured further discoveries. Such discoveries led to the ensuing reporting of the results, conclusions, and future study recommendations.

## Importance of this Study

Research for identifying critical variables concerning school superintendent turnover and effectiveness needs to be expanded, given the lack of consensus surrounding this phenomenon (Rogers & McCord, 2020). In the interim, the "churn of K-12 executives" (Superville, 2018, para. 5) remains intact. For instance, the 2019–2020 Superintendent Salary Study echoed these sentiments. Over half of respondents reported service in their position for fewer than five years, and a mere 11% noted serving in their position for more than 10 years (Rogers & McCord, 2020).

News outlets in states around the United States reported school superintendent turnover, and turnover rates remain higher in low socioeconomic and urban areas (Rogers & McCord, 2020). In Denver, Colorado, over 230,000 students did not have a superintendent as of November 2020. Speaking of the national turnover rate for school superintendents and the stresses they endure, A+ Colorado president Van Schoals made the following remark, "The job was hard before, and now it's remarkably difficult. Managing the logistics of being out of school for kids, having kids come back, hybrids. Imagine all of the work that's required to do that" (as cited in Garcia, 2020, para. 4). According to Schoals, "There's no such thing as a great school without a great leader, and there is no such thing as a great school district without a great superintendent" (as cited in Garcia, 2020, para. 10).

What some reporters refer to as the "superintendent merry-go-round" (Falk, 2020, para. 41) maintains its cycle. For varying reasons—some known and others unknown—school district leaders come and go. As a former superintendent of the year in Wisconsin put it, "The work is very dynamic . . . it is exhausting work" (Falk, 2020, para. 38). In Indiana, McDaniel reiterated the necessity of further exploring the topic of superintendent turnover. He and his colleagues receive notifications of approximately 40–50 school superintendent openings in Indiana annually (T. McDaniel, personal communication, April 20, 2020). As shown in Table 5, the percent of returning school superintendents has dropped annually from 2016 to 2019. Since 2016, the percent of superintendents returning has decreased by 5.11%.

Table 5

*Indiana Traditional Public Superintendent Turnover Percentage: 2016–2019*

| Year | Number | Number Returning | Percent Returned |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2016 | 290 | 258 | 88.97 |
| 2017 | 294 | 252 | 85.71 |
| 2018 | 297 | 250 | 84.18 |
| 2019 | 285 | 239 | 83.86 |

## Limitations

This study's results were limited to the participation of public schools and school district leaders within the state of Indiana. Levels of stress are distinctive to individuals. The participant's capacity to distinguish reform as stressful may have caused bias in responses. The partiality and neutrality of the researcher may also have been a limitation. The participant's

capacity to answer a question and expose adequate mentee information may have been a limitation.

Time, travel, and sample size posed as limits for this study. I spent one or more hours officially interviewing each participant in addition to a 30-minute follow-up meeting with each participant after that. Despite these time limitations, I covered all semi-structured interview questions and follow-up probing questions with fidelity. Given the day-to-day responsibilities of school district leaders, participants were limited by the amount of time we were able to meet. Concerning the sample, all 10 participants represented public school districts. Public schools solely made-up the study, which could pose a limitation. Also, all participants were school superintendents. Thus, representation of other district-level administrative roles served as one of this study's limits.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many school operations, impacted mentor relationships, and contributed to higher stress levels. Additionally, the pandemic prohibited physical travel to participant's schools, requiring all interviews to occur via private recorded Zoom meetings. If time had afforded me to spend several days with participants educating myself further about their experiences, this limitation might not have been as inherent. As in all qualitative research studies, this study's participant selection, data collection, and data analysis in some measure depended upon me as the researcher.

## Conclusions

This study's participants provided rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences as school district leaders and mentors. This study's readers must understand that their development in school district leadership and as mentors is an ongoing process for these experienced school district leaders. I suspect that what experienced school district leaders experienced in these 10

representative school districts is not unique and could be translated into other school systems in different counties throughout Indiana. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, I used follow-up probing questions to analyze the participants' different contextual experiences. Additionally, I triangulated transcriptions of interviews and field notes with a full literature review and information provided by the IDOE. During the participant interviews, I discovered the wide range of subjective perceptions and experiences surrounding reforms, stressors engendered by reforms, and approaches participants took due to how they interacted or responded to their environments.

In this study, 10 experienced school district leaders participated in the research. The semi-structured interviews examined each participant's current and previous experiences and social processes concerning educational reforms, stressors engendered by such reforms, and mentor-mentee relationships. The participants provided an abundance of data concerning their experiences and social functions as educational leaders. Through this study's data analysis phase, several themes emerged that spoke to these experienced school district leaders. Each participant currently served as a superintendent of schools in Indiana.

**Disconnect with Legislators**

Throughout the entire interview process, the participants started to use matching terminology, which generated six interrelated themes. Four of the six themes involved participants' perceived disconnect with legislators and the methods by which they responded to stressors propelled by reforms. All 10 participants acknowledged this disconnect with legislators and expressed having to confront stressors stimulated by such reforms. When it came to their suppositions on how federal, state, and local election results will impact public education in the

years to come, several participants articulated concern for how changes at the federal, state, and local level may impact education moving forward.

### *Federal Changes and Reforms*

Given that the interviews took place during the 2020 election season, several participants referenced the impact of potential changes resulting from changeover in federal offices. Joseph R. Biden Jr. defeated Donald J. Trump in the 2020 presidential election at the federal level. As of January 20, 2021, Biden will serve as the 46th president. Christine noted how this change in the executive branch marks the third president's office change since she became superintendent. When such changes occur, Christine drew attention to the obstacles that inevitably result in how the government distributes title monies. When projecting a budget, Christine also discussed the difficulties of not knowing how districts can spend such funds moving forward.

The Biden administration has since announced its nominee for education secretary. At present, Mr. Miguel Cardona will serve in this role (Camera, 2020). Assuming Cardona accepts the position, he will inherit “a breathtaking to-do list, including the behemoth task of getting the country’s public school system back open and overseeing a potentially historic infusion of federal dollars for poor students and those with disabilities” (Camera, 2020, para. 3). Additionally, civil rights groups expect Cardona to reinstate Obama-era regulations that the Trump administration overturned. Educational leaders will likely face changes in guidance on matters like reducing the discipline of minority students, protecting the rights of transgender students, and refining the Trump administration’s recent Title IX changes.

A few participants specifically referenced matters concerning civil rights and the stressors such changes engender in their leadership practice. For instance, in Rita’s district, she mentioned having a diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinator. In her district, Rita referenced

substantial changes to their emphasis on such matters and the complexities surrounding these topics, given the polarized perspectives parents, community members, board members, and other stakeholders maintain. Speaking of the sensitivities surrounding cases involving civil rights issues, Edward also encouraged the need to educate board members on such changes and the delicacy of these conversations.

Speaking of Title IX, Ronald and Christine explicitly referenced the stressors of the Trump administration's recent rulings. Ronald expressed his concerns as such rulings essentially require school superintendents to serve as magistrates in overseeing Title IX cases. Florence equated the Title IX sexual harassment process to the current practice involving the expulsion process. Florence expressed her concerns with Title IX changes, given the appeal processes at varying junctures throughout the process. Others, however, used the Title IX changes as an example of why they approach reforms with patience and are not the first ones to jump through the hoops. In their years of experience, participants learned how quickly things change—as exemplified by what could occur with Title IX given the changeover in leadership at the federal level. For instance, Edward drew attention to his patience as such matters arise; he thereby watches as others step their toes in the water and work through the process before jumping in headfirst.

### *Indiana Changes and Reforms*

Participants also addressed stressors engendered by reforms in Indiana. Additionally, participants offered their prognostications concerning potential upcoming changes due to the recent political changeover and the upcoming legislative sessions. In Indiana, Governor Eric Holcomb ran a successful re-election campaign in 2020 and announced Indiana's first secretary of education, Dr. Katie Jenner (Wooten, 2020). Jenner replaces Dr. Jennifer McCormick, who

has served as Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction since 2016. In the new role, Jenner will serve as chief executive officer of the IDOE and serve on the Indiana State Board of Education.

Some participants addressed this leadership change, and a couple of participants expressed their hopeful optimism concerning this appointment, given their previous working relationship with Jenner. That said, Jenner will face a litany of concerns as the 2021 legislative session ensues. House Bill 1047, introduced by Rep. Jim Lucas, is one such bill. This bill addresses educational matters, such as requirements for teacher salary, evaluations, curriculum, licensure, among other issues. Also, Senate Bill 33 (2021), introduced by Sen. J. D. Ford, is another bill that requires schools to maintain at least one equity, diversity, and inclusion officer. Some participants referenced the upcoming legislative session and expressed the necessity for school leaders to stay abreast of such matters.

In February 2019, Governor Holcomb assembled a special commission to study teacher compensation and make recommendations accordingly. The Next Level Teacher Compensation Commission (2020) published a report with their conclusions titled "A Roadmap for Improving Indiana Teacher Compensation." The commission guides school corporations through disaggregating the report in addition to offering separate state government officials' recommendations. In response to the report, Indiana Superintendent Hammack published an article praising the authors for their useful analysis of why competitive teacher compensation matters. Hammack (2020) reiterated the three consequences should compensation not be handled accordingly in the upcoming legislative sessions: a decline in the popularity of entering the teaching profession, a decline in the quality of instruction, a decline in retention, and an uptick in

attrition. This report's findings illustrated another layer of complexities Indiana school district leaders would need to address in the months and years to come.

### *Local Level Changes and Board Relations*

Some participants also discussed local level changes resulting from new board members taking office, whether appointed or elected. Several participants referenced navigating the board as the most challenging part of their job. For instance, Dennis stated, "The hardest part of the job is navigating the board." Also, Edward emphasized the need to mentor the board leading up to vital decisions or complicated issues. According to Edward, "You are not going to see a very successful superintendent very long that is not able to work collaboratively with the board. That is key."

When mentoring the new superintendent at a neighboring district, Norma referenced how she was unique to the area and did not have an existing relationship with her school board. As a result, board relations served as the main topic of study for Norma and her mentee. Leonard noted the sensitivities surrounding multiple personalities he worked with, including those of the school board members. Similarly, Florence discussed how challenging it can be to keep all her board members happy but that "it is worth it for the students to support the board." Christine also addressed the difficulties resulting from the school board sometimes getting "their fingers in things that they do not need to get their fingers in" and doing her part to ensure their focus is on the most pressing matters at hand.

### *NCLB versus ESSA*

During the interview process, I discovered a lack of substance when it came to participants delineating distinct differences between ESSA and its predecessor, NCLB. Given ESSA's relatively infantile stage in the implementation process, participants lacked an overall

consensus on how ESSA will impact their leadership in the years to come. From a federalism standpoint, part of this uncertainly likely abounds given ESSA's flexibility in repositioning major federal education policy controls to the state government level (Heise, 2017). Some participants expressed a hopeful optimism on the flexibilities ESSA seems to afford should the states take advantage of them accordingly. That said, critics draw attention to "an even more fundamental development in educational policymaking power: its migration from governments to families, from regulation to markets" (Heise, 2017, p. 1859). Squabbles between federal lawmakers may matriculate down to the state-level authorities, and parents may gain more control over their child's school choice options. Nonetheless, participants gave the impression that educational leaders are left in the dark when predicting what education will look like in the years to come.

Regardless of one's stance on such matters, "The growing demand for charter schools, school voucher programs, tax credit programs, and homeschooling—independently and collectively—suggests that families have an almost unquenchable thirst for greater agency when it comes to decisions about their children's education" (Heise, 2017, p. 1862). Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in schools' global shutdowns, distinctive rises in e-learning, and a litany of uncertainties surrounding whether online learning adoption will continue post-pandemic. Some researchers suggest the educational landscape has forever changed, or at a minimum, shifts in the worldwide education market will continue disrupting the education system as it is known (Li & Lalani, 2020). Although the tug-of-war battle ensues, school district leaders have choices to make concerning what they will do within their districts concerning matters that are in the vicinity of their control.

## Approaches Experienced School Districts Employ when Confronting Stressors Engendered by Educational Reforms

Participants characterized their leadership styles based on their decisiveness and inclusiveness. Additionally, participants identified themselves as servant-oriented and team-oriented. Also, participants referenced leading from the middle, collaborating with stakeholders, and being purposefully relational. As experienced school district leaders, participants collectively shared three interconnected methods for limiting the negative impact of reforms on their districts. However, these methods serve a dual purpose as they utilize participants' leadership styles to sustain their state of equilibrium. Only then, participants reiterated, can they continue to serve effectively.

### *Approach 1: Discernibly Filter Reforms Through School District's Vision, Mission, and Values*

As discussed, the first method for limiting such reforms' negative impact involved participants discernibly filtering reforms through their district's vision, mission, and values. Regardless of whether participants characterized their leadership style as servant leadership, they reiterated ways to buffer the impact of reforms and external stressors to maximize their staff and students' spending on matters that align with their district's goals.

### *Approach 2: Consciously Exercise a Growth Mindset*

Second, participants consciously exercised a growth mindset in their leadership practice. In so doing, participants actively reflected on their practices, took calculated risks, embraced challenges, viewed failures as opportunities for growth, sought feedback, saw the effort as a path to mastery, and operated with a high sense of free will.

### *Approach 3: Actively Expand Their Network and Collaborate with Others*

Third, participants actively expanded their network and collaborated with peers, legal counsel, and professional service providers. Rather than traversing the unchartered territories that came with the nature of their jobs as 21st-century superintendents, participants reiterated the power in numbers and the need for cultivating these networks for their professional success to remain intact and should they continue effectively leading their districts.

### *Approach 4: Consider Mentoring a Fundamental Aspect of their Job Responsibilities*

Due to their tenured experience as educational leaders and acknowledging their service as mentors, the participants I interviewed were comfortable being seen as leaders. Participants used terms like *mentor* and *coach* interchangeably when speaking of informal mentor-mentee relationships. Overall, participants attributed the term mentor as a more definitive title when applied to formal relationships. Whereas participants acknowledged their willingness to serve as formal mentors when such opportunities arose, they spoke fervently on the nature of their job as superintendents entailing the mentoring or coaching of their staff members. As referenced, participants also referred to these measures as *building capacity* in others.

### *Approach 5: Convey a Duty to Mentor New and Aspiring Mentors*

Participants had difficulty separating their job responsibilities as superintendent from the organic way mentoring and coaching played into how they led. Therefore, participants' perceptions of mentoring are fundamental to their job responsibilities. However, throughout the interviews, an emphasis on participants' duty to serve as mentors came up repeatedly. Not only did participants view mentoring as a fundamental aspect of their job responsibilities, but their reverence for mentoring, coaching and building capacity in others went beyond what their job descriptions pragmatically entailed. Regardless of whether participants expressed having a

mentor early on in their district leadership tenure, they conveyed an unwavering duty to mentor new and aspiring superintendents.

## Recommendations to New and Aspiring School District Leaders

As the literature review demonstrated, school district leadership's history entwines itself with America's evolution and its democratic ideals. Dating back to the first state superintendent of schools and the first school district superintendent's rise, the school district leaders endured uncharted territories. As is the case with any position, school district leadership roles' evolution involved its fair share of peaks and valleys, triumphs and tribulations, distresses, and joys. The purpose of this study is not to suggest school district leadership in the 21st century is more difficult, stressful, or essential than decades before.

Instead, the purpose of this study is to add substance to the body of literature surrounding school district leadership and shed light on which factors may aid in a school district leader's likelihood of not only persisting in the career field but also thriving in it. American writer and futurist Toffler (1971) remarked concerning how to enhance human adaptability, "By instructing students how to learn, unlearn and relearn, a powerful new dimension can be added to education" (p. 415). The leaders of today's schools are the students Toffler referenced. How are these truths being modeled? How is the iterative learning process being encouraged within mentor-mentee relationships? As new and aspiring school district leaders, I recommend embracing this approach by being the hands and feet of Dweck's growth mindset. One's willingness to learn, unlearn, and relearn may be one of the deciding factors determining the future of education in the 21st century.

### Collaborate With Other Practicing School District Leaders

I recommend analyzing the relationships in one's personal and professional lives. Take note: who do I have in my life right now in the same boat as me? Am I collaborating with these people? Am I learning alongside them? Next, who do I have in my life that is more seasoned and experienced in my profession than me? Again, am I seeking them out? Am I learning from them? Am I being vulnerable and listening? Last, who do I have in my life right now less experienced than me? Am I building capacity in them? Do I feel it is my duty to mentor and coach them? Am I deliberately seeking out relationships with others who may not have the self-esteem to recognize their talents or who may not otherwise be marginalized or underrepresented? Only when these three categories of people are in our lives will we feel a sense of sustainable purpose.

### Seek out Mentors and Coaches Who Can Build Leadership Capacity

By collaborating with others at the same intersections in their professional careers by collaborating and expanding your network, we can learn, unlearn, and relearn together. We can hold one another accountable and approach the uncharted territories as a caravan. As participants in this study reiterated, there is power in numbers. In so doing, we can leverage one another's strengths. Vulnerability, transparency, and reflectiveness will determine the fruitfulness of these relationships. As competitive as we may be by nature, I recommend seeking out the marginalized, the less represented, and the minorities that may not otherwise have a seat at the table they rightfully deserve. As a white male school district leader myself, I recognize the need to do so.

A sign in Texas's shape decorated with bluebonnets, a cowboy, and oil derricks hung on the wall of President Lyndon Johnson's office. The sign read, "You ain't learnin' nothin' when you're talkin'." The quote allegedly came from a Texas oilman and philanthropist named Sid W.

Richardson (Cowan, 2019). I recommend we embrace the truth expressed by this quote. As imperative as it is to have a cadre of colleagues in the same boat, I recommend seeking out mentors who have perceptions and experiences to learn from moving forward. Lean into these relationships. Listen to what these folks have to say about how they evolved as leaders. Glean from how they discernibly filter reforms and apply them to your leadership practice. Experienced school district leaders consider it a duty to mentor new and aspiring school district leaders. French physiologist Claude Bernard underscored how we often know something that precludes us from learning (Toledo-Pereyra, 2009). By employing a growth mindset and committing to listening, relearning, and unlearning, you will continue growing as a leader. Mentors and coaches build capacity within others through these means.

**Seek out Mentees to Build Capacity in and Pour Into**

Last, I recommend deliberately seeking out relationships with others who may not have the self-esteem to recognize their talents or who may not otherwise be marginalized or underrepresented. If you, like the participants involved in this study, revere mentoring a duty to serve, be intentional about seeking these relationships. Socrates (470–399 B.C.), Plutarch (46–120 A.D.), and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939 A.D.) equated education to the kindling of a fire rather than filling a vessel or pail (as cited in Krupa, 2004). Through kindling the flames of others and carving out the time to build capacity in them as leaders, you will grow as a leader and ignite the fire of your passions. I recommend being vulnerable with those you mentor and coach. As Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire noted, “Dialogue cannot exist without humility” (Freire, 1968, p. 70). Humble yourself by letting your guard down with others and showing them the human side of what you do as a school district leader. Only when these three categories of people are in our lives will we feel a sense of sustainable purpose.

## Recommendations to Experienced School District Leaders

The participants in this study currently served as superintendents of school districts across Indiana. Participants served in rural districts, suburban districts, and urban/city districts. The ADM of participants' school districts ranged from 470 to 16,500 students, with an average of roughly 4,582 students. Five participants identified as men, and the other five identified as women. As a group, the 10 participants served an average of 26 years in education. On average, this study's participants served in administration for 19 years, with almost eight years being in the superintendent position.

With this information in mind, all 10 participants expressed their interest in this study's topic. Regardless of where participants fell within the ranges of experience or ADM, they overwhelmingly reiterated their gratitude for partaking in the study and their hopefulness that this study's results carry momentum in the months and years to come. I recommend you reflect on the themes that emerged from this study and relate them to your existing leadership experiences. If you share in the participants' sentiments concerning a perceived disconnect with legislators, I recommend you continue advocating for your staff and students. Should you confront stressors engendered by such reforms, I encourage you to actively reflect on your approaches for limiting their negative impact on yourself and your stakeholders.

Stay true to your district's vision, mission, and values. Any approaches shared by participants you may not currently utilize in your leadership practices suggest adding these to your repertoire. I recommend you remain mindful of the mindset you employ as a leader. Should you share the participants' use of a growth mindset, I suggest you continue cultivating this mindset personally and professionally. That said, I encourage you to ask your stakeholders what areas you lead with a growth mindset and how you may continue growing as a leader. Should

you be interested in learning more about the growth mindset, I suggest you start by reading Dweck's *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. As one participant shared, he was currently engaged in a volunteer learning community with staff members, and they were reading this book together and discussing implementation strategies. Should you already be familiar with growth mindsets, there are multiple resources available for future study, and I would encourage you to keep cultivating a culture in your district that embraces this approach to learning.

As emphasized by participants, I hope and trust you are actively engaged in collaborative networks with colleagues. Take full advantage of your legal counsel and the professional service providers and the fantastic resources they have to offer if you are not already doing so. I recommend considering the sentiments shared by some participants concerning the need for one's network to go beyond geographical locations and assuredly include peers who serve in districts with similar demographics, socioeconomics, community infrastructures, and cultures. I humbly ask you to consider new and aspiring district leaders who may be marginalized or underrepresented. I challenge you to be the one who reaches out to them and extends a helping hand. I challenge you to identify talents they may not use otherwise, harness, or act out in their prospective working environments.

Given the emphasis on having people in one's life who are more experienced, in the same boat, and less experienced than you may be, I ask that you list out whom these people represent in each category. In areas more shallow or stale, I ask you to reach out and consider what participants in this study had to say about the importance of informal and formal mentor-mentee relationships. As an experienced school district leader, I encourage you to reflect on the role mentoring plays in your daily operations and job functions. Should you feel the duty to mentor others as participants shared, I challenge you to carve out time to do so and actively consider

who you are not currently mentoring or being mentored by that would help your duty to serve and desire to continually mature as an educational leader.

Last, thank you for your time and consideration. Thank you for your willingness to serve and for your unwavering desire to impact others' lives, as I honestly believe this is the most critical profession in the world. For those called to serve as educational leaders, I firmly believe we have a duty to stay committed to the cause. May we persevere, stand together as a united front, hold one another accountable, and continue building capacity in others.

**Collaborate with Other Practicing School District Leaders**

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## Recommendations to School Board Members

While this study's intent did not revolve around school superintendent relations with one's board, several participants noted the challenges of navigating board relations. A few participants went so far as to claim the most challenging part of their job entailed navigating the board. Such participants referenced specific board members' realities having personal agendas or not understanding their roles within the given district. Other participants referenced their deliberate efforts to mentor their board. Although participants in this study expressed their gratitude for the board members they served alongside, they also represented the reality of there being situations elsewhere that are less favorable. Although reading through responses participants offered throughout the semi-structured interviews highlighted within this study, I encourage you to consider further the stressors engendered by reforms and legislative changes at the federal, state, and local levels.

Additionally, I recommend taking note of how participants buffer their stakeholders from the stressors engendered by these reforms and external pressures. For existing school district leaders in your district, I recommend talking with them about the approaches they employ to

sustain their state of equilibrium and maintain their capacity to serve in your community effectively. How are they filtering reforms around your district's vision, mission, and values? Are they consciously exercising a growth mindset? Are they actively expanding their network and collaborating with others? Do they consider mentoring a fundamental aspect of their job responsibilities? Do they convey a duty to mentor?

Likewise, I would encourage you to reflect on these questions and apply them to your respective leadership practices as school board members. Should you be in a position whereby you need to hire a school superintendent or district leader, perhaps these are questions that can matriculate into your interview questions. Last, I would encourage you to consider participants' concerns about ensuring their district leadership teams represent their communities' demographics. Are there internal candidates with talents that may otherwise get overlooked because of their identified gender, ethnicity, or some other factor? These sorts of reflective questions may help one's collective ability to ensure highly qualified school district leaders maintain their roles and become replaced by others in due course that embodies those ideals.

## Recommendations to Higher Educational Institutions

This study's intended nature did not explicitly focus on higher educational institutions equipping new and aspiring school district leaders to effectively implement what they learned in their formal training. That said, the intersections where theories and practices align tend to be fertile ground for reflection. As much as we societal focus on goals and terminal mile markers, like graduating from institutions, educators often wonder what? Once graduates demonstrate mastery of the skills and knowledge taught within a given program, how do such competencies interact with their application in real-world settings? Regardless of such variables, how are our graduates faring out there? Mixed-method approaches offer varying metrics used to evaluate

programming. Professors often follow-up with graduates after that and qualify such metrics through informal conversations. Symposia may involve graduates who share their experiences. Cohorts may get together for cocktails and reminisce about their peaks and valleys along the way. That said, I recognize the umbrella of an institution's vision, mission, and values. Perhaps some nuggets are worth adding to one's repertoire in designing, implementing, and evaluating course work within that umbrella.

### Recommendations to Legislators, Policy Makers, and Other Related Officials

I recommend that legislators, policymakers, and other related officials note participants' collective sentiments in this study. Specifically, I challenge such parties to lean into their vulnerabilities and openly consider participants' perceptions concerning the disjointedness between schools and legislators, policymakers, and other decision-makers. What if we committed to serving as the models for our children in a divisive world full of unknowns? Before looking through the windshield at what may lie ahead, perhaps we should look in the rearview mirror and assess what led us to this point. In Chapter 2 of *The Prisoner* from volume five of his seven-volume work *Remembrance of Things Past* by French novelist Marcel Proust (2015), the narrator gets lost in a brilliantly strange yet eerily familiar land created by a composer. The narrator emphasized that the real voyage of discovery does not result from seeking new lands—the real voyage of discovery results from seeing the same lands with fresh eyes.

Before venturing into new terrains, as appealing as vendors may make them out to be, what if we evaluated where we are, and what metrics we are using but did so with fresh eyes? German-born theoretical physicist Albert Einstein's *Gadeankenexperiment* exemplified his theory on simultaneity relativity (Stone, 2013). In so doing, Einstein portrayed an image of a moving train. Then, he asked the viewer to view this image from two perspectives: a person

sitting on the train and someone standing outside of it. If lightning strikes the train at both ends, the person sitting on the train facing the front will claim the lightning strike in the back of the train followed the strike in the front as the light would not reach their eyes until after the strike at the front occurred. Meanwhile, the person standing outside the train would maintain the bolts struck simultaneously since the light would hit their eyes simultaneously. Physics aside, differences in perspective are not binary, implying that one is right and the other is wrong. By shifting the lens and viewing the same situation from another angle or perspective, perhaps the real voyage of discovery stems from viewing that which is here.

## My Thoughts

As I conducted this study, I further recognized my appreciation for my superintendent and her unwavering commitment to building others' capacity. As an experienced superintendent, she serves as a mentor to countless staff members within her school district. Much like a baseball manager who strategically reorients the batting order to maximize players' efficiency and effectiveness by finding the right sequencing based on their respective roles, she identifies talents within leaders. She is not afraid to change the lineup if needed. As some participants spoke to me, I did not see myself in a district-level leadership role. If not for her recognizing talents in me and providing me with the opportunities to cultivate these talents and leverage my passions, I would not be in the position I am in today.

Additionally, several of her mentees have since left the district to pursue leadership opportunities elsewhere. Much like the participants in this study who reflected on their mentors' roles in their development, my mentor is fully committed to ensuring our district's vision, mission, and vision stay the top priority. She puts teachers first while emphasizing what we do is ultimately for students' best. When new school superintendents enter the field, she is quick to

collaborate with them and ensure they are fully supported. This past year, a superintendent came to a neighboring district and was not familiar with the area. As a district-level administrator under her leadership, I am grateful to serve under a mentor who is all about making others better due to her presence. She is all about making sure our impact lasts in our future absence.

As a relatively new district-level administrator serving in the central office at a public school district in Indiana, each day provides unique circumstances that afford me opportunities to reflect and grow as a leader. Looking back to the years I spent in the classroom, I now recognize what sorts of efforts administrators made to shield teachers from the stressors engendered by reforms. As a high school English teacher, I diligently prepared students for high-stakes tests and knew the realities surrounding such metrics. That said, administrators effectively buffered many external stressors that could have otherwise deterred us from accomplishing our school district's clearly-communicated mission, goals, and vision. In hindsight, I recognized the sacrifices they made as tributes to protect our time with students in the classroom.

Now that I am aware of what efforts administrators took to protect classroom time, I am increasingly grateful for my administrators' due diligence and willingness to shield us from such stressors. Like many of the participants referred to throughout the interviews, I better understand why school district leaders approach the central office's responsibilities to serve the building level administrators, staff, and students. To handle efficiently the pragmatic realities of what daily involvements occur within a given school building, being strategic with one's resources and invaluable commodities, such as time and staffing, is an absolute necessity should a school district stay united and thrive. After learning about the varying ways participants matured throughout their tenures, I remain committed to a lifelong growth journey. Like the participants, I, too, employ a growth mindset and am known for being a fervently reflective person.

Also, I will remain committed to expanding my network as participants prioritized the necessity of doing so. While maturing as an educational leader, I will also be mindful of ensuring I do not leave others out as I look for ways to be more inclusive, especially when people enter a new position and so forth. Rita offered a generalization that I remain committed to reflecting on:

> The male leaders I have seen who have grown quickly jumped through the hoops without gaining any expertise. But just because they are males, they get these opportunities that people of color and women do not always get. And so I think the mentors must seek out diverse groups of people to mentor so that they can have more—equal opportunities.

Given the comments made by some of the participants concerning the need for school superintendent demographics to better represent one's district constituents, I recognize being a part of the majority as a white male. Regardless of what position I may have in the future, I will actively seek out ways to ensure I am inclusively leading and am intentional with diversifying whom I network with and have a hand in hiring for positions that could arise. I, too, feel a duty to mentor others by building capacity in them, providing a listening ear, and showing my unwavering support to them so long as it aligns with the standards in place that formulate our district's mission, vision, and values.

## Final Thoughts for Future Research

I began this research because I wanted to understand better how experienced school district leaders view mentor-mentee relationships related to their job responsibilities and sustained success. The participants I interviewed provided thought-provoking, rich data. As a result, I saw an entirely new avenue of how mentor-mentee relationships are not only a fundamental aspect of school district leaders' job responsibilities but that those leaders feel a duty to serve as mentors to new and aspiring school district leaders. I did not anticipate acquiring

such an in-depth understanding of how filtering reforms, serving as a buffer, employing a growth mindset, and seeking out collaborative networks play such pivotal roles in a school district leader's ability to lead effectively and efficiently.

This study took a different route from previous research with my study topic. That said, I gained perspectives from school superintendents representing multiple locales and better representing what many participants feel should be a representative gender distribution with more female superintendents in place. Although this study solely focused on experienced school district leaders' perceptions of mentoring, this research's replication could result in affirming, qualifying, or countering themes illustrated in this study. Future research may involve more participants in Indiana or other states who participate in a similar task or replicate this research. Future research could focus on interviewing participants who have not experienced success or left the profession.

Further exploration is needed to understand minoritized candidates' experiences as school district leaders. Would minoritized school district leaders identify similar factors in how they progressed in their educational leadership journeys? Would such participants reference similar reforms and stressors engendered by them? Would such participants offer differing perspectives on reforms and how they have impacted them? Similarly, what would minoritized participants say about mentor-mentee relationships and collaborative networks' role in their leadership progression or lack thereof? What role would the locale of their districts play in such matters? Or, what role would the districts' free and reduced lunch percentage, for instance, play in such determinations?

As participants underscored throughout the interviews, researchers also need to conduct future research to ascertain why more women are not in school superintendent roles. As Table 6

illustrates, a slight increase in female superintendents from 2010 to 2020 in Indiana may indicate a promising trajectory for changing the distribution. For instance, 2020 shows the highest percentage of female superintendents in Indiana over the last decade, with 23.4% of Indiana superintendents identifying themselves as women. That said, future research additionally needs to explore the retention rates as fluctuation over the last decade may indicate a higher retention rate for those identifying as men or women. Such results could shed light on how to increase the number of women who serve as school superintendents in Indiana or other states.

Table 6

*Indiana Superintendent Gender Breakdown: 2010–2020*

| Year | Percent Male | Percent Female |
|---|---|---|
| 2010 | 81.6 | 18.3 |
| 2011 | 82.7 | 19.6 |
| 2012 | 81.3 | 19.7 |
| 2013 | 79.2 | 17.8 |
| 2014 | 76.8 | 21.2 |
| 2015 | 78.2 | 21.8 |
| 2016 | 79.3 | 20.7 |
| 2017 | 80.6 | 19.4 |
| 2018 | 78.5 | 21.5 |
| 2019 | 78.6 | 21.4 |
| 2020 | 76.6 | 23.4 |

Additional topics of interest related to mentor-mentee relationships within school district leadership involve evolving educational modalities and options for synchronous, asynchronous, blended, hybrid, and traditional learning experiences. Moving forward, parents will presumably see increased possibilities for the types of the learning environment and modality best fit their children's needs and aspirations. Increases in virtual schools' availability coupled with school choice initiatives and voucher programs inevitably bring forth new opportunities for educational leaders.

I hope that the results found in this study may offer encouragement to practicing school district leaders who are in the trenches and doing their part to serve effectively. Additionally, I hope new and aspiring school district leaders find encouragement in looking beyond the

percentages on district leadership turnover rates and the media's ensuing narratives about the job's nature. In turn, I hope new and aspiring district leaders find comfort in recognizing the emphasis practicing school district leaders place on their duty to serve as mentors and build capacity in others. As participants noted, there is much need to understand further the effects of ESSA compared to NCLB. Also, there is much need for further research on ensuring that district-level leaders represent their communities. In so doing, underrepresented minority and female candidates deserve more seats at the table. We must serve and remain committed to the lifelong iterative process of growing personally and professionally.

I want to conclude with a remark made well over a century ago by a Russian man named Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, known in America as Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy is one of the more popular novelists (Emerson, 2016). Author of canonized literary works like *War and Peace*, Tolstoy idealized his childhood memories in his writings despite his parents and several other family members dying when he was young. To date, Tolstoy serves as an example of challenging one's assumptions and prejudices and developing new ways of seeing the world through surrounding oneself with people whose views and lifestyles differ. That said, his teachers described Tolstoy as "unable and unwilling to learn." As a result, he abandoned all formal education.

> There can be only one permanent revolution—a moral one; the regeneration of the inner man. How is this revolution to take place? Nobody knows how it will take place in humanity, but every man feels it clearly in himself. And yet, in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself. (Tolstoy, 1900, p. 29)

## Summary

This discussion and conclusions offered an overview of this study's importance within the existing educational reform context and the uncertainties encompassing the country and Indiana's educational landscape. Additionally, I addressed limitations like time, travel, and sample size. Conclusions focused on participants' perceived disconnect with legislators and the approaches employed as a means of confronting the stressors engendered by educational reforms.

I offered a series of interrelated recommendations to stakeholders who play critical roles in the topics discussed throughout this study. Specific recommendations targeted each category of stakeholder represented by this study. I also reiterated the initial desire to understand better how experienced school district leaders view mentor-mentee relationships related to their job responsibilities and sustained success. My final thoughts regarding future research addressed unanticipated research areas that surfaced throughout this qualitative study. Future research needs to focus on underrepresented minoritized school district leaders' experiences related to formal and informal mentoring based on participant responses. Similarly, I addressed the need for additional research on female superintendents and applying this study's focus to a group of participants who have not experienced sustained success or effectiveness in the profession.

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# APPENDIX A: DISTRICT LEADER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your current position?
2. How many years have you served in your current position?
3. How many years have you served as a district administrator?
4. How many years have you been an educator?
5. Please describe your central office in terms of personnel and organization.
6. What is your district's Average Daily Membership?
7. Would you consider your district as primarily urban, suburban, metropolitan, or rural?
8. Are you currently in a mentor/mentee relationship?
9. Describe your predominant leadership style?
10. What do you consider to be the most significant educational reforms that impact your leadership?
11. Do these significant educational reforms serve as a source of stress in your leadership practice?
12. Do these significant educational reforms create negative or positive stress in your leadership practice?
13. Do you feel you are effectively dealing with the reforms you are faced with?
14. Are you currently involved in a mentor/mentee relationship?
15. How many years have you served as a district-level mentor?
16. How many mentees have you served since becoming a district leader?
17. Why do you serve as a mentor?
18. Did you have a mentor during your first years of district leadership?
    a. If so, do you think it helped contribute to your leadership successes?
    b. If not, do you think it could have helped?
19. Describe your current relationship between your mentee and yourself.
20. How did the relationship with your mentor begin?
21. Would you describe your current mentor/mentee relationship as formal or informal?
22. Do issues of significant educational reform enter into your current mentor-mentee relationship?
23. Do significant educational reforms serve as a source of stress in your mentees' leadership practice?
24. Do these significant educational reforms create negative or positive stress in your mentees' leadership practice?
25. Which reforms serve as the greatest source of stress to your mentee?
26. Does your mentee's leadership style change according to the reform situations you face?
27. Does your mentee feel he/she is effectively dealing with the reforms he/she is faced with?
28. Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude?

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FORM—SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS

<Date>

<Name>

<Address1>
<Address2>

Dear <Name>,

Educational reform in the United States has undertaken numerous alterations since the turn of the 21st century. At the federal level, significant reformative changes consist of enacting the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and its replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. Since ESSA's enactment, the state level's increased autonomy affords each state more flexibility regarding its response and supplemental implementation strategy (Atkinson, 2017). Given these variances, this qualitative case study will solely concentrate on school district leaders in Indiana for its participants. In Indiana, recent significant changes result from changes to assessments like the Indiana Evaluation Assessment Readiness Network (ILEARN) in 2017, the passage of Graduation Pathways in 2018, and the replacement of ISTEP with the SAT before reverting to the ISTEP for a year.

Additionally, school funding issues brought forth by the circuit breaker tax caps, increased alternatives to public education through choice, voucher programs, and online public schooling add layers of complexity to the profession. Most recently, school district leaders faced the pandemic forcing shutdowns during the spring of 2020. Currently, school districts face implementing and revising reentry plans to return in the fall of 2020 and circumnavigate these uncharted territories.

Meanwhile, school districts face internal changes relating to their respective schools, communities, students, staff members, and leadership teams. Turnover in school district leadership, for instance, remains a mainstay. Of 388 Indiana chief executive leaders in 2018, only 306 returned in 2019 (R. LeClaire, personal communication, April 20, 2020). School superintendent openings will predictably arise in the years to come, and an absence of confirmed research surrounding the need for "deeper discussions about the conditions necessary for superintendent longevity and effectiveness" (The Broad Center, 2018, p. 13) corroborate a persistent need for an additional examination of these patterns (Rogers & McCord, 2020).

When public school leaders like yourself face current reform initiatives and these sorts of uncertainties, their experiences or lack of such experiences may be a significant factor in confronting the required changes.

This research, therefore, seeks to analyze further if the support received by mentors and coaches can be a determining factor in how new school district leaders embrace the latest reforms – including those brought on by ESSA, and in turn work with their organizations and communities to successfully lead their districts through these uncharted territories.

The study aims to better define and understand the influence of informal and formal mentoring of new district school leaders, including superintendents, in times of stressful educational reform. The semi-structured one-on-one interview will occur through a privately recorded Zoom session with eligible volunteer subjects who met the participant criteria. The participant will choose the time and location of the interviews to ensure comfortability on the participant's behalf. Additionally, field notes will be taken by the Principal Investigator during the duration of the interview with each participant. After conducting interviews, I will transcribe the audio files and refer back to the Zoom recording's closed captioning.

We are requesting two hours of your time to contribute to acquiring information for a dissertation research project that incorporates school leadership characteristics in times of significant educational reform. The interviews will necessitate no travel on your part. Participation in this study is voluntary. Confidentiality of all participants, their school districts, or any information that could identify participants will be maintained. Data will be coded for use and accessed only by the researchers. All identifiers will be removed from the data to protect confidentiality. Participants will choose pseudonyms, or pseudonyms will be provided on their behalves to ensure data confidentiality. Transcripts will be analyzed using a coding process to determine themes within the data. If you would be willing to participate in this study, please contact me at tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request for assistance.

Sincerely,

Timothy Ryan Krieg
Director of Secondary Curriculum
School City of Hobart
Administration Building
32 E 7th Street
Hobart, IN 46342
(219) 713-9540
tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu

Dr. Brad Balch, Professor & Dean Emeritus
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Indiana State University
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Terre Haute, IN 47809
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## APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### Effective School Leadership Mentoring Characteristics in the 21st Century: Moving Beyond Compliance and Conformity

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study aims to determine what perceptions school district leaders have of their informal and formal mentoring experiences in times of stressful educational reform. This document will help you decide if you want to participate in this research by providing you information about the study and what you are asked to do. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are considered an experienced superintendent or district leader.

Some reasons you might want to participate in this research are resultant from the reported lack of correlative trends or patterns connecting superintendent tenure and effectiveness coupled with an annual drop in the percentage of school superintendents in Indiana who return the following year. Mentoring and coaching are two such constructs that may play a role in linking tenure and effectiveness. You might not want to participate in this research because of your potential discontentment in responding to the posed questions despite being able to elect not to answer a question or questions. Other potential reasons may result from your perceived partiality or neutrality related to mentoring and coaching new school district leaders and superintendents.

This study asks you to volunteer by partaking in a research study consisting of one-hour, one-on-one interviews via a private Zoom session. The interview will be recorded, and I will

additionally take notes while conducting the study. Additionally, you will be telephoned or invited to another private Zoom session for a follow-up interview to appraise your transcripts and cross-check your responses. The interview questions will be directed toward both past, and current educational reform initiatives, including those brought forth by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), what leadership method(s) was/were employed, and its influence had on mentoring.

After contacting the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) for a full list of candidates who met these criteria of the study and randomizing it to safeguard candidates' selection from potentially latent subjective measures, you were selected as an eligible subject. After randomizing the list of eligible subjects to safeguard any latent subjectivity, we ensured five candidates identify as male, five candidates as female, at least two candidates serve in an urban/metropolitan area, and at least two candidates serve in a suburban or rural area.

You have been asked to participate in this research because you meet the criteria outlined in the study: For this study, an experienced superintendent or district leader refers to a veteran, retired, or practicing superintendent with a minimum of ten years' experience practicing in this capacity. Additionally, you hold a valid Superintendent license in Indiana and have served in a district-level leadership role in Indiana since ESSA's enactment in 2015.

The choice to participate or not is yours; participation is entirely voluntary. You can decline to participate at any time during the process and immediately stop recording audio and delete or request to have the interview rescheduled. You will not be contacted in the future if you decide not to participate. You may decline to participate at any time during the process. You may also decline to respond to any question(s) you do not want to answer. Before any questions are asked during the interview, we will verbally remind you that you may also decline to respond to

any questions you do not want to answer, that there is no consequence if you withdraw from the study and that you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise authorized.

You may email your intent to withdraw during, between, or after one-on-one Zoom meetings. If you withdraw before data analysis, all information and data associated with you will be destroyed. Withdrawal from the study will be allowed until the point of data analysis. Once data analysis begins, two weeks after the Zoom meeting, it will be unfeasible to remove data, and removal from the study will not be possible due to coding, looking for patterns, and establishing a theme. Again – there is no consequence if you choose not to participate, decline to answer any question(s), or withdraw from the study, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise authorized.

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality by coding all data for use and accessed solely by the involved researchers. All identifiers will be removed from the data in order to protect confidentiality. Any information acquired in association with this study can be acknowledged with you will remain confidential and unveiled only with your authorization or as compulsory by law. Your name will not be used, nor will you be personally identified in any fashion or at any time. You may choose your pseudonym, or the PIs will choose a pseudonym for you.

The research will include a master code list to ascertain each subject for data analysis determinations. The confidentiality of respondents will be secured by all means obtainable to me. Participants will be entreated to retain all information shared for the interview's duration confidential. Data collected in this study will be stowed in a locked filing cabinet in my office for the mandatory three-year period. All data collected, including recordings, will be shredded and destroyed at the end of the mandatory storage period. You have the right to examine material

preceding the concluding oral defense of the study and may do so through filing a written request to me.

There are some potential risks to this study. These include the possibility of participants who may not feel contented responding to all the posed questions in the survey. However, participants may elect not to answer a question or question(s) as stated. Every precaution has been taken to reduce the risk, but there is still no more than the minimal risk involved in this socio-behavioral study.

**Date of IRB Approval:** September 15, 2020

**IRB Number:** 1647230-2

**Project Expiration Date:** N/A

## APPENDIX D: IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

<Date>

<Name>

<Address1>

<Address2>

Dear <Name>,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Please email tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu with dates and times (designating your respective time zone) that best accommodate your schedule. A private Zoom invitation will be sent upon receipt of this confirmation and the signed form found on page 2 of this correspondence letter.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research before moving forward, please contact:

Timothy Ryan Krieg
Director of Secondary Curriculum
School City of Hobart
Administration Building
32 E 7th Street
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(219) 713-9540

Dr. Brad Balch, Professor
College of Education
Indiana State University
Bayh College of Education
Room 109
Terre Haute, IN 47809
(812) 237-2888

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 4709, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

Sincerely,

Timothy Ryan Krieg
Director of Secondary Curriculum
School City of Hobart
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I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Printed Name of Subject

_____ _____

Signature of Subject Date

# APPENDIX E: LETTER OF COOPERATION

<Date>

<Name>

<Address1>
<Address2>

Dear <Name>,

We are writing to seek your permission for a district-level administrator in your school corporation to participate in a voluntary research study, "Effective School Leadership Mentoring Characteristics in the 21st Century: Moving Beyond Compliance and Conformity," to be conducted by Timothy R. Krieg, a doctoral student at Indiana State University and Dr. Bradley "Brad" Balch, Dissertation Chair.

The study aims to better define and understand experienced school district leaders' perceptions of their formal and informal mentoring experiences in times of stressful educational reform. The semi-structured one-on-one interview will occur through a privately recorded Zoom session with eligible volunteer subjects who met the participant criteria. After securing a list of suitable subjects from the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) and randomizing the list, a school district administrator from your school corporation was identified as a subject eligible for participating in this research study. The participant will choose the time and location of the interviews to ensure comfortability on the participant's behalf. Additionally, field notes will be taken by the Principal Investigator during the duration of the interview with each participant. After conducting interviews, I will transcribe the audio files and refer back to the Zoom recording's closed captioning.

We are requesting two hours of your school district administrator's time to contribute to acquiring information for a dissertation research project that incorporates school leadership characteristics in times of significant educational reform. The interviews will necessitate no travel on your part. Participation in this study is voluntary. Confidentiality of all participants, their school districts, or any information that could identify participants will be maintained. Data will be coded for use and accessed only by me. All identifiers will be removed from the data to protect confidentiality. Participants will choose pseudonyms, or pseudonyms will be provided on their behalves to ensure data confidentiality. Transcripts will be analyzed using a coding process to determine themes within the data. If you would be willing to participate in this study, please contact me at tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu

If you – as the appropriate administrator of your school district – are willing to have the voluntary subject participate in this study, please send this signed document via email to tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request for assistance.

Sincerely,

Timothy Ryan Krieg
Director of Secondary Curriculum
School City of Hobart
Administration Building
32 E 7th Street
Hobart, IN 46342
(219) 713-9540
tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu

Dr. Brad Balch, Professor & Dean Emeritus
College of Education
Indiana State University
Bayh College of Education
Room 109
Terre Haute, IN 47809
(812) 237-2888
Brad.Balch@indstate.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-3088 or by email at irb@indstate.edu

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I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to have [Insert Eligible Subject's Name] participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

PRINTED NAME:
_____

PRINTED TITLE:
_____

# APPENDIX F: POST-INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT APPRAISAL AND SHARING OF THEMES

<Date>

<Name>

<Address1>
<Address2>

Dear <Name>,

Thank you for voluntarily choosing to participate in this study. As a reminder, the study aims to better define and understand experienced school district leaders' perceptions of their experiences with formal and informal mentoring in stressful educational reform times. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews with each participant occurred through privately recorded Zoom sessions. Each eligible volunteer subject met the participant criteria. Each participant chose the interviews' time and location to ensure comfortability on the participant's behalf.

Additionally, field notes were taken by the Principal Investigator during the duration of the interview with each participant. After conducting interviews, I transcribed the audio files and referred them back to the Zoom recording's closed captioning.

Our initial request for two hours of your time contributing to qualitative information for a dissertation research project that incorporates school leadership characteristics in times of significant educational reform will conclude at the culmination of our follow-up meeting. As was the case for our first meeting, the follow-up meetings will necessitate no travel on your part. Again, participation in this study is voluntary. Confidentiality of all participants, their school districts, or any information that could identify participants will be maintained.

Data were coded for use and accessed only by me as another reminder. All identifiers were removed from the data to protect your confidentiality. Participants were able to choose pseudonyms, or pseudonyms were provided on their behalves to ensure data confidentiality. Transcripts were analyzed using a coding process to determine themes within the data.

As stated in the Consent to Participate in Research document, any information acquired in association with this study can be acknowledged with you will remain confidential and unveiled only with your authorization or as compulsory by law.

You have the right to examine material preceding the study's concluding oral defense and may do so by filing a written request to me.

**If you are willing to partake in a brief follow-up meeting one-on-one through a private recorded Zoom meeting to appraise the transcripts, crosscheck your responses, and listen to what major preliminary themes, please email tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu. Each participant will choose the time and location of the follow-up meeting interviews to ensure comfortability on the participant's behalf.**

**Again, thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Please email tkrieg1@sycamores.indstate.edu with dates and times (designating your respective time zone) to accommodate your schedule. A private Zoom invitation will be sent upon receipt of this confirmation and the signed form.**

If you have any inquiries concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be afforded the occasion to converse any inquiries about your rights as a research subject with an IRB member. The IRB is an independent committee comprised of members from the university community and lay community members who are not associated with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request for assistance.

Sincerely,

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