THE EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP
IN THE 21ST CENTURY
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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John J. Antonucci

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent, which some researchers claim is one of the most complex leadership positions seen today. The challenges of the superintendency may be contributing to a great number of professionals leaving the field, and a rate of turnover that some describe as historically high. Some superintendents even question the future of the position. With that in mind, this study seeks to provide current practitioners and future researchers a richer understanding of this one-of-a-kind job. The primary research question was: What is the lived experience of a 21st century school superintendent? Four secondary questions also provided a framework for the research: 1) What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role? 2) What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership? 3) What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job? 4) How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?

The design of this study was qualitative and employed a phenomenological strategy of inquiry. The six study participants included five current or recently retired suburban school superintendents from the New England area who had served at least seven years in the position. The sixth participant currently serves as executive director for an independent trade association that provides direct services to superintendents in a New England state. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in the respective participants’ workplaces.

The study resulted in the identification of four key leadership roles served by superintendents: 1) superintendent as CEO, 2) superintendent as politician, 3)
superintendent as instructional leader, and 4) superintendent as community leader. In addition, the findings were consistent with prior research that demonstrates that the job of the school superintendent is immensely complex and challenging. The six superintendents all described a job that is complete with conflict, public scrutiny, unreasonable expectations, complex relationships, and politics. Those challenges took both a personal and professional toll on superintendents. The study also explored whether superintendent turnover was a real or perceived problem and, similar to prior research, was inconclusive. The findings from this study also revealed that superintendents must bring to the table a wide and varied skill set. However, some consistencies emerged from the findings leading the researcher to conclude that there were a number of skills that were essential for successful superintendents to possess. They include expertise in: *curriculum and instruction, personnel management, communication, and relationship-building*. Finally, the literature review explored whether or not superintendents were adequately prepared for the job, and the results were inconclusive. Although researchers admit there is a perception that preparation program are inadequate, there is also evidence to suggest that superintendents are generally satisfied with their level of preparation. The findings of this study were similarly inconclusive, however, all of the participants agreed that superintendents would be better served by programs that incorporated more case studies, scenario-based instruction, and hands-on experiences.

Keywords: School superintendent, superintendent leadership, superintendent turnover, challenges of the superintendency, superintendent preparation
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This phenomenological study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent, which according to some researchers is one of the most complex leadership positions of the twenty-first century. The challenges of the superintendency may be contributing to a great number of professionals leaving the field, and a rate of turnover that some describe as historically high. Some superintendents even question the future of the position. With that in mind, this study sought to provide current practitioners and future researchers a richer understanding of this one-of-a-kind job. In light of this undertaking, the researcher conducted interviews with six suburban school superintendents from New England, each of whom has extensive experience in the field. Two theoretical frameworks guided the research. The first can be found in the work of such researchers as Boyd (1999), who contend that organizations should operate as “open systems, which assumes permeable boundaries and interactive two-way relationship between schools … and their environments” (Bush, 2003, p. 42). The second framework focuses on leadership—in particular on the unique challenges faced by chief executive officers (CEOs). Porter and Nohria (2010) provide a four-stage thematic lens for exploring this topic.

Problem Statement and Significance

The role of the twenty-first century school superintendent is becoming increasingly complex. Today’s educational leaders are asked to balance increased demands, higher accountability standards, fewer benefits than similar jobs in the private sector, diminished financial resources, and increasing criticism from outside the field (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Although working in the field of public education
brings numerous intrinsic rewards, the superintendency is a formidable undertaking. Short and Scribner (2002) suggest that “the role of the school superintendent has evolved into one of the most complex leadership positions seen today” (p. 1). Kowalski (2006) notes that being the chief executive officer of any organization is a difficult assignment, and being a school superintendent is no exception. In today’s educational arena, the superintendent is responsible for balancing the social, political, economic, and legal problems than penetrate the schoolhouse, as well as for managing the tensions surrounding these problems. Because of that, Cuban (1985) contends that “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency” (p. 28).

The challenges of the position may be contributing to a great number of professionals leaving the field, and a rate of turnover that some describe as historically high. Carter and Cunningham (1997) report that the average tenure of superintendents is at an all-time low. Recent statistics have demonstrated an annual turnover rate in some states at almost 19% (Czaja & Harman, 1997), leading some to question whether the superintendency is “evolving into a temporary position” (Shand, 2001, p. 2). In Massachusetts, of the 277 public school superintendents, there have been over 220 job turnovers in the past five years. This year alone, 66 school districts hired new superintendents (Scott, 2011).

With the seemingly endless demands being placed on school districts throughout the country, much of them precipitated by recent educational reform efforts such as No Child Left Behind, school superintendents are under fire. It is thus imperative to gain a better understanding of this unique profession. Many educators question the future of the
superintendency, and if the conditions of the job remain unchecked, there is the potential for greater upheaval in the profession (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

**Significance of the problem.** Uncertainty surrounding the position of the school superintendent may have several implications in the education arena. Looking at the issue from a macro level, Fullan (2002) argues that academic improvement occurs only when effective leaders have time to implement broad, sustainable reform. Turnover in the superintendency means that the continuity of district leadership is compromised, as is the ability of superintendents to respond to the mandates for change and educational reform.

In addition, there is a popular perception that the superintendency has become an impossible job and, in turn, one that few want to undertake (Sovine, 2009). This is evidenced by the reduced number of applicants for vacancies. Throughout the country, the demand for high-quality superintendent candidates exceeds the supply, and average-quality applicant pools are decreasing in size (Glass, 2001a). Carter and Cunningham (1997), in describing the “pipeline shortage,” sound an alarm that the future of the superintendency may be in peril unless policy makers and the public gain a better understanding of what is driving candidates away from the position.

Furthermore, the high rate of turnover leads one to question whether those assuming the superintendency are fully prepared for the job’s challenges. A deeper investigation into the superintendent role may yield valuable information for college, university, and professional preparation programs. Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) question whether current programs are aligned with the realities of the job, and state that many superintendents believe revamping preparation programs would be effective in improving school leadership.
Articulating the job’s leadership challenges may also help guide school boards and search or hiring consultants to better refine their search criteria. With a decreasing candidate pool, finding candidates who meet a school board’s expectations and possess the requisite skills to be effective district leaders is more important than ever.

**Discussion of Practical and Intellectual Goals**

Although research on school leadership (e.g., school principals) is abundant, research on the superintendency is relatively sparse. As the educational landscape has become more complex, the spotlight has shone brighter on superintendents, whose position at the top of district organizational charts makes them highly accountable for literally everything that happens in schools today. However, Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) surmise that “we know less about school superintendents than about any other set of chief executives in the nation” (p. 5). Intellectually, this research, whose subjects are 21st century practitioners, hoped to add to a growing body of research and provide future researchers a richer understanding of this one-of-a-kind job.

In addition, there is evidence suggesting that fewer people are pursuing the superintendency. School boards throughout the country struggle to find viable candidates to fill the vacancies. It is imperative to further the research on the superintendency to encourage qualified and capable administrators to pursue this career path. Furthermore, aspiring and sitting superintendents need reliable and valid research to better understand and appreciate their position. Delving into the lived experiences of superintendents will provide practitioners a realistic and practical depiction of the job responsibilities, and a sampling of the skills needed to achieve stability and success.
Research Questions

The superintendency is considered to be the most visible and influential leadership positions in the field of education today (Sovine, 2000). This research aims to contribute to the existing research on the role of the school superintendent by drawing on individual accounts of their lived experiences (Brunner, 2000). Toward that end, the researcher, using a qualitative, phenomenological process, asked one primary research question: What is the lived experience of a 21st century school superintendent?

Furthermore, four subquestions assisted the researcher in getting to the root of the primary research question:

- What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?
- What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?
- What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job?
- How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?

Summary of Doctoral Project Report Contents and Organization

The Doctoral Project continues in chapter 1 with a theoretical framework used to guide the proposed research and provide an overall orienting lens for the study (Creswell, 2009). Chapter 2 covers an in-depth review of related literature, which will 1) discuss the results of related studies, 2) propose further study for a larger dialogue in the literature, 3) show how the proposed research fits into existing knowledge on the topic, and 4) serve to ground the proposed study in relevant previous research (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Chapter 3 provides a detailed review of the research design, including a detailed
review of the research questions and the proposed research methodology. It is also in this chapter that the researcher will consider the validity, credibility, and ethical challenges of the study, and consider the limitations of the proposed work. In chapter 4, the researcher will present the research findings. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section will contain profiles of the study participants. The second section will discuss the four secondary research questions. Chapter 5 will contain a discussion of research findings and study limitations. The report will conclude with a bibliography and appendices.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Overview**

Research into the challenges of the 21st century superintendency will be guided by two theoretical frameworks. The first can be found in the work of such researchers as Boyd (1999), who contend that organizations should operate as “open systems, which assumes permeable boundaries and interactive two-way relationship between schools … and their environments” (Bush, 2003, p. 42). The second framework focuses on leadership—in particular on the unique challenges faced by chief executive officers (CEOs). Porter and Nohria (2010) provide a four-stage thematic lens for exploring this topic.

**Open Systems Theory**

As leaders of public school systems, superintendents are challenged with the need to respond to various constituent groups, each of whose ideals, goals, and interest may differ significantly from the others. Internally, the role and responsibilities of constituents differ greatly, from central office administrators, to school boards, to para-professionals.
Externally, those outside the formal system, constituents range in scope from mayors, to boards of selectmen, to parents (Johnson, 1996). Johnson (1996) suggests, “Constituents bring diverse expectations, strengths, and skills. Would-be leaders must take all these into account, for those individuals construct the character of their relationship with the superintendents and the patterns of leadership in the district” (p. 18). Bush reports that while open systems encourage interchange with the environment, it is not a one-sided relationship. That is, while organizations may respond to external influences, they also seek support from those influences for district objectives: “In this model, schools … have wide-ranging links across an increasingly permeable boundary but organizations are able to influence their environment and are not simply responding to external demands” (Bush, 2003, p. 42). It is worth noting that theorists agree that there is not necessarily a clear distinction between open and closed systems. Rather, it is helpful to view them on more of a continuum. By their nature, all public school districts have some measure of interaction with the environment and its many constituencies. The extent to which they choose to interact with or depend on them will likely define the degree of openness (Bush, 2003).

Boyd (1999) expands on the open systems theory by examining three social forces that have impacted educational leaders in recent years: a productivity imperative, an accountability imperative, and a community imperative. All three, he argues, “have transformed the context of public education and educational administration” (p. 283). The genesis of the imperatives was due in large part to environment and social pressures, many of which were linked to the faltering Western economy of the 1970s. Economic developments such as the oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting
Countries (OPEC), the recession, and stagflation caused U.S. policy makers to consider their place in the world economy and raised questions about how the United States could compete globally. Among other things, they “brought about the tight budgets and pressures for greater efficiency, economy and productivity” (Boyd, 1999). As it relates to public education, Boyd (1999) contends that education systems became the target of citizens’ uneasiness with declining test scores and standards and led many to blame schools for the “yawning gap between the skills of average workers and the need to ‘work smarter’ to keep pace with international competitors” (p. 284). Boyd (1999) suggests that people’s faith in public schools was waviering in the 1970s, eroded even further in the 1980s, and has since endured a steady barrage of criticism.

Another environmental pressure facing public schools is the existence of social trends that are impacting families and communities (Boyd, 1999). Whether it is poverty, the breakdown of families and communities, the neglect of children, or drug and alcohol abuse, public schools find themselves square in the middle of societal issues. The burden falls on schools to come up with solutions to societal problems, which puts them in an untenable position: “While expecting too much sets the schools up for failure, the schools, because of the strategic place they occupy in society, can in fact contribute to the reduction—if not solution—of many social problems … as a consequence of all of this, there are pressures and demands for new relationships between schools and their communities” (Boyd, 1999, p. 285).

The first imperative generated by the myriad of environmental pressures on school leaders is the productivity imperative. Boyd (1999) postulates that more than ever, because of global competition and a changing economy, educational productivity has
become a national imperative. However, at the same time, “few observers believe that we can continue to escalate spending on public education in search of better results. Instead, pressures are mounting for both better results and more efficient use of resources” (p. 285). School superintendents throughout the country are living with this pressure, and an area of future exploration is how Boyd’s productivity imperative is changing the way they conduct business. Carter and Cunningham (1997) agree that the budgeting process for schools is a source of great conflict with modern-day superintendents. Battling for their piece of the pie in a community almost universally creates tension between districts and their municipalities, and today’s superintendents are caught in the middle, with residents and taxpayers who want more with less (p. 85).

The second of Boyd’s three social forces impacting school leaders is the accountability imperative, which explores how schools are under scrutiny like never before. The existence of standardized testing, public report cards, school rankings, international comparisons, the call for merit pay, and many other accountability initiatives have placed great pressure on school leaders (Boyd, 1999). Jernigan (1997) notes that “today’s intense focus on public schools has produced a tremendous demand for superintendent[s]…who can leap tall buildings in a single bound” (p. 3).

The third social force that warrants exploration and how it impacts school superintendents is the community imperative, which Boyd (1999) theorizes is the “increasing recognition that effective teaching and learning requires us to revitalize and reinvent relationships both for the internal and external communities of the school. We must build a caring, professional community with high academic standards and expectations within schools, and also establish productive connections with our school
communities” (p. 288). In addition, existing research suggests that students’ academic achievement and community involvement are inextricably linked (Boyd, 1999). These findings “indicate that school leaders must strive for a management style and school culture that successfully balance a concern for performance with a concern for people and community” (Boyd, 1999, p. 289).

The framework that Boyd (1999) provides is relevant to the 21st century superintendency in that it demands a delicate balance of doing what’s best for schools and children and doing what’s best for local communities. While it is critical that superintendents strive toward more productive schools, it is also “vital to balance [their] concerns with genuine steps to meet the communal needs of schools, for students, parents, and community members” (p. 293). In short, it is essential to consider how external environmental factors affect superintendent management and leadership.

**CEO Leadership**

While the job description of the school superintendent is broad, the reality is that the superintendent, as chief executive officer of the school district, is ultimately responsible for all the district’s activities (Edwards, 2007). The duties of the superintendent cover almost every aspect of district operations—a daunting task that, coupled with a shifting landscape in public education, calls for strong leadership. Carter and Cunningham (1997) suggest that “superintendents must be in a position to distribute power and influence in such a way that it supports the capacity to continuously improve schools. Superintendents must develop shared visions that address the needs of the students and communities while holding firm the high standards established by the government, business, and their profession” (p. 16). That immense leadership challenge
is something held in common by CEOs of organizations, public and private, throughout the country. Porter and Nohria’s (2010) exploration of the role of the CEO in organizations provides another theoretical lens through which to look at school superintendency:

What is the role of the CEO in a large, complex enterprise? What makes a CEO effective? At first blush, these questions seem easy to answer. The CEO represents the epitome of leadership. He or she exercises ultimate power, and is responsible for making the most critical decisions. However, these questions get far more complicated as one contemplates the realities of large organizations … the CEO is powerful, but multiple constituencies can constrain power. The enormous variability in CEO tenure and performance reveals that many CEOs misunderstand their role and how to perform it effectively.

Porter and Nohria’s (2010) study on CEOs and the essence of leadership provides a practical, scholar-practitioner framework for this research. Their research resulted in four important themes that warrant further exploration, including *the realities of being a CEO, the importance of indirect influence, managing presence*, and *establishing legitimacy*.

**The realities of being a CEO.** While many CEOs, including school superintendents, have typically held leadership positions prior to their appointment, they are often surprised to learn how much more demanding the job is compared to previous positions. One reason, according to Porter and Nohria (2010), is the new range and intensity of responsibilities, in particular responding to external constituencies such as board members, shareholders, industry groups, and politicians. The interplay with the
board of directors—or in the case of the school superintendent, the school board—is important for the overall success of the CEO: “As boards are being pressured to be more vigilant and be more accountable for the conduct of the organization, managing the relationship with the board has become even more important and challenging” (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 438).

Another reality of being a CEO, as Porter and Nohria (2010) learned, is the inherent limit to power. Successful CEOs learn that while they have the titular authority to make broad, unilateral decisions, doing so can have unintended negative consequences. Knowing when and how best to use the power that comes with the job is a serious challenge and reality of being a CEO.

Another challenge for organizational leaders is ensuring they obtain the right information. Porter and Nohria (2010) suggest that while it is fairly easy for CEOs to access information, ensuring that it is reliable is more difficult: “CEOs get cut off from the informal channels in the organization. Information that is presented to the CEO is typically formal, extensively processed, and synthesized. Also, information is rarely presented to the CEO without some underlying agenda (p. 439). Since a leader cannot function effectively without good information, Porter and Nohria (2010) stress that CEOs must actively seek out information to get a true picture of what is happening in their organization.

Another great challenge that CEOs face, and something shared by superintendents across the country, is the reality that “every word and action are followed and scrutinized closely—both inside and outside the organization” (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 440). This is why even the most innocent remark or action may have consequences, many times
unintended. However, while it adds a layer of complexity to the chief executive’s role, it also serves as an asset, in that it enables the CEO to send or spread a message widely.

Finally, Porter and Nohria (2010) theorize that CEOs, and leaders generally, are expected to be “agents of change,” yet are simultaneously constrained to make change by external and internal influences. According to Edwards (2000), school superintendents share a similar expectation: “The efforts to improve schools across the country has created an expectation that superintendents will be agents of change, and most superintendents come to a new superintendency with plans to make improvements in the district” (p. 115). However, CEOs and superintendents learn quickly that making change is not a simple matter, due to the complexity of organizations, and also because of their organization’s history: CEOs “inherit people, resources, capabilities, strategies, cultures, processes … all of which limit their ability to act as if they had a blank sheet of paper” (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 442).

The importance of indirect influence. Porter and Nohria’s (2010) theoretical perspectives on chief executives also focus on indirect influence. While CEOs have significant authority, it is certain that they cannot perform all of their organization’s functions personally. Rather, it is inevitable that the “CEO must principally harness the work of others … [and] as a result, indirect levers of influence are of far greater importance to the CEO’s role than the direct exercise of power” (p. 443). Examples of indirect levers include 1) having a defined organizational strategy, a goal-setting process, explicitly defined values, an organizational structure, 2) and ensuring that systems and processes are in place that are consistent with organizational strategy and values.
If the CEO is to successfully lead his organization by triggering indirect levers, he must rely heavily on others, particularly the top management team: “Selecting the right members for their management teams and giving them the appropriate influence to drive the organization collectively is one of the key ways in which CEOs can exercise indirect influence” (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 446).

It is also critical that the CEO is personally and actively involved in decision making and in strategic and operational processes. While the extent may vary, Porter and Nohria (2010) theorize that personal and active involvement runs across three dimensions, namely, “how the CEO influences the design of the decision making process, the extent of the CEO’s personal participation in the process, and the CEO’s role in actually making the decisions.” This theory is supported by the work of Fullan (2001), who presents a five-stage framework for leadership, which suggests that leaders must 1) be guided by a moral purpose, 2) understand the change process, 3) be consummate relationship builders, 4) constantly be generating and increasing knowledge within the organization, and 5) seek coherence amongst the disequilibrium caused by the change process. However, the ultimate challenge for leaders, such as superintendents, is to tackle difficult situations by mobilizing the collective capacity of the organization (Fullan, 2001). A deeper review of Fullan’s theory may answer a lot of outstanding questions about how leaders can do that effectively. One thing is certain, however: In successful school districts, the superintendent is a key participant in the change process (Fullan, 2007).

Managing presence. As the leader of their organization, CEOs must decide how to allocate their time and their presence. Porter and Nohria (2010) contend that “everyone
wants the CEO’s time and attention, whether it is the people inside the organization or outside. Most recognize that the CEO can’t possibly meet all these demands for his or her presence. Thus, where and how the CEO chooses to be present or personally involved is a very important signal that accents his or her priorities and interests” (p. 451). Embedded in the theory related to CEO presence, and an important topic for this research on school superintendents, is the role of communication in leadership positions. Whether internally or externally, CEOs must communicate relentlessly. In fact, it is almost impossible for CEOs to overcommunicate. They must take every opportunity to get the organization’s message out and use any occasion to “reiterate and reinforce the direction of the organization and its priorities” (p. 454). This theory is supported by Kowalski (2006), who includes communicator as one of the four key role characterizations for modern-day school superintendents. Kowalski (2006) said, “Communicative expectations for administrators reflect a confluence of reform initiatives and the social environment in which they are being pursued. Virtually every major school improvement concept and strategy encourages superintendents to work collaboratively with principals, teachers, parents and other taxpayers to build and pursue collective visions” (p. 47).

In addition, it is noted that CEOs are often surprised by the level of scrutiny that comes with the position. Porter and Nohria (2010) report that virtually every action and behavior of a CEO may influence the behavior of others—internally and externally—and that people derive symbolic messages from them. Thus, to be an effective leader, the CEO must be mindful of the inherent power of his actions, behavior, and words and use them strategically.
Establishing legitimacy. Finally, while the CEO is charged with the highest degree of formal authority, to be an effective leader he must have legitimacy in the eyes of his multiple constituencies: “CEO’s who enjoy legitimacy motivate loyalty, inspire confidence, and build trust in the organization and in their leadership” (Porter & Nohria, 2010, p. 461). Legitimacy should not be taken for granted, as evidenced by the high rate of involuntary turnover in CEO positions, including that of school superintendent. In short, the formal authority assigned to CEOs can be easily stripped away when they lose the confidence of their boards, their employees, their customers, and other important stakeholders. Porter and Nohria (2010) theorize that legitimacy can be derived from seven areas:

1. Formal authority: CEOs derive some measure of legitimacy from their title/role.
2. Competence: Legitimacy is derived in part from the perception of competence.
3. Results: If the organization continues to meet expectations, the CEO gains legitimacy.
4. Fairness: CEOs must be perceived to be evenhanded, fair, and just.
5. Integrity: The closer the match between what the CEO espouses and how he behaves, the greater will be his or her legitimacy.
6. Putting the company first: The CEO must put his self-interests behind that of the organization.
7. Staying grounded: Despite having a high degree of formal authority, to maintain legitimacy, the CEO must remain grounded and must be experienced by others as authentic.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of Porter and Nohria (2010) provides a critical lens through which to explore the superintendency. Burton (2011) agrees, indicating that very few people outside of the superintendency fully appreciate the CEO-type responsibilities of the job: “Many don’t realize that superintendents in every district are CEOs. They typically run the largest food service operation in town, they run the largest transportation service, and they are most often the town’s largest employer. They are CEOs in every sense of the word.”
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This chapter intends to delve deeper into literature pertaining to school superintendency and literature that is relevant to this study. The review is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the history of the superintendency, and how has it changed over time?
2. What are common roles and responsibilities of school superintendents?
3. What are the common leadership characteristics of school superintendents?
4. What are the most common perceived challenges for school superintendents?
5. Is there evidence to suggest that superintendent turnover is a problem?
6. Are superintendents prepared for the challenges of the profession?

History of the Superintendency

Several researchers (Kowalski, et al., 2011; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) report that the role of the school superintendent has evolved over time. Reflecting on the past experiences of superintendents will better enable the researcher to contextualize their current role. Kowalski, et al. (2011) agree that to “fully appreciate the complexity of this pivotal position and its evolution over more than 100 years, one must understand how roles and responsibilities have waxed and waned over time” (p. 1).

The position of school superintendent has existed since the mid-1800s. According to Callahan (1966), “The history of the superintendency parallels the development of the public school system in the United States” (p. 11). Callahan adds that as free and public schools were established and multiplied, so multiplied the number of superintendents. By the late 1800s, virtually all cities and towns with substantial populations had placed
superintendents in charge of its public schools. Callahan concludes that since the mid-1800s, there have been four separate role conceptualizations for school superintendents, including teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, and applied social scientist.

Superintendents who filled the role of teacher-scholar were primarily scholarly educational leaders. They saw themselves as “students of education and as teachers of teachers and as educational leaders in the community” (Callahan, 1966, p. 188). During this era, which lasted from the mid-1800s to circa 1910, superintendents would frequently author professional journal articles about a wide range of topics, including history and pedagogy (Kowalski, et al., 2011), and many ascended to other scholarly professions like college professors or college presidents (Kowalski, 2006). Kowalski, et al (2011) suggest that at that time, the primary reason for appointing a superintendent was to ensure that classroom instruction was being supervised and to ensure curriculum uniformity. Superintendents were, in effect, lead educators.

The myriad of other responsibilities pertaining to school operations was undertaken by local school boards, who “performed both legislative and executive functions by setting policy and having individual board members assume day-to-day management responsibilities” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 103). By the late 1880s, as the position of school superintendent gained traction, tensions began to arise between superintendents and local school boards, who in some cases were reluctant to cede authority. Callahan (1966) found that “there is abundant evidence to support the fact that superintendents had not, in most places, been given the authority by school boards that they [the superintendents] thought they needed” (p. 65).
After 1910, the role of the school superintendent segued from *teacher-scholar* to *business manager*, where it would remain for the next thirty years. Kowalski, et al. (2011) speculate that the Industrial Revolution and its tenets (classical theories and principles of scientific management) helped shaped this new role conceptualization: “Specifically, many school boards in large city districts believed that innovations applied in burgeoning industries to produce technical efficiency could be equally effective if they were applied in public schools” (p. 2). Callahan (1966) points out that the change in the superintendency was not precipitated by any change in the nature of teachers’ work or because of changes in the purpose of the school. Rather, the change was in response to external social forces, mainly to the “increasing acceptance by Americans of the business ideology” (p. 199). This shift in roles meant new expectations for school superintendents. Whereas at that point in history they were characterized as scholarly leaders, they were now expected to be well versed in budget management, administration, personnel management, and facilities management (Kowalski, 2006). Ironically, the superintendent came to be viewed “more with ‘administrivia’ than with the education of children” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 23).

Callahan’s (1966) third role conceptualization of superintendents is that of *statesman*, which he contends lasted from approximately 1929 until 1954. Like the change before it, this too was driven by a social force, this time by the Great Depression. While during the Industrial Revolution business acumen was viewed as a critical and admirable skill, the stock market crash and subsequent Depression caused the general public to be “more reluctant to accept the premise that superintendents should have more power at the expense of local citizen control (Kowalski, et al., 2011). The *statesman*
superintendent, otherwise described as a democratic leader (Kowalski, 2005) was expected to “galvanize support for the public schools, a charge requiring them to behave politically” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 104).

The role of the superintendent was becoming more complex by the mid-1950s. With a booming post–World War II economy, a growing population, and corresponding complex social and economic problems (Kowalski, et al., 2011), the movement was to develop superintendents who possessed “a greater sensitivity to large social problems” (Kowalski, et al., 2011, p. 3). In summary, according to Kowalski, et al. (2011), superintendents were expected to solve education problems that were pervasive in this new, complex society. Kowalski (2006) states that prior to the 1950s, the practice of school administration was more focused on internal operations, but gradually systems theory was employed to demonstrate how external systems (e.g. social, economic) affected organizations. This led to the need to redefine the school superintendent as an applied social scientist.

Carter and Cunningham (1997) offer a slightly different perspective on the evolution of the superintendency and identify four major stages of the position. In the earliest stage of the superintendency, the role was primarily clerical, when the superintendent’s main responsibility was to assist the local school board with the day-to-day school operations. Secondly, as the country’s education system grew more complex, the superintendent became more of an instructional leader, or master educator. Very similar to the business manager role identified by Callahan (1966), Carter and Cunningham (1997) define early 20th-century superintendents as expert managers, whose focus was more on efficiency and operations than on educating students: “This
was the era of the four Bs: bonds, buses, budgets, and buildings [during which time there was a] strong push for hierarchical bureaucracy and scientific management” (p. 23). By the middle of the 20th century, the Soviet Union’s successful launch of Sputnik caused Americans to question whether the American education system was adequate. In response, Congress ushered in a new wave of educational reforms, and “in school systems, emphasis quickly shifted from the four Bs to the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 24). During this era, “the call in American education was for leadership, political savvy, reform, community responsiveness, and improved education” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 24). The result was a formative change in the role of superintendents who were now called upon to serve as the chief executive officer of the board, including acting as a professional advisor to the local school board, a leader of reforms, a manager of resources, and a communicator to the public (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

While there is widespread acceptance of the various role characterizations highlighted in the section above, the reality is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to neatly separate them. Though the position of superintendent has clearly evolved over time, the responsibilities and roles frequently overlap. While one primary role may be deemphasized, it does not suggest that the role goes away completely (Baker, 2010).

**Contemporary Perspectives on the Superintendency**

Like the CEOs described in Porter and Nohria’s (2010) research, school superintendents have complex, diverse, and varied responsibilities. Carter and Cunningham (1997) suggest that the conventional role of the superintendent is vastly oversimplified. The law in many states usually stipulates that the role of the
superintendent is to “assist the [school] board in policy making and to carry out policy” (p. 16). This oversimplification tends to cause confusion and debate about the superintendent’s responsibility, and “as a result, superintendents have been pulled in different directions by politicians, interest groups, communities, school boards, other superintendents, [staff], and parents” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 17).

While it is difficult to find consensus as to what makes a successful superintendent, it is clear that the roles of superintendents are numerous. Kowalski (2006) found that, regardless of the size of the school district, “most superintendents verify that the position is demanding and complex. Office holders are expected to have knowledge and skills spanning a number of academic disciplines associated with their leadership and management responsibilities” (p. 14). Kowalski, et al. (2011) state that “as chief executive officers, superintendents must be visionary leaders (Kowalski, 2006) financial planners (Owings & Kaplan, 2006), human resource managers (Young, 2008), and instructional experts” (p. 45).

**Superintendents’ job descriptions.** Before the researcher explores the various roles that school superintendents must play, it is helpful to identify beforehand the typical responsibilities (i.e., job description) of a superintendent. Edwards (2007) found some commonalities in superintendent job descriptions, while at the same time acknowledging that the role is quite broad, usually including duties that cover almost every aspect of district operations. Those commonalities include the following:

1. Serving as chief executive officer of the school board and thus assuming responsibility for all aspects of the work
2. Providing leadership planning and evaluating all phases of the instructional program

3. Selecting and recommending all personnel to the school board for appointment and guiding the growth of said personnel

4. Preparing the budget for submission to the board and administering it after its adoption

5. Determining building needs and administering building programs, construction, operations, and maintenance

6. Serving as the leader of the school board, the staff, and the community in improving the education system (pp. 10–11)

Edwards also adds that while the duties of superintendents are fairly uniform throughout the country, local school boards exert a great deal of influence on their responsibilities, and may expand their role at their discretion.

A joint committee of representatives from the American Association of School Boards (AASA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) also identified common superintendent responsibilities. A sampling of key responsibilities showing the broad range of skills needed for the position are listed below:

- To serve as the school board’s chief executive officer and preeminent educational adviser in all efforts of the board to fulfill its school system governance role

- To serve as the [district’s] primary educational leader … and chief administrative officer
• To develop a sound program of school/community relations in concert with the board

• To develop and carry out a plan for keeping the total professional and support staff informed about the mission, goals, and strategies of the school system and about the important roles all staff members play in realizing them

• To oversee management of the district’s day-to-day operations (AASA and NSBA, 1994, pp. 11–12)

Another factor in the depth and breadth of superintendent responsibilities is the nature of the school district (Kowalski, 2006). For example, in large districts, the superintendent may specialize or be able to focus on specific areas of the organization. A sample scenario is one where a superintendent may serve as a financial expert. On the other hand, superintendents of smaller districts may have less administrative staff, and thus are not able to delegate responsibilities to anyone else. The result is that superintendents in those districts may have to serve as generalists. However, although there may be differences between large and small systems, Kowalski (2006) reports that school boards across all local districts generally have emphasized curriculum, finance, and public relations (including communication skills) in seeking new superintendents.

The varied leadership roles of school superintendents. A review of the literature pertaining to the leadership role of the 21st century superintendents uncovered an array of viewpoints. However, what is clear is that superintendents are expected to bring to the table a vast amount of expertise in seemingly incongruous areas such as finance, curriculum, community relations, or personnel management. As a result, successful superintendents must be chameleons—adapting their skills and leadership
styles in response to a perpetually changing landscape. The following is a consensus among researchers on the major leadership roles of superintendents: 1) superintendent as an educational/instructional leader, 2) superintendent as a political leader/politician, 3) superintendent as a managerial leader, and 4) superintendent as a communicator (Cuban, 1985; Bjork, 2009; Kowalski, 2005; Johnson, 1996).

**Superintendent as an educational/instructional leader.** Cuban (1988) traces the reemergence of the superintendent as instructional leader back to the 1980s, when the effort to increase the importance of instructional staff (e.g., teachers and principals) on school effectiveness expanded to the superintendency. As a result, “setting goals, establishing standards … insuring consistency in curricula and teaching approaches have become benchmarks of instructionally active superintendent” (p. 136). Furthermore, Cuban (1985) says that to exercise real leadership, a superintendent must play the role of teacher, and in fact, it is the teaching role that provides the focus for other skills, such as political or managerial: “Teaching implies objectives and thus a sense of direction. Without a sense of direction … [political skills] become ends instead of means, and managerial skills are dedicated solely to keep the machinery running. The role provides purpose” (p. 30).

Bjork (2009) concurs with the importance of instructional leadership at the district (i.e., superintendent) level, reporting that studies suggest that superintendents who serve as instructional leaders contribute significantly to the overall success of their school districts. Research by Johnson (1996) also highlights the importance of this role. First, she demonstrated that effective superintendents were actively involved in the daily affairs of the classrooms, interacting with principals and teachers on a regular basis. Second,
superintendents also provided educational leadership by “teaching others about the budget process, leading the district in a strategic planning process … [and] regularly visiting schools and classrooms” (Peterson & Barnett, 2005, p. 124). Finally, Johnson (1996) finds that “through their roles as teachers … superintendents [convince] others to lead them—to participate in shaping a vision for change, to take principled stands about important issues, and to engage colleagues in finding better approaches to schooling” (p. 278).

Superintendent as a political leader. Many superintendents are surprised by the political nature of their job, yet Johnson (1996) deems that political leadership is critical. In an extensive study of twelve experienced superintendents, Johnson (1996) learned that “if [superintendents] were to win public support for their initiatives, they had to quickly master the details of the political scene, learning … what kind of politics prevailed, who the key political figures were … and who might be their allies or adversaries” (p. 277). Superintendents must exercise political leadership for several reasons: to build coalitions of local support to ensure adequate school funding, to bargain with local officials, to persuade teachers and other staff to represent their school’s interests in the community, to affect systemic change, and to allocate resources among programs in schools to groups vying for influence. Johnson (1996) concludes that “superintendents who understood the political implications of their decisions and could plan their strategies to improve education with those implications in mind fared better than those who did not” (p. 156).

Cuban (1985) supports the assertion that superintendents are political leaders, claiming thus:
Since the first superintendent sat behind a desk, they spent time meeting with parents, businessman, local officials, and others either to nourish public support for schools or offset criticism. Most superintendents recognized the fact that any public institution supported by taxes in this society will seldom be left to professionals alone to run. [Thus, the word “political”] refers to the goals held and the process superintendents used to determine and transform personal and public expectations into formal policies and formal actions; it also refers to the authority, rules and influence that superintendents exert in governing a school district. (p. 139)

Like Johnson (1996), Cuban (1985) contends that superintendents must act politically when dealing with various constituents, including staff, school board members, parents, and local officials.

**Superintendent as a managerial leader.** The superintendent as a manager is a common conceptualization among researchers (Brown-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 2005). Brown-Ferrigno and Glass (2005) list six major management tasks for superintendents: governmental regulations, district personnel, finances and budgets, facilities, contractual negotiations, and public relations. Further, “it is important to emphasize that whether delegating managerial tasks or doing them personally, a successful superintendent understands that management is an essential component of leading a school district” (p. 144). In addition, Brown-Ferrigno and Glass surmise that “organizational management is a critical role assigned to superintendents .... Performance as successful CEOs depends on understanding differences between leadership and management and knowing when to use the appropriate role” (p. 156).
Johnson (1996) suggests that making distinctions between leadership and management are common, and they frequently imply that managers cannot lead and that leaders need not manage. She proposes that while those arguments may be “cognitively and rhetorically satisfying … [they] misrepresent reality … perhaps some entrepreneurs can thrive while disregarding the routines and structures of their organizations, but it is inconceivable that school superintendents could succeed by doing so” (p. 219). March (1978) found that while sometimes the conception of a school administrator is as a heroic leader, the reality is that much of the job involves the mundane work of making a bureaucracy work. Johnson (1996) agrees:

School boards delegate their authority for providing educational leadership services to the superintendent, who is expected to appoint staff, allocate resources, and oversee teaching and learning. The superintendent may foster creative teaching and nurture innovative programs, but if the buses do not run or children are unaccounted for, he or she is judged to have failed as a manager, not to have succeeded as a leader. (pp. 219–220)

Cuban (1988) also discusses the importance of managerial leadership in the superintendency, listing some of the more common administrative tasks associated with the job, including planning, collecting and disseminating information, budgeting, hiring and firing, supervising staff, and managing conflicts. The actions of superintendents may range from bussing students, to evaluating principals, to allocating parking spaces, to planning for a new building. Cuban (1988) found that “if the [role of instructional leader] aims to alter existing beliefs and behaviors of members of the school community, the
fundamental purpose of the managerial role is to maintain organizational stability” (p. 136).

Kowalski (2006) provides a contemporary perspective on the role of superintendent as a managerial leader. First, he cautions against generalizations on management responsibilities, as they could differ markedly from one school district to another (the size of the district is one significant, mitigating factor). That being said, and “even though the degree of emphasis placed on management has fluctuated, the importance of the role is rarely questioned … superintendents must be both effective leaders and effective managers” (p. 42). Like Johnson (1996), Kowalski (2006) argues that the performance of superintendents, no matter what leadership has been exercised, will not be deemed effective if there are management failures:

Experienced practitioners recognize that many of their leadership attributes become insignificant when budgets are not balanced, school facilities are deemed not to be safe, and personnel problems routinely result in litigation … [thus] the challenge facing today’s superintendent is not choosing between leadership and management, it is establishing equilibrium between these two essential roles. (p. 42)

**Superintendent as a communicator.** As the literature shows, the range of responsibilities for superintendents is extensive. Watenpaugh (2008) found that the perfect candidates “must possess skills in vision setting, policy implementation and priority establishment, public relations and collaboration, building cultural leadership, communication and participatory decision making, student learning accountability, and program evaluation, to mention only a few” (p.36). However, according to Kowalski
(2005), there is one skill that stands out as important for success: the ability to communicate effectively with external and internal stakeholders. Kowalski (2005) suggests, “There is mounting evidence that communication has become increasingly important for all school administrators, and that effective communication behavior used by superintendents has influenced both school culture and productivity” (p. 101). Kowalski further argues that communication, while typically discussed as a role-related situational skill, should instead be discussed as a “pervasive role” (p. 102).

She (2004) contends that the importance of communication for school leaders cannot be overemphasized: “In the daily operation of the school, leaders not only communicate messages, but they receive, monitor, and seek them …. therefore, tantamount to the school operating in an efficient and effective manner is the leader’s ability to communicate with people” (p. 3). Several studies have indicated that school leaders spend up to 80 percent of their time in communication with members of their organizations, parents, or members of the greater community (She, 2004). Furthermore, according to She, there are several objectives of communication, many of which align with school leadership roles. School leaders may communicate to gain attention or gain acceptance of a message. They may provide information to make an organization more adaptable to change, or to command, instruct, or influence people. Finally, She (2004) contends that communication for school leaders is of paramount importance, as it is intended to maintain favorable relations with those with whom one communicates: “Obviously, human relationship is all about people, it is the base for educational leadership” (p. 29).
Carter and Cunningham (1997) agree that communication is a critical leadership skill that must be present in order to respond to the diverse demands placed on the public education system:

A major responsibility of superintendents is to deal with the conflicting expectations, multiple political agendas, and varying ideas without duly creating enemies or distrust …. Either way, the most-often-heard symptom of a superintendent who is in trouble is that he or she lacks rapport with—and respect from—important constituents in the education process. In these cases, communication and ultimately cohesion break down, and the superintendent is no longer able to manage the multiple pressures of the school district … which typically ends with the superintendent’s being fired. (p. 35)

In addition, the ever-present mandate for change forces superintendents to consider how the school district fits into the larger environment. Carter and Cunningham (1997), in affirming that superintendents must play the role of statesperson and be effective communicators, assert that it is their responsibility to provide a “sense of interconnectedness and ensures that no group that is needed to support public education feels it is not a full partner in the process” (p. 152). This is supported by McClellan, Ivory, and Dominquez (2008), who in their research concluded that 21st century superintendents must interact and communicate with the greater community. Their study participants (50 superintendents) reported on the “many hours spent meeting with business groups, parent associations, civic organizations, special interest groups/organizations, government entities, and the general community” (p. 353). Furthermore, it is important to mention that effective communication is interactive.
Carter and Cunningham (1997) make the distinction between disseminating information and communication. Specifically, communication is a two-way activity. In practice, that may mean that the superintendent develops community surveys, organizes town hall–style meetings, leads focus or discussion groups, etc. Regardless, McClellan, Ivory, and Dominquez (2006) maintain that “the superintendent and the community have much to learn from each other…[it is a] teaching-learning reciprocal exchange” (p. 353).

As important as external communication is, a superintendent’s ability to effect change is predicated strongly on his ability to communicate internally and build relationships with internal stakeholders. Teachers, in particular, are at the epicenter of district change, and also influence how the external public perceives the quality of the school district (Edwards, 2007). Given their importance, superintendents must develop strong communication ties with them: “[They are the] core, the center post for actual learning in the system, and must absolutely be kept informed and involved in district affairs” (Edwards, 2007, p. 61). Communication is also an important function of building school culture according to Kowalski (2000): “Culture affects communication, but communication also is central to building, maintaining, and changing culture” (p. 4).

Factors Influencing Superintendent Leadership

Research on the challenges of the superintendency, or specifically on factors that influence superintendent leadership, all convey a similar theme: that today’s superintendents work in a challenging, sometimes volatile, environment, and that the unprecedented demands placed on the district CEO call for leaders who are versatile, responsive, and resilient (Kowalski, et al., 2010; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Chapman, 1997; Hoyle, et al., 2005; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 2005). Hodgkinson and Montenegro
(1999) find that the job of the local school superintendent “is one of the most difficult chief executive undertakings in America today. These leaders must have a constantly expanding inventory of skills and capacities and must be able to use these to deal with the complexities of the education enterprise, as well as the challenges of today’s political realities, economic constraints and turbulent social problems” (p. 1). Trevino et al. (2008) also agree that today’s educational leaders work in a culture that is based on conflict, insecurity, and uncertainty, and that superintendent turnover is due, in large part, to the challenges of the position. Furthermore, Houston (2001) suggests that while many superintendents find the job rewarding, and even exhilarating, “there is much about the current role that is dysfunctional. Expectations and resources are mismatched. Accountability and authority are misaligned” (p. 429). This section of the literature review addresses the perceived challenges of the superintendency, with a particular focus on the following broad areas: a) accountability, b) school finance, c) the political nature of the superintendency, and d) superintendent–school board relationships.

**Accountability.** Without a doubt, the American education system has undergone a significant change in the last forty years, much of it driven by education reform movements; and with that has come new responsibilities, new expectations, and a high demand for accountability that is challenging 21st century school superintendents. According to Houston (2007), “superintendents of a bygone era would not recognize the job today” (p. 30). The modern-era reform movement began as far back as 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a report that “focused on the need for school reform and higher standards and expectations for education, for excellence” (p. 30). The report spurned a series of reform efforts over the next two decades that were designed to
promote equity and high standards. With the “top-down” reform, which was largely mandated by state and federal legislation, came the advent of state assessment programs designed to monitor and measure the progress of all students and, in many cases, teachers (Houston, 2007; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). The most recent reform effort, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, has significantly impacted school administrators’ jobs by setting rules and regulations for virtually every area of school operations. According to Trevino et al. (2008), the new law has only exacerbated superintendent challenges, because it came at time when “public school superintendents were already struggling with unfunded mandates, and complexities and challenges of education reform agendas in their won local districts” (p. 107). The problem, according to Houston (2007), is that decisions once made by local educators are now being made at the top levels of the federal government. For superintendents, that means that “not only has the authority of the position been eroded, but the expectations have multiplied … the role of the superintendent has changed dramatically, from community leader to school manager to education leader to scapegoat, and it is anyone’s guess where the job is headed” (p. 30).

Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) contend that recent education reform movements have placed superintendents in a tenuous position. Rather than looking at superintendents as crucial to the successful implementation of school reform, “it is possible that the [movements] have targeted ‘the educational establishment’ as the enemy of change, and thus to be ignored or gotten around” (p. 5). In addition, while many of the movements call for action at the school level, the reality is that the ultimate accountability in a district rests with the superintendent. No matter what the department,
“food and transportation services … finance management, community and public
relations, athletics, arts … personnel … if something goes wrong with any of these areas,
the buck almost always stops at the superintendent’s desk, regardless of devolution [to
the school level]” (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999, p. 6). Edwards (2007) supports that
premise, finding that due to the broad authority that superintendents are granted by school
boards, they are typically held accountable for the overall effectiveness of the school
system, regardless of whether or not they influence a particular action. In fact, “the risks
are high that at some point the superintendent will indeed be held accountable for an
issue or action over which he or she has no control” (p. 13).

Edwards (2007) also looks at recent education reform legislation and contends
that it continues to influence the role of superintendents. In particular, because they are
forced at the local level to implement change regardless of whether it is desired or
popular, “the superintendent will undoubtedly find himself or herself taking on a different
leadership position, not unlike when laws and mandates of the past required courage and
unpopular stances to move the agenda forward … he or she is bound by law to implement
legislation, even at the risk of being criticized” (Edwards, 2007, p. 12).

**School finance.** Fiscal management is another area that challenges
superintendents throughout the country. Superintendents cope with an ever-present lack
of fiscal resources, which exacerbates the job’s demands. The reason, according to Glass
(2004), is thus:

A school district is a trustee of a community’s children and youth and its tax
dollars. Efficient and appropriate management of public tax dollars is a key
responsibility for every superintendent. Inarguably, this is a complex and time-
consuming task for superintendents in districts of all sizes. School districts are not “stand alone” businesses managing revenues and expenditures. Instead, they are part of large state school funding programs that are complex and difficult to comprehend and implement at the local level. (p. 6)

Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) report that 97% of superintendents viewed finance issues as a factor inhibiting school effectiveness. In fact, superintendents in school districts with less than 25,000 pupils (i.e., the vast majority) rank financing schools as the number one leadership inhibitor (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Another study showed that out of 21 possible factors that inhibit superintendent effectiveness, lack of fiscal resources was ranked as number one (CASE, 2003).

Kowalski (2006) submits that “for casual observers, financial resources may appear relatively unimportant to schools, but to those who build, approve, and manage budgets, resources are paramount” (p. 307). Carter and Cunningham (1997) agree that “when talking about where the heat comes from in a school district, fingers point to the budget process. As school budgets shrink, all issues have the tendency to be put in financial terms, with the budget process becoming the battlefield” (p. 85). Carter and Cunningham (1997) also contend that one of the most prevalent causes of short tenure for superintendents is reaction to budget cuts, and that the state of the budget is a good predictor for the level of peace or conflict in superintendents’ lives. Glass (2004) concurs, citing mismanaging finances as a primary driver behind superintendent dismissals.

According to Trevino (2007), the issue of school funding is correlated to the aforementioned accountability mandates. That is, while the number of state and federal mandates continues to grow, budgets are simultaneously being stretched thin. The result
is that superintendents are forced to accomplish more with less. Carter and Cunningham (1997) also cite the difficulty that superintendents have in trying to achieve reforms with limited financial resources. They contend that “these expectations, that superintendents find ways to operate and reform schools on dwindling budgets, have begun to change the job itself. Superintendents lose sight of the children’s learning as the reason they are there in the first place” (p. 87).

Edwards (2007) found that superintendents were in “the unenviable position of trying to figure out … [how to] … effectively help schools improve in their primary mission, while at the same time dealing with an extremely critical public that is ready to dismiss its top executive should the district experience financial setbacks” (p. 95). In addition, Brown-Ferrigno and Glass (2005) contend that a major challenge for today’s superintendents is managing limited resources in such a way that ensures both efficiency and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

The political process. Although many educators, including superintendents, eschew the notion that their jobs are political in nature, the reality is quite different according to the literature. Although most superintendents are nonelected public officials, several researchers contend that one of the primary challenges for superintendents, and a key inhibitor to effectiveness, is dealing with politics within local communities (Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Edwards, 2006; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, 2005; Johnson, 1996). The pressures, according to Carter and Cunningham (1997), are borne from the expectations that modern-day superintendents must involve the entire community in the decision making and operations of the local school districts: “No longer can superintendents focus their attention only on issues
within the education community—or even in the immediate community of the schools. What occurs inside is quite likely to be part of a larger political process outside the school system” (p. 43). Edwards (2007) believes that it is simply a reality of the school superintendent’s job, arguing that since schools are not self-sufficient organizations, and as a result their concerns are entangled with that of the general public, engaging in the political process is necessary to function as an organization: “Political involvement is so fundamental to the work of today’s superintendents that they cannot succeed as educational leaders without taking an active role in district politics” (p. 130). Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) also comment on the shifting landscape:

Politics in education has moved from being a spectator sport to active participation of citizens, all in the same districts. Even though the culture of education mitigates against viewing the superintendency as political, superintendents are drawn almost daily into contact with elected public officials, special interest groups, and elected or appointed members of boards of education, and are asked to orchestrate efforts to obtain voter support for school bond issues.” (p. 23)

Johnson (1996) attributes the prominence of politics in education to several factors. First, shrinking budgets, coupled with rising expectations, have driven competing interest groups to battle for funding. Second, and more importantly, “there is an increasing conviction that public education is, indeed, the province of the public rather than the professionals” (p. 154). Similarly, Kowalski (2005) finds that school districts are affected by “ongoing competition among interest groups seeking to advance their own
interests by virtue of policies and resource decisions. Consequently, practice in the superintendency is never totally divorced from political realities” (p. 305).

Unfortunately for superintendents, engaging in the political process is potentially fraught with controversy and conflict. Several researchers found that the political nature of the superintendency impacted leadership effectiveness, job satisfaction, and, in some cases, impacted tenure (Parker, 1996; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Carter & Cunningham, 1997). However, it is also a key element of leadership effectiveness and, simply, part of the job. Carter and Cunningham (1997) acknowledge that while the political process can immobilize superintendents, they must have a stomach for it: “Superintendents can’t expect a clear consensus or a cohesive set of political forces in making decisions. Ultimately, they need extraordinarily good political acuity” (p. 44). Blumberg (1985) concurs: “One thing about today’s superintendents is almost a given. Whether or not he is partisan in his politics, in order to survive he must indeed be a political animal—or behave like one, even if he is not so inclined” (p. 19).

**Superintendent–school board relations.** Of all the research topics related to the challenges of the superintendency, the most frequently researched and written about is superintendant–school board relations. Eadie and Houston (2003) view the superintendent and the school board as the “two most important members of the district’s ‘strategic leadership team,’ whose continuous, close, creative collaboration are essential … for a district’s long-term success” (p. 1). Houston and Bryant (1997) agree that the school board and the superintendent must work together as a team: “How boards and school superintendents work together can mean the difference between frustration and a smooth-running operation … it can also make the difference between success and failure
for students in public schools” (p. 756). On the critical nature of the superintendent–school board relationship, Carter and Cunningham (1997) suggest thus:

The superintendency is perhaps most clearly defined by its relations with school boards. [The challenge is that] the superintendent must convince laypeople—who most often have never taught a day in their lives and have little experience working with children—what is best for the education of children in the district …. the effective superintendent works hard to maintain positive relationships with the board … everything depends on good relationships. (p. 93)

Research and history suggest that maintaining positive relationships between superintendents and school boards is easier said than done. Cuban (1985) found that as far back as the early 19th century, conflict among superintendents and school boards was prevalent, and that many times, it led to the superintendent’s dismissal. Johnson (1996) found that “theoretically, school boards are in charge of school districts and hire superintendents to run them; they set the policies that superintendents must implement. However … the relationship is seldom that simple or unidirectional” (p. 167). Similarly, Peterson and Short (2001) offer thus: “To the casual observer, the roles that the superintendent and board of education play in the leadership and governance of the school district appear well-defined, yet a myriad of investigations examining the subtleties and dynamics of this relationship … indicate otherwise” (p. 534).

Although the job of the superintendent has changed over the course of time, the existence of conflict and tension with school boards has not. Carter and Cunningham (1997) attribute deteriorating relationships between superintendents and school board members to the following factors: board members weighing the agenda too heavily in
favor of business matters, lack of knowledge or commitment on the part of board members, attempts by the board members to dominate the superintendent, board members relinquishing responsibility, board members’ response to lack of community trust or confidence, and adherence to practices that stifle vigorous discussion, to name a few. According to Carter and Cunningham (1997), while “many of these problems are the result of good intentions … the end result is alienation between board members and the superintendent” (p. 99). Patillo (2008) offers similar insights into why the relationships between superintendents and school boards are very complex. Namely, superintendents must work in collaboration with board members who “are uneducated, are not informed of educational issues, who lack communication skills and who are influenced by issues outside the scope of the school board duties” (p. 135). In her research, Johnson (1996) found that most superintendents face the following challenges with their school boards: establishing appropriate and workable boundaries between the board and central office, avoiding destructive public conflict, framing problems in ways that would elicit attention and action, promoting orderly and constructive decision making, converting political opponents into allies, and fostering collaboration among adversaries.

Kowalski (2006) examined the superintendent–school board relationship from both viewpoints, offering a more balanced assessment of this issue. He found that the most common criticisms of school board members, voiced by superintendents, were the following: pursuing single issues, pursuing personal gain, rejecting the professional status of the superintendent, satisfying the need for power (manifested by dominating and controlling behavior), failing to maintain confidentiality, and intruding into administration (i.e., micromanaging). Conversely, school board members voiced the
following criticisms against superintendents: lack of respect for board members, lack of integrity, practice of subordination rather than cooperation, failing to provide leadership, failure to manage, inaccessibility, failure to communicate, and failure to comply with ethical or moral standards (pp. 155–157).

Although from the literature it appears difficult, it is seemingly critical that superintendents have a positive working relationship with the school board. Patillo (2008), in an extensive study of influencers of superintendents’ departure from school districts, found that “superintendent tenure in a school district is highly reliant on the superintendent’s ability to build and maintain productive and positive relationships with the board of education” (p. 134). Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) found that superintendent tenure is directly correlated with the quality of the relationship between the superintendent and the school board. They proved that average tenure decreased as the difficulty of working with the school board increased: “Superintendents frustrated about not being able to work with the board to make decisions were 1.3 times more likely to leave the position when compared to those who maintained a cooperative relationship with the board” (p. 14). In an extensive study, Glass (2001b) found that 71% of superintendents agreed that the “superintendency is in a state of crisis,” with the leading reason being (poor) school board relations. Ultimately, according to Carter and Cunningham (1997), the superintendent’s relationship with the board is the number one determining factor as to whether he or she stays with a school district.

**Superintendent Turnover**

With the abundance of leadership challenges faced by superintendents, it is no surprise that job security has been called into question. A review of the literature
demonstrates that there is a perception that the rate of turnover, and a corresponding lack of applicants, is high. Some even suggest there is a crisis in the superintendency (Glass, 2001b). However, there is also research that, while acknowledging the great challenges of the superintendency, dispels the notion that the turnover rate is atypical.

Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) report, “The tenure of many superintendents … is often short and tumultuous. This can be attributed to a range of factors including conflicts with school boards, city councils or mayors, or community pressure for improved academic outcomes” (p. 1). Chapman (1997) adds, “In recent years, the rapid turnover of superintendents has increasingly been identified as a significant deterrent to sustained efforts by a school district to improve its schools” (p. 3).

Several studies support those claims. One of the most comprehensive studies over the last decade concluded that the average tenure of superintendents within their respective districts is six years (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). In addition, in a study of 408 districts, Glass and Bjork (2003) found that approximately 64% of school districts were led by three or more superintendents over the past ten years, a number they say is evidence of significant instability in the position. Similarly, Carter and Cunningham (1997) report that as far back as 1991, more than 53% of superintendents in the United States had been in their current position for five years or less, and that only 40% of them felt secure in their positions. In Massachusetts, a survey of 226 superintendents in 2010 found that the average tenure of superintendents in their current districts was only 4.4 years. In fact, 22% of superintendents had been in their districts one year or less, and 67% had less than five years of experience in their current district (M.A.S.S., 2010).

Natkin et al. (2002), who conducted a study of 292 random districts in the United States,
report that superintendent tenure has “declined significantly since the middle of the last century, when it averaged 13–14 years” (p. 8). They also found that superintendent tenure averaged six to seven years, regardless of district size or location.

Several researchers contend that the conclusion that the position of superintendent has become increasingly unstable is unwarranted (Kowalski, 2006). Kowalski found that “the actual length of time a superintendent spends in one position has remained amazingly stable over the past several decades, ranging from 6 years in 1971, to 5.6 years in 1982, to 6.4 years in 2000” (p. 316). Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) acknowledge that there are several factors that contribute to superintendent longevity (e.g., school board involvement) but contend that “superintendent turnover was not as serious as once perceived” (p. 3). Similarly, Natkin et al. (2002) found that frequent superintendent turnover is not as serious a problem as generally believed:

The results of this study show that public school superintendency is not a revolving-door profession, whether in districts large, urban or rural, in the mid 1970’s or the late 1990’s, in the Nation as a whole or in a single southeastern state. Contemporary superintendents, on average, remain in office between six and seven years. (p. 26)

However, Natkin et al. (2002), like Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006), are able to point to specific conditions where a short average tenure would be likely; for instance, superintendents serving in districts with high poverty, low financial support, and superintendents who experience school board micromanagement. Butera (2006) also concurs that “a superintendent interested in employment longevity … would be wise to understand the factors that are supportive of longevity” (p. 14). These include, among
other things, superintendent/school board roles and responsibilities, superintendent/school board relationship, and board of education turnover. According to Butera (2006), a superintendent who is able to successfully address these areas has a greater chance of longevity in a district.

Although the literature on turnover is inconclusive, Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) do acknowledge that the “tenure figure has had a life of its own. Unfortunately, it has fostered a negative image of the superintendency” (p. V). This is a topic that warrants further exploration, especially considering the detrimental effect that leadership turnover can have on school districts. Natkin et al. (2002) contend that school districts with histories of frequent turnover are likely to be chaotic, and these types of organizations lose focus on productivity or school improvement, as they focus instead on survival.

**Superintendent Preparation**

With evidence to suggest that the challenges of the superintendency are abundant, and with further evidence to suggest that the average tenure of a superintendent is, at most, six years, it is important for the researcher to consider a superintendent’s preparedness for the job.

Some studies claim that superintendent licensure and preparation programs are flawed. Johnson (1996) found that “academic content and pedagogical approaches in administrative training programs are regularly reported to be narrow and unimaginative …. lecture and discussion dominate, with little opportunity for active, experiential learning” (p. 286). Kowalski et al. (2005) cite several criticisms of preparation-program quality, including the following: a preoccupation with management, insufficient attention to leadership, lack of curricular relevance, inadequate funding and staffing for
professional education, inattention to gender-related issues, low admission and graduation standards, and the absence of a national curriculum (p. 22). Chapman (1997) also detailed several criticisms of preparation programs. For example, she reports that many certification programs focused on skills and requirements that are different from what is needed in the field. In short, “preparation programs are disconnected to practice” (p. 236). In addition, she found that while many preparation programs emphasized a solid grounding in theory, the social sciences, and rational decision making, they, in fact, “were well off the mark as effective preparation for the chaotic life of … a superintendent” (p. 236). Furthermore, Orr (2006) reports that most superintendents in her study gave their graduate programs “mixed reviews, ranging from useless to extremely helpful in preparing them for the superintendency” (p. 1392). Preparation programs were most beneficial, according to Orr (2006), when they integrated theory and practice. 

However, other literature shows that superintendents’ perception of preparation programs does not align with the criticism. Chapman (1997), in her case study of superintendents, found that 86.7% of participants rated their graduate programs as “excellent” or “good.” Similarly—and in perhaps the most extensive national survey of superintendents—Kowalski et al. (2011) found that 78.7% of superintendents rated their preservice academic preparation as good or excellent. Bjork et al. (2005) addresses the apparent inconsistencies in the literature, summarizing their findings related to superintendents’ perceptions of preparation programs in the following passage:

An examination of these reports also identified several weaknesses in preparation programs that have persisted over time. The four most prominent identified in the
The 2000 study include (1) the lack of hands-on application (20%), (2) inadequate access to technology (19%), (3) failure to link content to practice (17%), and (4) too much emphasis on professors’ personal experiences (14%). A review of the research findings spanning nearly two decades (1982-2000) suggest that although superintendents expressed a need for more relevant, hands-on, field-based experiences, the majority of superintendents were satisfied with their preparation. This directly contradicts critics’ claims that university-based preparation programs are widely regarded by practitioners as being ineffective. (p. 84)

In addition to formal preparation programs, Orr (2006) points out that superintendents are frequently able to access professional development opportunities from their state education departments or state professional associations: “New superintendent seminars or academies … seem to be fairly common … [superintendents] described these as valuable in orienting them, in providing access to experienced superintendents for advice and mentoring, and in providing networking opportunities” (p. 1393). Scott (2011) reports that in Massachusetts, the state association provides many professional growth opportunities for sitting or aspiring superintendents, such as leadership academies on a wide variety of topics, a formal mentoring program, and conferences.

Although the literature pertaining to superintendent preparation is not vast, and in some ways provides conflicting results, most agree that both university and state-sponsored preparation programs could be improved (Johnson, 1996; Orr, 2006; Chapman, 1997; Bjork et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2006). Orr (2006) proposes that “improving leadership preparation and support seems to be the most viable solution to the
shortage and quality problems” (p. 1363). This is critical, according to Orr, because “how superintendents are prepared could influence both the attractiveness of the position and the likelihood of job-related success, particularly in the early stages, when superintendents are learning and defining their role and leadership” (p. 1364).
Chapter 3: Research Design

Purpose of the Study

The superintendency is considered to be the most visible and influential leadership positions in the field of education today (Sovine, 2000). The review of existing literature confirms that school superintendents are faced with diverse responsibilities and a myriad of challenges, many caused by external forces beyond their control. Furthermore, it shows that the perceived leadership challenges of 21st century superintendents are vast, and that they may be a contributing factor to a high degree of turnover in the field. The review also raised the question of whether leadership preparation programs are adequately preparing superintendents for the rigors of the job. As the landscape of public education continues to shift on a regular basis, and as pressures mount for schools to be accountable for their performance, effective district leadership is more important than ever. This research sought to contribute to the existing research on the role of the superintendent, and to gain a deeper understanding of the superintendency by drawing on individual accounts of lived experiences.

Research Questions

Toward the goal of developing a better understanding of the complex role of school superintendent, the researcher, using a qualitative, phenomenological process, asked one primary research question. The question was a process question focused on “how things happen, rather than whether or not there is a particular relationship or how much of it is explained by other variables” (Maxwell, 2005). The primary research question was: What is the lived experience of a 21st century school superintendent?
This research question related directly to the literature review and the theoretical frameworks of Boyd (1999) and Porter and Nohria (2010). As CEOs of their school districts, superintendents are responsible for all facets of their organizations, and they operate in an environment where both internal and external pressures impact their ability to lead. The superintendency is a one-of-a-kind position, and only through the lens of superintendents can the researcher understand the complexities and realities of the job.

The central research question was “a broad question that ask[ed] for an exploration of the central phenomenon” in the study (Creswell, 2009), namely, the lived experience of school superintendents. In addition, Creswell (2009) suggests creating subquestions to “narrow the focus of the study but leave open the questioning.” Toward that end, the following subquestions assisted the researcher in getting to the root of the primary research question:

• What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?
• What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?
• What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job?
• How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?

Overall Research Approach

The design of this study was qualitative and employed a phenomenological strategy of inquiry. The following section will contain a detailed justification for the overall research approach, how the researcher selected the site and participants for the study, how the data was collected, and how the data was analyzed.
A qualitative approach for this study was advantageous for several reasons. For one, Patton (2002) states that “qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry (p. 14). With the primary research focused on ascertaining the lived experience of superintendents, this approach provided for more in-depth inquiry and analysis. Although pursuing a quantitative approach would have allowed the researcher to measure the reactions of more superintendents, and thus perhaps be more generalizable (Patton, 2002), “by contrast qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people … [thus increasing] the depth of understanding of the cases and situations” (Patton, 2002). In addition, qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to inductively and holistically understand the experience of school superintendents. Conversely, using quantitative methods would have forced the researcher to “generate and test hypothetical-deductive generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 69).

Further, the researcher’s study had several characteristics of qualitative research as identified by Creswell (2002). Among them was that the study took place in a natural setting (i.e., the offices of local school superintendents), something Creswell (2009) suggests is typical for qualitative researchers, who “tend to collect data in the field at the site where the participants experience the issue or problem under study” (p. 175). Additionally, in this qualitative study the researcher was responsible for data collection, and did not rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers. Unlike quantitative researchers, “qualitative researchers collect data themselves … they may use
a protocol—an instrument for collecting data—but the researchers are the ones who actually gather the information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). Furthermore, the study design was emergent, meaning that “the initial plan for research is not tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (Creswell, 2009, pp. 175–176). As the researcher attempted to learn about the lived experience of school superintendents—from superintendents themselves—a qualitative approach enabled him to “learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176).

**Practice-based research method.** A phenomenological study best enabled the researcher to advance the practical goals of the study, and to answer the primary and secondary research questions. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), “a researcher undertaking a phenomenological study investigates various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon. The researcher hoped to gain some insight into the world of his or her participants and to describe their perceptions and reactions” (p. 428).

To understand the phenomenon being explored in this study, *the lived experience of school superintendents*, the researcher needed to gain a better insight into the world of superintendents and describe their perceptions and reactions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The literature review indicated that “the role of the school superintendent has evolved into one of the most complex leadership positions seen today” (Short & Scribner, 2002, p. 1). Also, some researchers, like Cuban (1985), contend that “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency” (p. 28). And many question whether the unique challenges of the job are leading to a high rate of turnover in the field, postulating that the superintendency may be “evolving into a temporary position” (Shand, 2001, p. 2). A
phenomenology allowed the researcher to find some commonality in the experiences of superintendents and to see how they perceive and interpret similar experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

In phenomenological studies, “perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). The researcher hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the workplace experiences of school superintendents by exploring their “lived experience,” or, specifically, how they perceive firsthand the role of superintendent. According to Moustakas (1994), the aim of this approach is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Patton (2002) concurs that “there is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means” (p. 106). Finally, in a phenomenological study, the researcher attempts to determine the essence of a shared experience: “These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). This research identified the essences of the common experience of being a school superintendent.

**Site and participants.** The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the superintendency by drawing on individual accounts of superintendents’ lived experiences. In order to achieve that purpose, and to answer the research questions, the researcher purposefully selected six study participants. Patton (2002) states that “qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples … selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in
According to Patton (2002), “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis of in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46).

To meet the objective of selecting information-rich cases, the researcher selected five current or recently retired public school superintendents from the New England area who had served at least seven years in the position. The sixth participant served for 12 years as a superintendent and currently works as an executive director for an independent state trade association that serves superintendents from a New England state. The researcher, who hails from Massachusetts, used the average experience for Massachusetts’ superintendents as a standard by which to select the participants. The tenure of all Massachusetts superintendents is available through the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, which publishes an annual report detailing its members’ years of experience. In 2011, the average years of experience for Massachusetts’ school superintendents was approximately seven years. The purposeful selection of five participants who, at a minimum, meet the average tenure in Massachusetts — and thus have relatively long, rich lived experiences — served to enhance the research. The executive director was selected to participate in the research because he is a former superintendent, as well as for the fact that in his current capacity, he has developed an expert knowledge of the current state of the superintendency. The executive director also helped the researcher identify which participants would best contribute to the qualitative study.
In addition, the researcher selected school superintendents who serve in suburban communities (as opposed to urban or rural). The U.S. Justice Department classifies “suburban areas” as those that are no more than 30 miles from urban areas and/or have a density greater than or equal to 500 people per square mile and less than 2,000 people per square mile (The National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). Since the purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of superintendents’ lived experiences, the researcher believed it was important that participants worked in comparable communities. Although it is certain that suburbs are not all alike, it can be assumed that communities sharing the suburban designation have more in common than they would if they had different designations. In addition, based on the researcher’s personal knowledge of the superintendency, it is known that suburban, rural, and urban superintendents all face unique challenges. The focus of this study was on the unique lived experience of the suburban school superintendent.

After identifying potential participants, the researcher wrote a letter inviting them to participate in the study (see appendix A); the letter was followed up with a personal phone call. The letter was accompanied by a Request to Participate in Research form (see appendix B) which outlined the informed consent process, including, the purpose of the study, the procedures, and the potential risks of participation, confidentiality, and research participants rights (Watenpaugh, 2008). Access to the participants was facilitated by the fact that the researcher is also a school superintendent and has developed professional relationships with several superintendents in the New England area. In fact, the researcher personally knew four of the six participants before the study was conducted. The relationships are critical to a successful study, according to Maxwell
(2008), who suggests that “the relationship you have with a participant is a complex and changing entity. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means by which the research gets done” (p. 83).

When possible, the research was conducted in the respective participants’ workplaces. The interviews for the two participants who had recently retired were conducted in the researcher’s office. Conducting face-to-face interviews in this natural setting was conducive for this qualitative study because it allowed the researcher to see the participants “behave and act within their context” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175).

Data collection. The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection in this study, which is typical of qualitative studies. Creswell (2009) states that while qualitative researchers “may use a protocol for collecting data … they do not tend to rely on questionnaires or instruments used by other researchers” (p. 175).

The second data collection instrument for this research study was face-to-face interviews with participants. The interviews were completed in two rounds. The first-round interviews lasted approximately ninety minutes (see Appendix C for first-round interview questions); the second-round interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes (see Appendix D for second-round interview questions). The purpose of interviewing was to allow the researcher to enter into the perspective of school superintendents. Patton (2002) states that “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone’s mind, to gather their stories” (p. 340). This is especially important for phenomenological studies, as “the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the
phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves. This leads to the importance of … in-depth interviewing” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). Furthermore, the interview questions enabled the researcher to answer the research questions: “Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 92).

The researcher combined two protocols for participant interviews. Specifically, a standardized, open-ended interview protocol was combined with an interview guide protocol (Patton, 2002). This approach was beneficial for several reasons. Since it was only possible to interview participants for a fixed amount of time, the “highly focused questions serve[d] to establish priorities for the interview” (Patton, 2002, p. 346). Also, Patton (2002) suggests that standardized, open-ended interviews make data analysis easier, because “it is possible to locate each respondent’s answer to the same question rather quickly and to organize questions and answers that are similar” (p. 346).

Furthermore, this approach guaranteed that the same amount of information was collected from each of the six participants. This minimized the risk that those using the findings from the study will worry that the researcher’s “conclusions have been influenced by qualitative differences in the depth and breadth of information received from different people” (Patton, 2002, p. 346). Finally, Patton (2002) states that incorporating the interview guide protocol allows the researcher to specify certain key questions exactly as they must be asked while leaving other items as topics to explored at the interviewer’s discretion. This combined strategy offers the interviewer flexibility in probing and in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to pose questions about new
areas of inquiry that were not originally anticipated in the interview instrument’s development. (p. 347)

The combined strategy of structured, open-ended interviews, accompanied by an interview guide, allowed the researcher to explain or clarify questions if needed, which increased the usefulness of the responses (Watenpaugh, 2008).

**Data analysis.** In qualitative studies, the analysis transforms the collected data into findings (Patton, 2002). The process of qualitative analysis involves “reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 2002, p. 452).

The initial step in the analysis included reading, organizing, and preparing the interview data for analysis (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). The interviews with the six participants were digitally recorded, and subsequently transcribed. The researcher read all of the transcripts, which allowed him to “obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (Creswell, 2008, p. 185). Next, the researcher began a detailed analysis of the data, using the twelve interview transcripts, and employing a coding strategy. This involved taking text gathered during data collection, segmenting it into categories, and labeling the categories with a term (Creswell, 2008). The codes were determined based on various factors, including the following: those that readers would expect to find based on the literature review and theoretical framework, those that were not necessarily anticipated at the beginning of the study, and those that are of conceptual interest to the readers (Creswell, 2008). As Creswell (2008) advises, the researcher used both predetermined codes and emerging codes, which are “on the basis of emerging
information from the participants” (Creswell, 2008, p. 187). The codes that were developed included accountability, CEO, communication, community, complexity of role, finance, instruction, leadership, longevity, personnel, politics, relationships, school committee, stress/personal toll, training/preparation, and the unexpected.

The coding process resulted in the development of several themes for the research study, which became the foundation for the “major findings” (Creswell, 2008, 189) of this qualitative study. According to Creswell, the themes “should display multiple perspectives from [participants] and be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence” (p. 189).

The final step of the data analysis process was the interpretation of the meaning of the data. This researcher attempted to derive a meaning from the findings with information from the literature review and theoretical framework (Creswell, 2008). The researcher also confirmed past information and explained how the findings diverge from it and suggested “questions raised by the data and analysis that [he] had not foreseen earlier in the study” (Creswell, 2008, p. 190).

**Timeline.** In the fall of 2011, the researcher purposefully selected and invited six participants to take part in the research study. Once the participants were confirmed, interviews began in November 2011 and were concluded by January 2012.

**Validity and credibility.** The researcher considered threats to the validity of the proposed study, namely, the researcher’s current professional position as superintendent of schools and the small sample size.

The researcher has held the position of school superintendent for seven years, in a suburban district southwest of Boston, Massachusetts. He is an active member of
M.A.S.S., and serves on its executive board. Since he shared a similar professional background, and presumably a similar lived experience with the participants, researcher bias was a validity threat that he had to consider. In addition, the researcher considered his influence on the participants, which Maxwell (2005) defines as “reactivity” (p. 108). Trying to minimize the researcher’s effect “is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research … [rather], what is important is to understand how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 109). The researcher addressed this issue by conducting intensive interviews to collect data “that [were] detailed and varied enough that they provide[d] a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 110).

Furthermore, the researcher engaged in respondent validation during the interview process, “soliciting feedback about [the] data and conclusions from the people [he was] studying” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 111). This helped to prevent misinterpretation of the meaning of what the participants said, and provided a mechanism for identifying biases and potential misunderstandings (Maxwell, 2008). In addition, the researcher shared with the six participants a full draft of chapter 4: Report of Research Results, and asked them for feedback. Patton (2002) contends that having “those who were studied review the findings offers another approach to analytical triangulation” (p. 560). By having people described in the analysis react to it, “researchers and evaluators can learn a great deal about the accuracy, completeness, fairness, and perceived validity of their data analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 560).

The small sample size was another potential threat to validity and could have compromised the study’s generalizability. However, Patton (2002) suggests that sample
sizes “should be judged according to the purpose and rationale of the study. 

[Furthermore], the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected…than with sample size” (p. 245). The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of school superintendents. The sample size was selected based on the researcher’s judgment and “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 2008, p. 246).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Creswell (2009) states that it is important for the researcher to “protect [the] research participants; develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions” (p. 87). In order to protect the participants in this study and to ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was known only to the researcher. Furthermore, audio recordings and documents related to the interviews were destroyed at the conclusion of the study, something Creswell (2009) recommends, “so that it does not fall into the hands of other researchers who might misappropriate it” (p. 91). Subjects were assured that any data collected from them would be held in confidence.

In addition, prior to the interviews, the researcher reviewed the *informed consent protocol* with each subject. The protocol included 1) the purpose of collecting the information, 2) who the information is for and how it will be used, 3) what questions will be asked in the interview, 4) how responses will be handled relative to confidentiality, 5) and the risks or benefits involved for participants (Patton, 2002).
Finally, in consideration of possible risk to the participants, the researcher considered an alternative manner of conducting the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). However, since the purpose of the study was to better understand the lived experience of school superintendents, intensive interviews with purposefully selected participants was determined to be the most effective data collection method. It was the researcher’s belief that this approach presented little, if any, risk to the study’s participants.

**Conclusion**

This study intended to gain a deeper understanding of the school superintendency by drawing on individual accounts of the lived experiences of several New England school superintendents. The research was guided by two theoretical frameworks: Boyd’s (1999) open systems theory and Porter and Nohria’s (2010) research into the unique challenges of chief executive officers (CEOs).

Practitioners and researchers agree that the role of the school superintendent has evolved into one of the most complex leadership positions today, and that “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency” (Cuban, 1985, p. 28). This is evidenced by a high rate of turnover in the field and a perception that school superintendents are under fire throughout the country. Carter and Cunningham (1997) question the future of the superintendency and suggest that if the conditions of the job remain unchecked, the profession could face a great upheaval.

With the intent of gaining a better understanding of the school superintendents’ role, the researcher conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study to answer the research question: What is the lived experience of a 21st century superintendent? The study participants were purposefully selected and include five current or recently retired
school superintendents with at least seven years of experience. The sixth study participant served for 12 years as a superintendent and currently works as an executive director for an independent state trade association that serves superintendents from a New England state. He brings to the table an expert knowledge of the superintendency.

Data was collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews. This approach best supported the purpose of the study, as “the only way to for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves. This leads to the importance of in-depth interviewing” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). The data collected was organized, coded, and analyzed, and the researcher derived meaning from the findings. The analytical process also considered how the findings aligned with the literature review and the theoretical framework.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Results

Introduction

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent, which according to some researchers is one of the most complex leadership positions of the twenty-first century. In light of this undertaking, the researcher conducted two rounds of interviews with six purposefully selected participants, each having served a minimum of seven years as a public school superintendent. Five of the six participants currently serve as school superintendents in New England suburban communities or have recently retired from the superintendency. The sixth participant served for 12 years as a superintendent and currently works as an executive director for an independent state trade association that serves superintendents from a New England state.

The research results are organized following the study’s four secondary research questions, which, when answered, contributed to answering the primary research question: *What is the lived experience of a twenty-first century suburban school superintendent?* This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section contains profiles of the study participants. The second section discusses the following research questions:

1. What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?
2. What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?
3. What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job?
4. How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?

4.1. Participant Profiles

Jennifer

The first study participant, Jennifer, is the superintendent of schools in a large, suburban, coastal town. She has been in this job for less than 1 year, having recently left her first superintendency in another district after nine successful years. She has over 30 years of experience in public education and, prior to becoming a superintendent, worked as a teacher, curriculum coordinator, director of curriculum, and assistant superintendent. She holds a master’s degree and a doctorate in Instructional Leadership and Educational Leadership.

The researcher had known Jennifer professionally for 3 years prior to the study. Both interviews were conducted in her office, located in a district administration building, which is situated downtown in a heavily populated, though quaint, area. Her office was spacious, comfortable, and well appointed. Jennifer appeared completely at ease and in fact eager and willing to participate in the study.

Sean

The second study participant, Sean, has been a school superintendent in three school districts in two different New England states for a total of almost 15 years. He worked in his first superintendency for 10 years, his second superintendency for 3 years, and has been in his current position for 2 years. His current district is a “regional school district,” comprised of students from three different small, suburban New England towns. Like Jennifer, he has over 30 years of experience in public education and, prior to
ascending to the superintendency, served as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent. For a time, he also served as a school business administrator and as a director at a state regional “collaborative.” Sean holds a master’s degree and a doctorate in educational administration.

The researcher had not met Sean prior to the first interview. The interaction was pleasant and comfortable, and Sean was a willing study participant who seemed happy to share his experiences. Both interviews took place in Sean’s office, which was located in a free-standing district administration building on the main campus of his school district (high school and middle school). The building itself was nondescript, but Sean’s office was large and had an “executive” feel.

James

The third study participant, James, is a recently retired superintendent, who describes his background as “probably as traditional . . . as you could find” (Interview 1, p. 1). He was a teacher, a principal, and a human resource director before landing his first superintendency at a relatively young age of 40. He was an active superintendent in three different school districts—each time for 4 to 5 years—and in between served as the executive director for an independent trade association that serves superintendents in a New England state. While his first and third superintendencies were in small suburban districts, his second was in a very large district with an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population. In total, he has over 30 years of experience in public education and over 15 years as a school superintendent. Like the other participants, James possesses a master’s degree and a doctorate in school administration.
The researcher has known James for over 10 years, and they have a strong and friendly professional relationship. Because of that, the conversations in both interviews flowed easily, and James was more than willing to participate in the study and share his experiences. The two interviews with James took place in the researcher’s office.

**Carol**

The fourth study participant, Carol, has been superintendent for 5 years in a suburban, New England town that she compares with “Mayberry RFD” (Interview 1, p. 5), a reference to the quaint, fictional town in the *Andy Griffith* television show. Prior to this position, she served as superintendent in another suburban New England town for 3.5 years. In addition to her more than 8 years as superintendent, she has been a teacher, principal, director of curriculum, and assistant superintendent. She possesses a master’s degree in school administration but, unlike the other participants, has not pursued her doctorate.

The researcher had never met Carol prior to the first interview. She was instantly engaging and excited to participate in the study. Both interviews took place in her office, which was located in an older free-standing “school administration” building that was situated on the campus of the town’s high school. Carol’s office was small but had a distinctly “educational” feel to it. Her desk, walls, and shelves were packed with books, paperwork, and a lot of student art work.

**Eric**

The fifth study participant, Eric, is also recently retired, having stepped away from the superintendency after 15 years in the same district in a suburban New England town. Prior to the superintendency, he served as teacher, department head, director of
personnel, and interim superintendent. He possesses both a master’s degree and a
doctorate in educational administration. Coincidentally, he completed his doctoral work
in the same program at the same time with Sean.

The researcher has known Eric in a professional capacity for approximately 10
years, and there was a high level of comfort in both interviews. The researcher had sent
the participants the interview questions beforehand, and Eric arrived meticulously
prepared to answer them, having made notes in anticipation of the interview. He was
eager and willing to participate in the study. Both interviews took place in the
researcher’s office.

David

The sixth participant, David, currently serves in a unique capacity as executive
director for an independent trade association that provides direct service to
superintendents in a New England state. The association provides training and
professional development, legal support, and legislative advocacy for the state’s
superintendents. It is a vibrant organization, and virtually all superintendents in the state
are members. David has more frequent interactions with school superintendents than
anyone else in the state, which gives him a unique perspective on their lived experiences.
David is a gregarious, articulate, and seasoned professional; and both interview sessions
yielded fruitful data for this research study. Like the other participants, David had a fairly
traditional background in public education, having served as a teacher, assistant principal,
principal, and assistant superintendent prior to assuming his first superintendency at the
relatively young age of 39. After serving as superintendent for 11 years in a regional
school district in New England, he also worked as the executive director of a regional “collaborative.” In total, David has over 40 years of experience in public education.

The researcher has known David for over 10 years and has worked closely with him on various committees. As a result, there was a high level of comfort in both interviews, and David was generous with his time and seemingly willing to participate. The interviews took place in a conference room in David’s association’s office building, a nondescript, fairly sterile building located on the campus of a local high school.

4.2. Research Questions

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of a twenty-first century suburban school superintendent, the researcher conducted two rounds of interviews with the six study participants. The findings from those interviews are detailed in this section, organized under the major headings of the four research questions.

4.2.1. What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?

Superintendent as a CEO/educational leader

Participants were asked how they would define a school superintendent to a layperson. Their responses varied greatly and revealed a wide array of roles and responsibilities particular to the job. David articulated how a superintendent essentially runs the day-to-day operations of the school district, ensuring that all policies and fiduciary requirements are met, and ensuring that an appropriate level of leadership is being exercised with the staff, with the school committee, and within the community. It is a comprehensive job, but the “simplistic way of saying it is that the Superintendent is the Chief Educational Officer, the Operational Officer and the one that carries out the day-to-day duties of the school district . . . in the private sector [the comparable role is] the
CEO” (David, Interview 1, p. 3). Jennifer also compared the job with that of a CEO: “In business you have a product; a product is the automobile if you are the CEO of an organization like Ford or something . . . Our product in education is student learning” (Interview 1, p. 4). James concurred and suggested that a CEO is a comparable position with a school superintendent: “Sure, I think [you are], obviously, the head of the entire school system, and the leader of the entire school system, so I describe it to people that everyone technically reports up to the superintendent of schools. And I think from a layperson’s perspective understanding the private sector and things like that, that seems to be a fairly straightforward to say what the job looks like from kind of an organization standpoint” (Interview 1, p. 2). Carol said that when she tours all of her schools, she explains to students “that my job is to make everyone happy, keep a smile on every one of their faces. So that’s for the kids. For a layperson, I describe it as a CEO. You know, it’s a 3,900-student, 522-adult organization . . . it really is [a CEO].” She also added, “I don’t think people understand the magnitude of the organizations we run” (Interview 1, p. 6). Eric also thought that a CEO was the most obvious private-sector comparison for school superintendents: “I think the more we think of the job of the superintendent as a CEO, the better the position will be for superintendents. The reason why I say that is because I think a lot of superintendents have the view that they have to be terribly hands-on for the work . . . in districts [like mine] of 4,000 to 5,000 kids, when you have people around, you really do work through others” (Interview 1, p. 2).

Eric also provided a slightly different take on the CEO theme and gave perhaps the most colorful description of the superintendency, comparing the job of superintendent with that of a “band leader.” When asked to elaborate, he said
I think [as a] band leader you want a symphony rather than a cacophony. If you are interacting with the people well, if you have built very strong collegial relationships with the people, and you have faith in their ability to join you in leadership around the values, then you have a good shot at a symphony . . . That also implies lots of communication, if I haven’t said that. So, those are the components I think that allow you to have a symphony. Short of that you get a lot of noise. (Interview 1, p. 2)

Furthermore, Eric suggested that at budget time, he thinks of his role more as a “quarterback.” Either description speaks to the “expert knowledge that is required to be successful—to be successful far exceeds the expert knowledge that . . . the superintendent would possess” (Interview 1, p. 2). Because of that, successful superintendents must work through others to achieve the goal of the school district, and “that’s what I tried to do when I was superintendent. It speaks to collaborative leadership in a big way” (Interview 1, p. 2).

Superintendent as a politician

A consistent theme emerged from all six participants when they were discussing their perceptions of the superintendent role. Namely, although all six superintendents are not elected officials, they nonetheless consider themselves “politicians.” Sean discussed how that surprised him when he became a superintendent: “Today I would talk about the position being far more political than I ever would have thought when I started this, or even when I was looking at doing it. I used to say I was not a politician, I was an educator. But in reality, I think [that’s not true] and maybe it has to do with the economic times we’re in” (Interview 1, p. 7). James reported that he frequently phrases the
description of his role as “the Mayor of Education in your community . . . and I think people understand and get that as well, because people understand what a mayor does and how that works. And so I shifted into the political side, and I think the position has evolved into a very political position, and some of that has to do with social media and technology and being on the job really 24/7” (Interview 1, p. 2). Carol agreed and, like Sean, was also surprised at that reality when she became a superintendent for the first time:

Anybody that says the superintendent position is not political isn’t doing the job right. I firmly believe that. I hear some superintendents say that it’s not true and I used to believe that until I became one. I was so naïve… it wasn’t a job that I wanted to do. To just being thrown into the job, my coursework, when I was getting my [degree] in administrative leadership it was to be principal, which is so totally different in lots of ways than being a superintendent. I had not a clue, because as a principal you can be political, not political, but you can advocate for the school all the time. (Interview 2, p. 7)

Jennifer shared her thoughts about the political role as well: “You know, I think superintendents have to be politically savvy today. I think they have to know the temperature, they have to gauge the temperature of the [real] politicians, they shake hands, kiss babies, go out there, be visible, attend events. I think that is another big piece of the job” (Interview 2, p. 3). Finally, Eric believed that a significant part of the superintendent’s job, similar to a traditional politician’s, “has to do with who you know, reaching out to people, understanding what they want, responding to their concerns,
things like that . . . [so] it does speak to the superintendent as politician, in a way” (Interview 1, p. 12).

**Superintendent as an instructional leader**

In the conversations about the superintendents’ many roles and responsibilities, *the superintendent as instructional leader* emerged as a major theme. However, in practice, it was different for each participant. The one consistent message is that superintendents, unlike teachers and principals, are not on the “front line” of teaching and learning every day. However, they still fill an important role in the instructional arena. Carol was unequivocal that superintendents must be instructional leaders, as they are the face of the school system. She added that despite the many hats she is forced to wear, the one title she always gives herself is teacher: “I am a teacher. And the day that I am not a teacher is the day I am going to walk out the door . . . and if I’m not a teacher then I lose my credibility I think” (Interview 1, p. 25). Sean also believes that the instructional leadership role is important: “I do believe you are the lead educator in the community. I think that it’s important that people know what your vision for education is. I think it’s important that people see you and they see you in that educational role. So what does that mean? That means you need to be in the classroom, you need to be in the school, teachers need to know who you are, kids need to know who you are, their parents need to know who you are” (Interview 1, p. 7). Sean also added that while he is not a “curriculum coordinator,” he nonetheless is engaged in that realm by “working with my management team and the principals and the special education director . . . we meet at least twice a month with all my department heads . . . I think it’s important for them to understand I have a real interest in teaching and learning” (Interview 1, p. 8). He continued on this
theme and shared a story about having seen a 60-minute television show about billionaire investor Warren Buffet the night before. He relayed that Buffet plans to turn over his entire empire to his son who is a farmer, a decision that seems incomprehensible until you consider why. Namely, he said, his son understands culture, and it is the culture of the business that he deemed important. Sean related it to his superintendency by saying:

I don’t have to know how to teach physics to be able to carry the vision and to support the culture of instruction that we want to take place. Everything should be about teaching and learning, conversations should always be about teaching and learning . . . And so I think, I do think it is the role of superintendent as often as possible to be the speaker about instruction, what’s taking place, why do we do the things we do, where do we need to change. And so you can do that in a variety of ways. (Interview 2, p. 4)

Eric also had similar thoughts about what instructional leadership looks like for him. He acknowledged that superintendents may not have the depth of knowledge in curriculum, and even if they did at one time, you likely “lose that edge” as you move into the superintendency. However, “It’s all about leading through others. Modeling is the key piece for me, it’s supporting the effort by being visible in the schools, by visiting classrooms, by engaging teachers around their work, by supporting professional development, making sure the dollars are associated with that. Making sure that there are teacher’s voices, and principal’s voices heard as the district determines its priorities. Those are the primary pieces for me” (Interview 2, p. 4). David echoed a similar, almost identical sentiment, suggesting that superintendents “don’t have to be the fountains of all knowledge . . . but you have to be engaged . . . [you need to] spend time with principals,
actually going into schools and spending time in classrooms, modeling and understanding and communicating together expectations of what’s going on” (Interview 2, p. 6).

James had a different opinion about the topic of instructional leadership and acknowledged that he has had to “agree to disagree” about it with some of his colleagues. The reality, he says, is that

there has never ever been anyone fired based on a curriculum decision. They might tie it to we bought the wrong textbooks but that’s a money decision, that’s a bought decision. Not ‘we don’t think this is the right math program’—that’s not what happens . . . I tried to . . . be an instructional leader as a principal. I don’t think that’s the superintendent’s role. I would surround myself with those right people, a good assistant superintendent, depending on the size of the district, for curriculum and instruction. That’s their role, in fact I argued [once with the] chair of the school committee and he said to me, I would like to ramp up the academic achievement. I said well, we have the right people in place and now we have the right programs in place, you are just going to have to be patient because I think it’s going to continue to get better, because now we are much more structured than they ever were. He said, well you have done all these other things in the community, why don’t you take that on? I looked, and I said, right next door is the assistant superintendent of curriculum instruction, what is she going to do?

(Interview 2, p. 5)

Superintendent as community leader

All six participants, in some way, discussed how the superintendent is, among many other things, a community leader. In the districts in which these participants
worked, there is only one school superintendent in town, making it a highly unique and visible position. Jennifer spoke about some of the complex issues that her school district is facing (e.g., drug abuse among students and low parental support for education) and said “I don’t think these are issues that a school superintendent or school district can solve alone. They have to involve working with the police, they have to involve working with the clergy, [they have to involve] working with civic organizations” (Interview 1, p. 3). She added that just nights before, as an example, she attended her town’s civic association meeting, which involved various groups within the community coming together to solve some of the complex issues. She felt it was important that, as one of the town’s community leaders, she be involved in that discussion. Jennifer also discussed how she was involving herself in the community on a very personal level, even holding meetings in neighborhood homes in an effort to meet families where they are comfortable. Recently, she has “been trying to make my way into this one particular village . . . where my most needy students [live]. These are students who some of their parents are incarcerated, some of them are on free/reduced lunch, they don’t have any structure at home, they really, really struggling” (Interview 1, p. 11). Speaking of her ambition of making a “house call” there, she said, “How can I get them to understand what I am trying to do, and how can I support them, and how can they support us . . . [I am] sort of stepping out of my comfort zone as well, but those are the kind of outreach [needed] to get out into the community” (Interview 1, p. 12).

Carol spoke about the importance of the superintendent making connections to various community groups, such as senior citizens or the local business community: “I think a school system is really, in a lot of respects, the heart of a community. And I see
[my job as] reaching out to the preschool through the senior [citizens], because it’s not just about PK-12” (Interview 1, p. 12). A key part of being a community leader, according to Carol, is being visible in the community, something she deems “critical.”

I think it is critical to be visible in the community . . . [some superintendents don’t think so, but] . . . I think it’s important to be at athletic events, cultural events, to see how kids see me, other than the person who calls off school [on snow days], a voice on the phone, you know. I think that’s really important. I also try and support some of the community events that happen in town, like whoever does an auction I will do a couple of those a year, volunteer my time for that, because I think that—the community needs to know that the educational leader knows their community and supports their community. (Interview 1, p. 13)

David believes that communities want their superintendent to be accessible, mainly because multiple constituencies want their voices heard. Whether it’s a community group, a school committee, or even a group of teachers, those that make up the greater community believe it’s important to make a connection with the superintendent. Thus, “I think one of the things superintendents need to be thinking about is how do you, what are some of the ways you connect with voices in the community” (Interview 1, p. 11). According to David, there are formal ways to do that, such as having regularly scheduled meetings with community groups, as well as informal ways, like periodically going into schools. The bottom line is that no matter how you do it, “good superintendents try to find ways to connect with their constituencies. I think that’s symbolically important, but I think it’s also [important] content wise. So, you’ve got to find ways to be visible and accessible” (Interview 1, p. 11).
Sean believes that twenty-first century superintendents have no choice but to be community leaders: “I think times have changed, now you are a very public figure. Everybody knows who the superintendent of schools is. Everybody probably knows what the superintendent of schools looks like, because you are either at the basketball game at the end of the court, or you are flipping the coin at the Thanksgiving football game, or you’re doing something where you have to be right front and center. And so they have access [today] . . . Because we are available and around . . . [and] we are not the authoritarians we maybe were 20 years ago . . . [When I went to high school], the superintendent’s office was in my high school. I don’t believe I ever saw the superintendent of schools” (Interview 1, p. 13).

James, speaking on the importance of maintaining a high level of visibility, adds that the “public expects that the superintendent is going to be that [community] leader and they want that. I think in every community they want to see that publicly” (Interview 1, p. 5). He talked about his experience, saying:

I always enjoyed going to a lot of extra-curricular activities. I think that is something that the community really likes. I have heard it in every community that I have worked in. I have gone to many cultural activities, many music and art exhibitions and performances and a lot of athletic events. And I just think that is part of, I believe that is part of the job. If you don’t think its part of the job, then I’m not sure that the job is—because I think that is so much of what you are able to get done in the community in building relationships and establishing rapport with people. I think that’s a huge part of it. Some of that is what I believe is The Job. And so it is time consuming. (Interview 1, p. 10)
James relayed a story from his experience as the executive director of the trade association, which he believed illustrated the importance of superintendents’ engaging the community:

[A superintendent] . . . comes up to me, and he just started, been on the job for a couple of weeks. His first question was, do you have a list, does [the association] have a list of all of the things that we need to do, a yearly kind of checklist? And so, I dragged him into a room just the two of us and I said you know who you replaced? He said yeah, I said well the guy grew up in the community and died of a heart attack, fairly young superintendent, beloved in the community. Why do you care about the checklists for the event—you have to engage that community . . . I told him what I thought he needed to do . . . I said find out where the players eat breakfast, get to the first football game, stand on the sideline even if you don’t stay the whole game, make sure you get to the basketball game. Get to these things. So two years later I get a call and I went out to his district and met with the chair of the school committee and the superintendent together, and we did one of those “he’ll leave as long as you don’t evaluate him.” So as I was brokering (his departure] from the district) . . . I said to him, what’s the local breakfast place? “I don’t know.” How many football games did you go to last year? “None.”

(Interview 2, p. 2).

James said the point of the story is that superintendents who choose not to engage the community are “going to be in trouble . . . Tom Menino [the Mayor of Boston] is not the smartest guy in the world, but [he engages the community] and boy I will tell you he will be the mayor as long as he wants to be” (Interview 2, p. 2).
4.2.2. What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?

In the course of the interviews, the superintendents all described a job that seemed infinitely complex and challenging. In this section, the researcher will explore factors that impact superintendent leadership, both positively and negatively.

The unexpected

A recurring theme with the participants was the reality that the life of the superintendency is fraught with “the unexpected” and with issues that are outside of one’s control. Jennifer described the superintendency as a job where “you are constantly putting out fires and being distracted by things that have nothing to do with education” (Interview 1, p. 3). That is the reality of public education, she said, which is business unlike any other, mainly because “there are a lot of things that are not within our realm of what we can control” (Interview 1, p. 4). For example, “if the night before, a kid is coming to school and the teacher is going to teach a math lesson and that kid has . . . been up all night because his parents have been fighting, we have no control over that” (Interview 1, p. 4). Those realities, Jennifer said, impact educators’ ability to improve student learning, which is the “product” of public education.

Jennifer said that the unexpected issues stem from the reality that the superintendent is the leader of a large, complex organization: “So you have 5,000 students and 800 employees—things are going to happen . . . it’s inevitable that you are going to have somebody doing some foolish things . . . Parents aren’t going to be happy . . . We have over 45 busses that go out and come back every day, that’s a lot of transportation” (Interview 2, p. 6). Jennifer discussed a recent situation where students
were left at a bus stop due to a bus-driver error. This one “foolish decision” by the driver impacted a lot of people, including her, but

those are the things sometimes you have to deal with it. And I think also, you never know when it’s going to happen . . . it could pop up in the middle of the night, it can pop up before the day starts. You have your day planned that this is X, Y, and Z you are going to do, and it could all fall apart in a heartbeat (Interview 2, p. 6).

Sean gave a similar account of how issues beyond the superintendent’s control can make the job difficult:

To some degree there is as routine to this job, but there is a part that isn’t. You come in on a Monday morning and you have been dealing for the last week with this kid who’s in crisis and who is putting this stuff up on YouTube and you find out . . . that two more kids have put things up, so you say, OK, how do you deal with this? (Interview 2, p. 11)

The reality, according to Sean, is that you can “have you day mapped out, but in a minute it can all change depending on an issue that might have happened in the community, an issue with a staff member, and you go on” (Interview 2, p. 12).

Eric, like Sean and Jennifer, agreed that superintendents spend a lot of time responding to things beyond their control: “A School Committee member who is just elected resigns three months into the job and then shows up to a school committee meeting and reads a manifesto about how she was disrespected by the school committee members . . . What do you do about that?” (Interview 1, p. 14). These things, which he called “the debris field,” can derail a superintendent, and thus it “is important [for the
superintendent] to put that into perspective, because that’s a piece of the job, but it’s not the job” (Interview 1, p. 14).

**High expectations**

The fact that the superintendents must deal with a variety of issues outside of their control is exacerbated by the other reality that the expectations placed on superintendents are high and, in some cases, unreasonable. Carol said there are many things that fall under the category of “other,” as in “other things superintendent have to do.” Some of them are strange, such as the woman who asked her to mediate a dispute with a neighbor who continuously walked her dog on her property, or the two neighbors who were in a clash and wanted her to make sure their kids were separated. Carol said, “I get asked to do 9 million things because I am superintendent of schools . . . [many things I can’t do], but they think you can do those things” because of the high-profile nature of the job (Interview 1, p. 16).

Sean had similar experiences and a similar perspective and discussed the pressures placed on superintendents: “They want you to be omnipotent, they want you to be all-knowing, all-seeing, and they want you to be able to fix anything. You are the superintendent—fix it, you know . . . you get a lot of that” (Interview 1, p. 13). Sometimes, he said, he is shocked at what people expect him to do, especially things he does not and should not control: “I say to parents all the time, you’ve got to be kidding me, this isn’t something you should be talking to me about . . . there’s a whole series of folks you might want to deal with [before you ask the superintendent]” (Interview 1, p. 13).
Jennifer has also experienced community members, especially parents, feeling entitled to “go right to the top” when dealing with issues, even something as small as not having their bus pass arrive in the mail on time. Acknowledging that times have clearly changed, she mused, “I don’t know, when I was growing up, I don’t know that my parents would have ever called the superintendent” (Interview 1, p. 8). She continued that while it may come with the territory of being a superintendent, it is nonetheless difficult: “I think when they say the buck stops here, and it does stop here, I understand that. I am not afraid to make decisions, but I think there are so many things out of our control [and] . . . . the expectations are unreasonable” (Interview 1, p. 8).

Both David and Eric agreed that the twenty-first century superintendency is challenging, and superintendents may face unreasonable expectations. However, both provided a perspective that it is simply unavoidable. David said that “a lot about the job is not even reasonable to tell you the truth. I just think there’s so much that is expected—but let me say this, I think they are necessary so whether it’s reasonable or doable is not even the question. The question is, is it necessary?” (Interview 1, pp. 11–12). Furthermore, Eric said that dealing with these types of issues (e.g., facilities, transportation, personnel, etc.) is something all leaders need to do: “The conflict has to do with leadership . . . that’s part of the life of what leadership is all about, in the sense that if there was absolute clarity about all of those issues, you wouldn’t need to have a superintendent” (Interview 2, p. 7).

School committee–superintendent relations

The literature on school committees (a.k.a. school boards) painted a troubling picture of superintendent–school board relations, and several studies pointed to school
committees as a primary inhibitor to superintendent effectiveness. The six participants in this study had varied experiences when dealing with their own school committees. Eric had perhaps the most positive things to say about his committee: “I was extremely lucky that I had a supportive school committee from beginning to end . . . I had only two members] come on board in the fifteen-year period who were anti-me or critical of the school district” (Interview 2, p. 5). However, Eric acknowledged that “I think generally speaking communities at large don’t know what school committees should do and should not do. I think sometimes people will come on a school committee to ‘fix a problem’ or deal with a personnel problem . . . they don’t understand [that’s not their role]” (Interview 1, p. 12). Eric insinuated that he worked very hard on maintaining positive relationships with the school committee. The reality, he said, is that community members will always call school committee members in the hopes that they can help them fix something, “like my class is too big, or the teacher is unfair to my child, [etc], and they expect somehow the School Committee member to fix that. So they are in a very delicate spot” (Interview 1, p. 12). Eric attributed some of his success in understanding his role in that kind of situation, which he suggests is to “validate that they [the member] are in that kind of a situation. And in my view listen a lot to their concern, help the issue be resolved in a way that does not create a different kind of role or inappropriate role for the school committee. And that takes some work” (Interview 1, p. 12).

James had a decidedly different opinion about school committees, saying that “one of the areas that I have found to be an unfortunate part of the job is all the work you have to do with the school committee” (Interview 1, p. 4). According to James, one of the problems is that committees feel empowered to deal with issues that are not within their
purview, such as personnel. In describing his experiences, he said that dealing with school committees “distract you from the everyday work you know you need to do. I mean, I have had days where I just talked to school committee members all day long about something to try to keep the lid on things” (Interview 1, p. 4). Having had experience in several districts, James did make a distinction between his experiences, suggesting that dealing with school committees in smaller suburban communities may be better for superintendents: “I was in a bigger district with seven committee members and found a lot of my time was spent on that, and that can really inhibit you because you just run out of time to do all the other good things you need to do” (Interview 1, p. 4). James, who retired recently, said of school committees: “It’s one of the things that I absolutely don’t miss about the job . . . because it consumes so much of your time, and I have had a couple of [negative experiences]” (Interview 2, p. 6). He relayed a humorous story about working with a former school committee chair in his larger district:

I had a chair who, on one day, would say to me, and this is a quote, ‘You are the best superintendent. I have been in this community for forty years, you are the best superintendent [we] ever had.’ And then the next week he would call me on the phone and tell me I am the dumbest person he has ever met! (Interview 2, p. 6)

Sean, like James and Eric, has had various experiences—some positive and some negative—working with school committees. In his current district, which is a regional comprised of three towns, he has a thirteen-member committee that is by far the largest committee of the six participants. He identifies the major challenge for superintendents as dealing with committee members who are “on the outside, I don’t know that I’d call them
‘rogue’ but there is typically someone [like that] on the board” (Interview 2, p. 6). Those members, he said, are not on the board because they support public education, and sometimes they are not even politicians. Rather, they ran for school committee because they have an ax to grind, or they have an issue they want addressed. For example, Sean described a member of his current committee who does not even attend meetings regularly. However, when he does attend, “he finds a way to take shots, always about our math program. Thinks our class sizes are too large, thinks our kids aren’t performing” (Interview 2, p. 6). Those types of members “can wear you down too . . . I typically struggle with school committee members who are single-agenda folks who aren’t members for the right reasons . . . And they can take up a lot of your time, because you either end up either defending or getting taken away from the job that you want to be working on” (Interview 2, p. 6). Overall, Sean believes he has a good relationship with his school committee and contends

   I can’t imagine you talking to a superintendent who has had any longevity who isn’t going to tell you they have had great school committee relations, because you don’t last. I wouldn’t want to be in this job in a situation where I didn’t have a good relationship with the school committee, it would just be to wearing on you. (Interview 2, p. 7)

Jennifer has had different experiences with the school committees in her two districts but overall said, “I’ve always established a good relationship with the school committee” (Interview 2, p. 12). In her previous superintendency, school committee members would call her constantly: “They had my cell phone number and they would call me at night, they would call me first thing in the morning, they would call me during
the day” (Interview 2, p. 12). Conversely, in her new district, she finds that members rarely call her, or interfere with her, something she attributes to the committee members having clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities:

They made it very, very clear when they hired me, that they hired me to do the job, and they are very clear about their roles and responsibilities [established by the state law]—*hire and fire the superintendent, budget,* and *policy.* And so, I really think here it’s somewhat different because I don’t have that constant interruption, if you will. (Interview 2, p. 12)

Jennifer gave an account of a very difficult experience she had with a school committee member in her former district. The member wanted her to hire her nephew, yet Jennifer did not because he was not the most qualified person for the job. After the decision was made, “the school committee member came into my office, shut the door, and he said ‘I will never support you again in your administration.’ And I said, ‘Okay’—that was a challenge, it was always—That was a difficult situation” (Interview 2, p. 12). For the most part, said Jennifer, even if she has to disagree with a school committee member, she tries “to do so with respect and dignity, and I think that’s been something I have been able to do, and it has worked well for me” (Interview 2, p. 12).

Like Jennifer, Carol’s experiences with school committees have depended on the district in which she worked. Overall, she has found that “board members can easily inhibit my effectiveness. A great percent of school committee members run because they have an agenda—it’s because they have a child they want to have special treatment, or they have political aspirations . . . and this is how they are going to get the exposure” (Interview 1, p. 10). In addition, she has frequently seen school committee members
“overstep their bounds.” For example, she had a school committee member who wanted to make radical changes to the school calendar, such as changing the length of the school day and altering the traditional school vacation schedule: “I tried to explain, look, this is not something you can do at the local level . . . It’s a waste of the committee’s time . . . Those are things that make you crazy because it takes time away from what I think I should be doing” (Interview 1, p. 10). Her experience with the school committee in her current district has, overall, been positive, and in fact, she believes the committee has facilitated her leadership. That is because they “know their job is simple: policy, oversee the budget, and supervise me. They don’t get involved the way [they did in my former district] . . . When a school committee knows their role, it makes my job easy” (Interview 2, p. 5).

Because of his experience at the trade association working with superintendents from across the state, David has a broad perspective on superintendent–school board relations. Like the other participants, he reiterated that school committees have, by law, three basic functions: budget development, policy development, and superintendent supervision and evaluation. However, while there is a clear delineation of responsibilities, “there are a lot of school committees that blur those lines on a regular basis” (Interview 1, p. 4). David believes that school committees have the ability to “set the tone” of a school district, and that “they should not underestimate that the ways in which they treat the superintendent . . . and how they go about their business sets a tone for how other people act. So, school committees are an important part” (Interview 1, p. 9). David also suggests that the reality is that “there are not two school committees alike. They really are a function of the culture of the community . . . and [that] has great bearing on terms of how
school committees function” (Interview 1, p. 9). That has a huge impact on how successful a superintendent will be in a particular community, according to David, and he counsels superintendents applying for jobs to ascertain the answer to the question, “What’s the school committee like?” He elaborated thus:

Some school committees have a great history of knowing their roles and being supportive…and there are other committees that totally disregard [their legally-designated roles]. They still want you to bring all the personnel decision before them, they still want a say in terms of . . . the day-to-day operations of the district. And even more than that, they go to school committee meetings and denigrate the position of the superintendent in public. So it undermines the superintendent’s power role, function, and so the superintendent looks weaker . . . and it leaves a kind of dysfunctional environment. Unfortunately this happens more than I even imagined. So it’s a problem, and I have yet to find out what’s a good solution to this problem, because you can’t. (Interview 1, pp. 9–10)

Finally, David reported that every year, there are at least eight to ten superintendents who have some significant contractual problems with their school committee, requiring the trade association to provide legal support.

Conflict

In the literature review, it was established that in today’s educational arena, “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency” (Cuban, 1985, p. 28). The superintendent participants were asked about that, and they all, in some way, agreed that it was a justified declaration. Sean shared an anecdote to make that point: “My father, who was a dentist, used to say nobody comes to the dentist because they are happy, they
come to the dentist because they have a toothache, you know. Some of that may be true about the superintendency as well” (Interview 2, p. 8). Sean finds that some of the conflict comes from parents’ sense of entitlement around public education, something that was a common theme among several of the participants: “Parents feel like, that’s our school, our taxes are paying for that school. My child has one shot at second grade or a physics class, or whatever it is, [and] I want to make sure it’s the right thing for him” (Interview 2, p. 9). However, while acknowledging that it can be difficult to deal with these parents, Sean said that as a parent, he could relate them. He suggested that sometimes they are right: “So is it entitlement when a parent comes in? Sometimes. But sometimes we maybe aren’t doing our jobs the best we could” (Interview 2, p. 9).

Eric, who had the most experience of all of the superintendents, sees a change in how parents act and suggested that parents today are less afraid of authority and are also more demanding of what he termed “boutique” service. Those two together add “complexity to the job, because I think the superintendent’s word isn’t necessarily taken [any more] because he/she said so” (Interview 1, p. 3). Both Sean and Eric believed a sense of entitlement is correlated to the socioeconomic status of the residents. Eric said

What I saw from community to community was that people that have high levels of education as a family know how to pull all the levers and know how to work the system, and they know they want the best, they know the importance of education and they know they want the absolute best for their child. So they lean on the system, that’s the entitlement piece. (Interview 2, p. 7)

Jennifer agreed that there is more conflict than ever in the superintendency: “I don’t know whether it’s because of the economy, whether it’s because parents are
struggling, but . . . it seems today . . . they are willing to confront, create conflict” (Interview 2, p. 7). Regardless, she said, “Conflict is part of the job today” (Interview 2, p. 7). She speculated, like Sean, that some of the conflict comes from a greater sense of entitlement: “It’s well, I pay my taxes, it’s part of what I do, I live in this community” (Interview 2, p. 8).

David believes that conflict stems from the fact that the superintendent “is in the unenviable position of having . . . to be the decision maker around some highly sensitive and debatable issues” (Interview 2, p. 8). And the reality is that superintendents today “are doing more with less, we have fewer resources, we have greater demands . . . [and] decision are being made about whose ox do I gore” (Interview 2, p. 10). Superintendents become the “the focal point for decisions . . . [and conflict is created] between a number of different perspectives and how people react to them” (Interview 2, p. 8). David added that this is the reality of the job, and that “we can’t walk away from the fact that superintendents are going to make decisions that are going to appease some and going to trouble others” (Interview 2, p. 9). Finally, according to David, conflict for superintendents is inevitable, so “the question is to what degree we can prevent some of the conflict and manage some of the conflict” (Interview 2, p. 9).

Carol attributed some of the conflict surrounding superintendents to the fact that social issues and other societal forces can creep into the school district. For example, she discussed the focus on student safety post-Columbine and how that has impacted her. Before Columbine, “someone scribbling ‘I am going to blow up the school’ on the bathroom wall, you’d look at that and say it’s a middle school kid being a middle school kid” (Interview 1, p. 19). She indicated that not only are school doors locked now and
equipped with security cameras, but “I [also] spend . . . a big part of my job dealing with safety issues” (Interview 1, p. 19). Another example of how societal issues have complicated her job is dealing with things like drugs and students with emotional issues:

But the fact that we have to worry about fifth and sixth graders doing drugs—that would never have been on my radar fifteen years ago. Middle School kids thinking about committing suicide? It’s really—social issues is a piece of the job now. That is a much larger part of my day than it was . . . even 10 years ago.

(Interview 1, p. 20)

**Politics**

In the previous section, it was described how superintendents sometimes viewed themselves as politicians. This section will briefly explore how that manifests itself as a challenge.

Sean discussed how a disagreement about the teachers’ contract caused tension and discord in the district. When one of the three towns in his regional district was unhappy at the negotiated contract settlement, it created a “political divide . . . all of a sudden we had school committee members saying ‘we have to come out against [the district’s] budget.’ I was saying, you’re the educators, are you really sure you want to do that?” (Interview 2, p. 3). The difficulty, said Sean, is that the contract was settled before he arrived in the district, and the town’s concerns (about the negotiated settlement) were legitimate: “So it became a real political football . . . and now we need to make peace . . . but [because I am the superintendent] I have to advocate . . . [which is] difficult because I am defending something I don’t necessarily think they should have done” (Interview 2, p. 4).
Carol discussed how the political process played itself out when her district was trying to get the town’s support on building a new high school. She felt it was critical to get the support of an influential town official who, she said, “loved sports” and was advocating hard for the inclusion of a new artificial turf field: “I was against [the field] at first, but this is a good example of politics. If I went along with him, then I would get his support to push [the entire project] through” (Interview 2, p. 3). Ultimately, Carol said her “gamble” paid off as the town official supported the project and the school was successful in getting the entire project approved. Carol also added that politics is sometimes about compromise. For example, when she arrived in her current district, she noted that the schools were spending a tremendous amount of money on school buses since every student got free transportation, something not typical in today’s fiscal climate. However, when she broached the subject with the town administrator, he indicated that he “came [to town] twenty-two years ago, said it is going to happen, and it will always happen” (Interview 2, p. 3). Even though Carol wanted to reallocate that money for other things, she said, “I wouldn’t touch that one. You pick your battles” (Interview 2, p. 3).

David agreed with Carol and spoke of a recent issue with a new superintendent who “took on” a longstanding tradition in his town without having a full understanding of the town’s culture and without discussing it with any other members of the community. He said that when you take traditions that have gone on for years and years and “pull the plug” without considering how the community is going to react:

Politically, that’s a bad thing. What happens in that case is that the superintendent gets pressure into his office, including the pressure from the school committee,
and [finds himself] in a no compromise situation . . . he’s obviously done damage
to his own reputation in the community . . . politically he committed suicide.

(Interview 2, pp. 3–4)

David went on to say that while it is not necessarily easy, superintendents must
develop decision-making processes that take into account a variety of perspectives and a
variety of constituencies: “That is really important politically when you stand up there
[and can say] you have done the work—the rest of the community can say [your decision]
represents me” (Interview 2, p. 4).

In addition, David believes that today’s superintendents are more “politically
charged” than ever, which creates conflict and pressure on the position:

If you think about it . . . fifty percent think one way, fifty percent think another
way, and somehow [the superintendent must] come down on one side or the other,
and by doing that, you are now dealing with the unknowns of where that other
fifty percent is going to go, and how charged up they are going to be in terms of
really combating your position. (Interview 2, p. 5)

Finally, Jennifer told a story of a political battle she engaged in with three town
councilors who were attempting to unilaterally cut the school department budget because
they felt the school department was too “top heavy” with administrators. In response, she
“played their game . . . I made a [district-wide phone call] to all the parents . . . naming
these three councilors. We had an auditorium [at Town Meeting] packed with parents,
with students, it created real controversy in town” (Interview 2, p. 4). At town meeting,
the tide turned on the three councilors, with “students coming up to the microphone
asking councilors to take the money they get as stipends . . . and give it to the school. So
needless to say, I called their bluff is what I did” (Interview 2, p. 4). Jennifer described the whole experience as difficult but necessary and valuable:

> It took a lot of “hutzpah” to do that, but it was about doing whatever you had to do to save the school budget, to save positions . . . and I think politically, it put things on the line for me…but I also had [people] coming up to me to say the difference is ‘you took a stand, you took a stand and you were willing to fight for something at all cost.’ I think sometimes we have to do that, and it does get us into some hot water politically. (Interview 2, p. 4)

**The personal toll**

All six superintendents acknowledged that the superintendency is all-consuming. Jennifer summed it up by saying “Our job is 24-7. We are on call 24-7” (Interview 1, p. 14). The totality of the job, including the pressure, the accountability, the conflict, and the responsibility of being the CEO, can take a toll on the life on a superintendent. The six participants in this study described that personal toll in varying degrees.

Jennifer put the stress she feels in context: “It goes back to the pressure and the enormous responsibility. It’s where the buck stops with you. You can’t rely on anyone else, you are going to be the ultimate decision-maker, you are going to have the final say” (Interview 1, p. 19). That pressure, she said, can put a strain on your personal life, partly because no one else outside of work truly understands what a superintendent goes through on a daily basis: “They just don’t understand you, as much as you try to explain it. And there are some days when you are just so exhausted . . . that you don’t want to talk about it” (Interview 1, p. 14). Jennifer also said that dealing with the conflict inherent in
today’s superintendency weighs on her. While acknowledging that conflict is simply part of the job, it is nonetheless always hard because it raises emotion. For me, I take it home, I think about it, I think about it in the middle of the night. I think about when I wake up in the morning. If I am dealing with a situation that’s really conflicting me, it takes a toll, it takes a physical toll, an emotional toll, a mental toll on you. It’s very-stressful. (Interview 2, p. 7)

Jennifer added that her busy work schedule also makes an impact on her. During the second interview, she outlined for the researcher her work commitments for the current week. Her days were literally filled with meetings and civic obligations and, on top of that, was out that week four of five nights until at least 9:00 p.m. at meetings or community events. It should be noted that Jennifer’s week was typical of all six participants. It became clear during the interviews that the work schedule school superintendents is demanding and extends into the nights and weekends on a regular basis. What that means, said Jennifer, is “that you spend more time on the job than you do with your own family . . . and that creates a wedge, and it’s something you really have to work at. Your job becomes your priority . . . [and it] sucks the life out of you” (Interview 1, p. 14).

Sean also spoke of a very demanding schedule and discussed how in his former district there was a long stretch where he was working sixteen- or seventeen-hour days on a regular basis. He said when you have that type of schedule, the reality is that you do miss precious family time. When his kids were young, he said, “I had a lot of night meetings . . . [so] I wasn’t always home . . . Often I was gone in the morning before they
got up, when I got home they [were in bed] . . . that is tough stuff because your kids grow up fast” (Interview 2, p. 16). He remembered a time when his kids were very young when his wife turned the television to a local broadcast of a school committee meeting: “I can remember her saying to me—she said I turned on the local cable channel and the kids said, ‘There’s Daddy.’ Because I wasn’t home a lot, you know?” (Interview 1, p. 16).

In Sean’s prior district, where he spent 10 years as superintendent, he also lived with his family in the same town. Although he said there are certain pressures associated with that—namely, you are “always on” as superintendent—he described it as an advantage: “So not only was I the superintendent of schools, but I was a daddy. So I was in schools, I got a lens on the schools that some superintendents don’t have. I got to see it through my child’s eyes” (Interview 1, p. 10). Furthermore, even though he was “always working,” working in the same community where he lived enabled him to “never miss a thing. If one of my kids was chosen to give a presentation in front of the school, I was there. If one of my kids had a ball game, I was there” (Interview 1, p. 10).

Carol had perhaps the most difficult experience in her former district, where she first became superintendent in the wake of an unceremonious dismissal of the previous superintendent (her boss at the time). In short, she inherited a difficult situation, including a school committee that had a history of adverse relationships with superintendents and a community that placed unrealistic demands on her. She said, “They owned every minute of my life is what it felt like to me. I was out every single night [and if I wasn’t] . . . I would get my wrists slapped” (Interview 2, p. 8). It got to the point where her husband would say, “Well, Carol is a slave for the [the district], they treat her like a slave. He saw it more than I did, because he was looking at it from the outside in” (Interview 2, p. 8).
Her time there had a direct impact on her personal life: “I have two sons. It was like you can’t believe . . . I would be gone from 6:00 in the morning until 11:00 at night, and Sunday mornings I was always in my office doing catch up. And that’s not healthy, and for what?” (Interview 1, p. 16). The reality was that her “life was consumed by the people of [the town]. We go to Canada on vacation, walk into [the hotel room] and see a red light [on the hotel phone]. We think it’s an emergency with my mother or something—and here it’s the chair of the school committee calling me” (Interview 1, p. 4). Carol said another time, on New Year’s Eve, she was “at First Night in [the City], I get off the elevator, and a parent [from her district] comes and attacks me about some issue over a teacher she was unhappy with” (Interview 1, p. 4). It got to the point where she decided “you know what, this is not for me . . . so I left, without [another] job . . . walked away from it” (Interview 1, p. 4).

James, like Carol, had different experiences in different districts. Overall, his first superintendency was “very, very happy, and it wasn’t impacting my personal life, it was just part of my life” (Interview 1, p. 9). However, later in his career, he went into a larger district, and he “found the job literally was 24-7, and that was not only impacting my personal life, it was impacting my health and I was concerned about that” (Interview 1, p. 9). In his experience, he has learned that “It really does depend on the district . . . some of it is just the culture of the place . . . some of it is the structure of the town government” (Interview 1, p. 10). For example, in his large district, he had “all of these sub-committees of the town meeting members . . . I called them ‘shadow groups’ of the school committee and the finance committee. And those were all extra meetings that you’d have to go to” (Interview 1, p. 10). Likewise, James said, there were some districts
where school committee meetings finish by a “reasonable time” of 8:30 or 9:00 p.m., whereas in other districts, “the meeting would traditionally get going by 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. in terms of activity” (Interview 1, p. 10). James said, looking back on his career, that he did not think the superintendency had a detrimental effect on his personal life, but “I could definitely see it happening . . . I have friends and colleagues who ruined their marriage and their children have never seen them and those kind of things” (Interview 1, p. 10).

Eric had a similar perspective and stated, “I don’t think any superintendent could say that the job did not impact [his] personal life, because there are certain family events, children’s games, [etc.] that you missed because you had obligations [in your district]” (Interview 1, p. 17). The major reason, he said, is that “the superintendency is a job and a half, if not two jobs—it’s a day job and a night job. And it’s the night job that’s the tricky one” (Interview 1, p. 17). Like the other superintendents, Eric described a typical week as having, on average, at least two or three night commitments, including school committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, and other community events. Eric acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining that pace and suggested it could easily lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. However, he made a personal commitment to protect himself from that trap: “That is called protecting the goose. There are no golden eggs if the goose dies, and some [superintendents] —some of them look awful” (Interview 1, p. 19). One of the things Eric did was to strategically limit the number of “show-up, show-the-flag” kind of events: “I was not the [superintendent] . . . who did six nights and would go to every wake and funeral, and every football game . . . [on the visibility scale] of one to ten, I don’t think I was a nine or ten” (Interview 2, pp. 9–10). Eric also took the dramatic step of purchasing
a second residence in the town where he worked. Doing so enabled him to go “home” after the regular workday, to “cook a decent meal and to sometimes have a rest [before going] back to a meeting” (Interview 1, p. 18). Finally, Eric concluded, “I think it is the very highest of priority to take care of yourself . . . I think throwing yourself at the job is not a good long-term lifestyle and I don’t think necessarily good for your own success” (Interview 1, p. 19).

The grind of the night commitments was also something David addressed. He found that “most superintendents, when they retire, they say you know, I really didn’t mind the day job, it’s the night job that bothered me” (Interview 1, p. 5). He believes that many people decline to pursue a superintendency because of those extra commitments, saying simply “I am not willing to give my life over to the demands of the job” (Interview 1, p. 6). Finally, he suggested that the myriad of commitments—day and night—are a relatively new phenomenon: “I think that’s a big part of what is different today . . . it’s not that those things didn’t exist ten or fifteen years ago. They just didn’t exist at the extent they do today” (Interview 1, p. 6).

**Superintendent turnover**

Since the six superintendents all acknowledged that the superintendency presents myriad of challenges, and with research (outlined in chapter 2) that suggests that superintendent turnover is considerably high, the researcher explored whether there is a correlation between the two.

Sean, who has been a superintendent in three different districts, has never been in a situation where he felt forced to leave his job. He spent 10 years in his first district, which he deemed “a long time” especially by today’s standards. Even though he had a
successful run in that district, including being named state superintendent of the year and serving as president of the states superintendents’ association, he felt that after 10 years that he needed to look elsewhere:

Stuff starts to build up, and I was looking to do something different . . . Every time you make a decision as a superintendent you [tick] somebody off. You have positive support, you have collateral, but you also have this growing group of disenchanted folks, whether it’s because of the athletic program you didn’t approve . . . or [because of] the kid who didn’t get to graduate because he got in trouble. (Interview 1, p. 5)

In addition, Sean indicated that in his state, there was “nowhere really for me to go in terms of a financial gain” (Interview 1, p. 5), and with salary being a factor to consider, he began looking at other options. Sean believes his experience and his reasons for leaving his district are typical of other superintendents. He attributes much of today’s turnover to superintendents simply retiring from the profession, or, like him, taking jobs elsewhere. However, he added: “By and large, it’s because they are no longer a good match for the community or no longer feel they have the full support of the school committee, and that for me . . . [is when] it’s time to start looking” (Interview 1, p. 14). When you take that into account, as well as the fact that many superintendents are taking jobs in communities offering higher salaries, “the reality is that the days of twenty-five and thirty-year superintendents in one place are gone . . . I think superintendencies go in five-year cycles personally” (Interview 2, p. 13).

David shared with the researcher that in his state, currently, the average tenure for a superintendent in one district is 5 years. He indicated that “about half” of them are
because of retirements, and the other half are superintendents who are moving from one district to another. According to David, the reasons why superintendents move vary; however, moving to get a higher salary is one major factor. The other major factor is that the challenges of the job can catch up to some superintendents:

And as I oftentimes say, today you walk into a superintendency as if you were going to the bank and you put your $100 in for your savings account. And every time you make a decision you are either taking some money out, or, if you are putting it in, you are probably putting a smaller amount in than [the amount you took out]. So that’s what happens . . . there are a number of [superintendents] who move because they just feel they have taken all of that money out of the bank.

(Interview 1, p. 5)

David also said that a superintendent’s longevity is not only a function of good decision making but also of good luck: “Because the superintendent becomes the lightning rod for everything . . . it seems to me that one of the things about [that] good luck is one bad incident can be a job-ending event” (Interview 1, p. 13). Unfortunately, said David, “you are as good as your last act and every day is a new day” (Interview, p. 13).

James said that in every one of his superintendencies, it was he who chose to leave and pursue other options: “I have been on kind of a four-year plan . . . that just seems to be my pattern. [I go in], trying to do some improvement things early, seeing some success in years three and four . . . [and then leaving with] multiple years left on my contract” (Interview 1, p. 7). Regarding the issue of turnover, he said, “In one way I have contributed to this turnover issue, but at the same time I think a lot of good superintendents . . . have stayed too long in their positions” (Interview 1, p. 7). James
contends that superintendents leaving districts is simply a function of the job, and “I think there are superintendents with a right fit at the right time, and that doesn’t mean forever” (Interview 1, p. 7). James did discuss how the grind of one job persuaded him to look at other opportunities. Although he was recruited to apply to another district, he also said his current job was “killing me,” which contributed to his decision to leave. In addition to a demanding day and night schedule, “I was commuting a long way, [and] I liked doing it for two or three years [but] it just got tiring . . . my family, my daughter was still in high school” (Interview 2, p. 16).

James also suggested that for the modern-day superintendency, “there is a shelf life, and I think you have to go into the job thinking that” (Interview 2, p. 16). He believes that “these are not lifetime positions anymore, just because of changing demographics, and changing experiences” (Interview 1, p. 8). In addition, he believes that some superintendents are simply not good “fits” for their community, something that search consultants and school committees must address: “I think there needs to be more work done with communities to figure out what they really want [in a superintendent]” (Interview 1, p. 8). And finally, according to James, some superintendents who have been forced to leave a district simply have “picked the wrong issues” to deal with. And he concluded, “I think some of my colleagues believe that the superintendency is a power position, and it’s not. It’s a respect position. And, they also think they can control everything and they can’t. It’s not a control job” (Interview 1, p. 8).

Jennifer, who said she has heard that the average “life expectancy” of a superintendent is 2.5 to 3 years in a district, left her former superintendency by choice. In fact, after serving 9 years there, “I probably could have retired there. I would have sort of
coasted out of there. Everything was comfortable, everything was safe” (Interview 2, p. 13). However, she also spoke of some political pressures that led her to consider other opportunities:

The last two years—the political stuff started to put an enormous pressure on me. . . It was very draining, very emotionally draining, and I think I began to feel taken advantage of. I began to feel less appreciated. I felt that I was fighting battles that were not moving the district forward. I was getting entrenched in those political kinds of battles that I was spending a lot of my time trying to defend the district. (Interview 2, p. 13)

Even though she was not seeking another job, she was recruited to apply for another superintendency: “I wouldn’t have done that on my own, but when that opportunity, that recruiter came along, it was like ‘I have a way out—there’s a way out of this conflict here’” (Interview 2, p. 13). Finally, Jennifer spoke of the struggles she hears about in other districts and how many superintendents lose their jobs over things that are beyond their control: “There are so many variables that are out of your control, and if somebody really wants to get rid of you, they are going to get rid of you. They are going to find a way to do it” (Interview 2, p. 9).

As was discussed in the previous section, Carol’s first superintendency was difficult, and while she chose to leave on her own, the tremendous pressure and conflict she was facing was one determining factor in that decision. She said, “I had been there for three and a half years, they had given me a new three-year contract, and I walked away” (Interview 1, p. 5). She attributed the difficulty in that district to the manner in which she was appointed. Specifically, the school committee abruptly fired the former
superintendent then, without doing a formal search, appointed Carol. Carol questions whether or not she should have accepted the job in the first place, and while “part of me thinks it was the biggest mistake I ever made, part of me feels [that] I learned a lot [and] grew a lot” (Interview 1, p. 3). One of the major conflicts Carol faced in that district was dealing with an employee who was charged by the state’s attorney with a serious crime. The story was widely covered in the local and statewide media, and it created a lot of tension and conflict in the district. The community, she said, “was going to make someone the fall guy, and they were going to make me the fall guy” (Interview 1, p. 4). According to Carol, this is a prime example of how issues beyond superintendents’ control can have an adverse impact on their job security.

Of all the superintendents, Eric had the most longevity in his district, serving there for 15 years. His decision to retire was self-determined: “I was having a good time. Nobody was asking me to leave—not even hinting” (Interview 2, p. 10). The researcher asked Eric why he believed superintendents had a high turnover rate, and he responded that “superintendents get fired when the . . . political realities become turbulent” (Interview 2, p. 5). He added that all superintendents “can have a crisis or two . . . [but] not five or ten. I think the political nature of the job is [that] you reach a tipping point, and when more than 50% of the people think you should go, you just have to” (Interview 2, p. 19).

4.2.3. What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical to the challenges of the job?

The results of the interviews with the superintendents illuminated the many challenges of their jobs, and it became obvious that superintendents must bring to the
table an array of diverse skills. However, there was consensus that there were four skills that successful superintendents must have; and these included curriculum and instruction, personnel management, communication, and relationship building.

**Curriculum and instruction**

Earlier in this chapter, the researcher established that superintendents, among other things, are instructional leaders, although what that looks like is different for each superintendent. Jennifer believes that, at a minimum, superintendents must be well versed in curriculum and instruction, and she suggested that if she was “expecting principals to be in classrooms, focused on looking at instruction . . . using data to inform instruction” than she needed to, at least, “lead the charge” (Interview 1, p. 4).

Sean said the superintendent’s role in the area of curriculum and instruction is making sure “everything is about teaching and learning; conversations should always be about teaching and learning” (Interview 2, p. 4). He said that the superintendent must be able to articulate why instruction is important: “I do think the role of the superintendent is [to be], as often as possible, the speaker about instruction, what’s taking place, why do we do the things we do, where do we need to change” (Interview 2, p. 4). Finally, he indicated that superintendents must have the ability to tie almost everything they do back to education. He discussed how he recently made a presentation to the school committee, as a preamble to his budget presentation: “I said, ‘At this time of year we talk about buildings, bodies, and budgets.’ I said, ‘But that’s not what it’s all about. It’s about education.’” (Interview 2, p. 4). He concluded that he was definitely “setting them up” for a budget conversation but wanted to remind them that education, not budget, was the district’s mission.
Several of the superintendents pointed to the recent national focus on teacher accountability as a critical reason why superintendents must be engaged in conversations around instruction. David said that when he served as an active superintendent, he “spent a little bit of time on instructional stuff, but most of it was managerial stuff. A lot of what we [are doing today] is trying to change the nature of the conversation to more instructional” (Interview 2, p. 4). With a greater focus today on student achievement and test scores, David believes that superintendents must have specific instructional-related skills. For example, “They need to be much more informed about data, how to gather data, develop data, interpret data . . . I think outcomes are going to be much more based on quantitative measures and so . . . superintendents must be thinking that way” (Interview 2, p. 5). Finally, David said that superintendents must “find a way to be part of the [accountability and instruction] conversations with their staff, meaning the administrative staff but also teachers . . . the superintendent needs to be viewed as an integral part of [that]” (Interview 2, p. 5). Eric shared David’s view that the superintendents’ job is changing, especially as it relates to student achievement: “This is a new concept. When I started out as superintendent . . . this was not a high-profile piece . . . now [a superintendent] needs data that indicates the district is moving forward, that student achievement is increasing . . . more than ever before” (Interview 1, p. 15).

Jennifer spoke about trying to maintain an ongoing dialogue about student achievement and instructional improvement, regardless of what else may be happening in the district. She talked about the many ways she does that, including beginning every staff meeting with a presentation from a principal on data/student achievement, visiting classrooms, and purchasing a book on an instructional initiative that all administrators
read together. In short, Jennifer said, “It’s about constantly keeping that focus on instruction” (Interview 2, p. 5).

**Personnel management**

Another key skill that superintendents identified as important is personnel management. To a person, they admitted that successful superintendents cannot do the job alone, and that hiring good people is critical. Sean compared his approach with the Boston Celtics drafting Larry Bird: “I want the smartest people, I want the most energetic people, and I tend to hire them, and then find the right job for them. I try to surround myself with really bright, energetic [people]” (Interview 1, p. 12). He added that the success of the district usually depends on many people working together, and that “I don’t need to be the superstar. If everyone around me is doing their job and things are going well, I am comfortable with that” (Interview 1, p. 12).

Eric was strong in his conviction that superintendents must depend on other people to be successful, and he prioritized human resources management as the most important skill a superintendent can possess. He attributes that to the fact that “you have to work with and delegate to key people . . . the so-called ‘right people on the bus, and in the right seats.’ It is to me the number one function in the school district” (Interview 1, p. 9). Eric tied the importance of hiring to instructional leadership and said he always “focused on making sure that we had the best teachers possible in front of kids . . . We would pay a lot of attention to that, the hiring process was very, very deliberate and intentional and had many parts and pieces” (Interview 2, p. 5). Eric also added that [as the CEO] superintendents are ultimately responsible for the actions of all employees.
Since “they are responsible for every bit of it, that’s why the human resources function… is number one” (Interview 2, p. 8).

James had the most extensive experience in human resources and thinks one of the reasons he was a successful superintendent was because he possessed strong skills in that area. He said that particularly in smaller districts, superintendents are directly engaged in “negotiations . . . you are hiring, you are recruiting . . . all of those things” (Interview 1, p. 1). Like Eric, he acknowledged that because of the superintendent’s broad range of responsibilities, hiring the right team is critical: “You need to surround yourself with the people who really know how to do work in their area . . . [For example], I always needed to have a great finance person, and a great special education director, and someone who really knew curriculum and instruction . . . building that leadership team is . . . key to the superintendent’s success” (Interview 1, p. 2).

Carol believes that a key leadership function of her superintendency is “hiring the best people I can that make the decisions around curriculum and instruction” (Interview 2, p. 15). She learned the importance of personnel management when she served years ago in a curriculum coordinator’s role. Her superintendent at the time told her, “I am not interested in doing your job. I am trying to find the best people I can to do all all the jobs” (Interview 2, p. 4), something she has always remembered and has tried to live by. She expressed the difficulty superintendents have in getting rid of lower-performing teachers because of union regulations: “Unfortunately [we have little control], so I do the best I can to get my principals to hire the best” (Interview 2, p. 4). Finally, Carol said hiring the district leadership team—principals, central office administrators—is one of the most important things a superintendent can do: “Hiring of the team . . . when you get to hire
your own team, it makes [the job] that much better . . . it makes a big, big difference” (Interview 1, p. 11).

**Communication**

Of all the leadership skills that a successful superintendent must possess, the six participants agreed that communication was perhaps the *most* important. In the course of the interviews, the superintendents conveyed how critical it was to provide frequent, timely, accurate, and relevant information to all constituent groups, including parents, school committee members, teachers, other town officials, and the local media to name a few. Furthermore, they expressed that a twenty-first-century superintendent must adapt to the “24-7” nature of media and news and, in order to survive, must use the tools that allow them to keep pace in this new milieu. Finally, several participants conveyed that communication is the cornerstone of relationship building, which is another key “skill” that will be explored in the next section.

Eric ranked communication as “number one on the priority list” of skills superintendents must possess. Communicating effectively allows “people to know who you are and what you stand for, and what’s going on in the district” (Interview 2, p. 1). Furthermore, “[communication] leads to trust . . . [and] it’s the trust piece that allows superintendents to do the work. It manifests itself for me . . . in having people go with you for the ride, and cut you slack when they are not perfectly sure” (Interview 2, p. 1). Because of the focus on accountability, which leads to a “pressurized” environment for superintendents, Eric believes strong communication skills are more important than ever: “I was always telling the community about the strengths of the school system . . . I think it was important fifteen years ago; now I think it’s critical” (Interview 1, p. 6). Finally,
Eric said that in today’s environment, transparency is extremely important, and thus openly communicating is a must: “I think you have to communicate a lot with people . . . I think sometimes we are too secretive about what we do. [Schools] are public institutions, and the more we share the better . . . for good and bad” (Interview 1, p. 9).

Carol was emphatic that “communication is an absolute key to success in this job” (Interview 2, p. 1). She described the many ways in which she communicates within her community, including writing newsletters to staff and parents, hosting a cable television show, and holding face-to-face meetings with many different constituent groups. The reality is that “you have to be an effective communicator both verbally and in writing because superintendents need to speak to different audiences” (Interview 1, p. 12). Carol said that most superintendents “would probably get a D in my book [for not talking enough about] what is going right in the schools . . . I know I don’t” (Interview 2, p 1). Like Eric, Carol said one of the primary reasons for communicating is to build trust and gain credibility within the community.

Jennifer reported that communication for superintendents is an “ongoing part of their job. I think the way, and the process, for communication is critical when you are trying to educate people, your constituents, parents, town council . . . I don’t think [they] know how schools work” (Interview 2, p. 1). Jennifer employs different communication strategies depending on her message and also depending on who is she trying to reach: “You always have to be thinking about who are your constituents, who are you trying to reach, how are you trying to reach them, [and] what are the avenues [to reach them]” (Interview 2, p. 2). Since she has arrived in her new district, Jennifer has been in a constant mode of communicating. She has, among other things, given speeches to civic
organizations; given interviews on cable television; aired a radio and television
commercial promoting her district; held formal and informal forums with parents,
including making “house calls” to local residences; conducted surveys; and written
newsletters. Jennifer added, “I think communication today is so critical to the success of
the superintendent . . . [and] it’s virtually impossible to over-communicate” (Interview 2,
p. 3).

Sean also agreed that “communication is a major issue in terms of success, [and
it] has changed . . . The way [I used to communicate] was through presentations, through
newsletters. Times were slow in terms of that” (Interview 2, p. 1). He added that because
of the proliferation of new technology, superintendents are forced to respond to things
more quickly and must adapt their communication to the new environment. Recently,
Sean dealt with a situation where a student in his district posted a YouTube video
claiming she had been bullied in school. Even though the video was posted late at night,
“in a matter of three hours, I probably had thirty e-mails from staff, from school
committee members, from former students [asking] ‘Have you seen this?’ . So it . . . just
takes off” (Interview 2, p. 1).

When that happened, he spent an inordinate amount of time communicating about
the issue and trying to diffuse it with his school committee, his staff, students, and
reporters from major media outlets. The ability of superintendents to respond quickly,
and to communicate the facts, is critical:

A lot what you are doing is damage control because they have run with something
when they only have part of the information. That again comes back to
communication . . . if we don’t do a good job of communicating often and early,
that could come back to bit us because the train might leave the station in the direction we don’t want it to go. (Interview 2, p. 7)

James said that in recent years, the job of communicating has become more difficult for superintendents, in part because new technology has made the job “even more 24-7 . . . In the last few years, I have had people e-mailing me in the middle of the night about the an issue they have heard about . . . and so you get up the next morning and are working on that issue whereas [in the past it] wouldn’t have gotten to you for days” (Interview 1, p. 3). Because of the speed in which information travels today, James said it’s important, more than ever, for superintendents to “control the message in the community . . . [and] to get the message out in different ways [than before]” (Interview 1, p. 3).

David concurred with James and believes that community members today expect a steady stream of information from superintendents: “They want timely information. They want to know what you are thinking about an issue . . . but they want to know what you are thinking about today, not tomorrow” (Interview 1, p.11). The challenge for superintendents, he said, is “anticipating . . . what people want to know and try[ing] to provide that for them” (Interview 1, p. 11).

**Relationship building**

The six superintendents also stressed the importance of building and maintaining relationships within the school and greater community. David said that one thing he tells all new superintendents is that “it’s about relationships . . . If you don’t have [skills in] relationship building, I don’t believe you can be successful. Now I am not saying that’s
all that’s required, but I’m saying . . . you begin with that” (Interview 1, p. 8). David added

The bottom line is you know in the superintendency that you are going to be faced with lots of decisions that people are going to question . . . And the more they understand you, who you are, and what you are about, the more they can make the connection to the decisions that you make . . . Because when you are not known in the community, and you make those critical decisions, you become just another face, another bureaucrat.

David also tied communication to relationship building, contending that “communication probably is the most important ingredient to building a relationship” (Interview 2, p. 1). Combining the two skills is not only important, David said, but is actually a key factor to a superintendent’s longevity and success.

Jennifer described the many relationships she tries to cultivate, including those with the teachers’ union, senior citizens, town officials, and other groups. She believes one of her core strengths is her ability “to bring people together, build relationships, get the right people on the bus, collaborate” (Interview 1, 2). Furthermore, she pointed to that strength as the reason she was selected for her current position: “Working with town officials, collaborating with the mayor, the town council, the school committee . . . the whole concept of building relationships was key [for the school committee] ” (Interview 1, p. 2). Jennifer said so much of her job is about interactions with people and discussed how important it was to her: “Sometimes you don’t know the impact that your taking time to talk to somebody in the community [could be] — it could be a bus driver, it could be a business person . . . it is building relationships with people” (Interview 2, p. 10).
When discussing the importance of connecting with people, Eric said there is “classic bifurcation” of the superintendency: “Superintendent as content-knowledge person and superintendent as relationship-building person” (Interview 1, p. 15). While you need both skill sets, Eric said, the “relationship piece is critical... I know superintendents who have gotten themselves in a lot of trouble who have wonderful academic credentials, terrific curriculum [knowledge], and all that stuff, and in the process ticked everybody off with whom they worked” (Interview 1, p. 15). Bottom line is, Eric said, “a superintendent has to able to balance the various constituencies, and that is all of them” (Interview 1, p. 15).

James believes “there are a number of different groups that you need to work with. [For example], I have had really good success in a couple of places building a strong, district-wide, PTO leadership group. And that is a constituency that I would meet with monthly” (Interview 1, p. 6). He said it behooves superintendents to develop and cultivate those relationships: “You get those folks on your side, particularly in good suburban communities, and you can get a lot done” (Interview 1, p. 6). In addition, in his last district, James spent a lot of time developing relationships with other municipal leaders. Those relationships can be challenging in a suburban district, because every department (e.g., school department) is competing with each other for financial resources. James said, “I pretty much just sat down with the leaders and said ‘We are all in this together.’ I think part of what a superintendent should be talking about is being a good community, not just [being] a good school system” (Interview 2, p. 12). That belief, James said, evolved over time: “I thought ‘Superintendent 101’ told me before I became a superintendent that I needed to try to beat the daylights out of the municipal side... in
order to get the school money” (Interview 2, p. 13). James acknowledged that superintendents do not pay as much attention as they should to building relationships with the municipal side of government, but that “these people can be awfully helpful. If you have a good relationship with the Police Chief and the Fire Chief, you’re golden. It makes the [superintendency] a lot easier when some of these [issues arise]” (Interview 2, p. 13).

Carol agreed with the other superintendents and said that communication and relationship building is about “trust and credibility” (Interview 2, p. 7). She described how the former superintendent in her current district had an adverse relationship with an important town official. Knowing that, she said, “As soon as I came here . . . I sat [with him] and said I would like to meet monthly . . . just to make sure we are on the same page” (Interview 2, p. 2). That relationship developed over time, and Carol describes it now as a “godsend.” Just recently, Carol submitted a school budget that she knew was “too high . . . but I also know that he will support whatever I need. That doesn’t happen overnight. That happened because we built up a relationship” (Interview 2, p. 2). Carol also believes that it is important to make personal connections in the school and in the community. She described a recent interaction with an elderly resident who, after an important public meeting, came up to her and hugged her. What was important was that even though “I didn’t know her, she knew who I was” (Interview 2, p. 2). Within her school system, Carol makes an effort to connect with every employee and, in fact, sends every one of them (over 500) a personalized birthday card: “I want them to know that I appreciate them . . . I want them to know that I know who they are . . . [that] they are
more than a person who is here six or seven hours a day, and that they have a life” (Interview 1, p. 27).

4.2.4. **How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?**

Although it was not a primary focus of this study, the researcher tried to ascertain how prepared the superintendents felt they were for the rigors of the job, taking into account both their academic and professional training.

When asked directly if she was prepared the superintendency, Jennifer declared, “No. Not at all . . . This is a job that you learn as you go, it’s on-the-job training” (Interview 1, p. 16). She considered the great responsibility she has, including overseeing a $60 million budget, 800 employees, and 5,300 students; and “When I think of the academic preparation [I had], a lot had to do with theory, and not practice” (Interview 1, p. 16). Jennifer said the reality is that when you ascend into the superintendency, “it is very different, you are no longer observing, you are doing. You are confronted on a daily basis with situations that you never experienced before” (Interview 1, p. 17). Thus, she said, the best preparation for her current job is the “experiences that I had for nine years [in my former district]” (Interview 1, p. 17). She believes that college preparation programs should employ more of a case-study approach: “[They need] to spend time in schools, observing. Doing some sort of study where they spend a year in a school system, from beginning to end. [Actually] I would say twelve months, because this is a twelve-month job” (Interview 1, p. 18).

Sean believes that overall, he was prepared for the job and points to his masters’ degree in organizational development as one contributing factor. Also, he said his
experience as a school business administrator prepared him well, and while he “didn’t want to do that for a career, it has held [him] in good stead” (Interview 1, p. 17). In addition, the supervisory experience he gained as a principal has been helpful. As he reflected more on this question, Sean said, “I don’t how you prepare anyone for [this job] — what I think struck me early on was the loneliness of the job . . . so that was one piece I was not prepared for” (Interview 1, p. 18). He said the reason it is lonely is because unlike other administrative positions (e.g., principals), there is only one superintendent in each district, meaning “there wasn’t a lot of places I could share” (Interview 1, p. 18).

Eric discussed the various doctoral programs designed to prepare superintendents and said they have the wrong focus: “A doctoral program should . . . give people basic understandings in various areas of the operations of a school district. Most school superintendents come out through some kind of curriculum stream one way or another” (Interview 1, p. 10). Although overall Eric believes his doctoral program was valuable because it was “a little more content based [than some others]” (Interview 1, p. 20), it had its flaws: “What bled out of that was this job is [only] about content. [That] the job is about knowing the law, knowing the business function, you knowing curriculum, you knowing special education regulations . . . and that’s the starting point, that is all that it is” (Interview 1, p. 20). Eric said that after taking two courses in school law, he left with “when you have a problem that’s legal—call your attorney” (Interview 1, p. 10). A more beneficial approach, he said, would be a preparation program that covers the content areas but has a greater focus on leadership: “I continue to maintain that . . . what sinks the superintendent’s ship is not the content piece . . . [rather] it’s that decision that you have to make when a parent is unhappy or school committees destabilize . . . those are the
things that really require [leadership skills]” (Interview 1, p. 20). If Eric were to design a model program, it would include more “case studies, scenarios, dilemmas a superintendent faces, [etc.]” (Interview 1, p. 20). Finally, Eric said that today’s superintendents, in the era of accountability, need more training focused “like a laser beam on the instructional core. Teacher and student in the presence of curriculum—that’s it, and everything that you do as a superintendent somehow should be tied to that.”

When asked if she was adequately prepared for her job, Carol said, “No one is” (Interview 1, p. 19). Carol believes that there needs to be “more real-life application” (Interview 1, p. 24) in superintendent training. For example, “No one trains you to deal with the sudden death of a student in your community, but there are lots of people out there who have dealt with it, and there [could be] training [available]” (Interview 1, p. 24). Also, Carol said she could have used more training on the “public relations piece [of the job]. I got no training in that in classes on the important role the superintendent plays as the communicator and dealing with stuff [we didn’t have to deal with ten years ago]” (Interview 1, p. 19).

Finally, the researcher and Carol discussed how most superintendents still come from the “traditional” pathway of curriculum and instruction, and she believes that is important: “If I’m not a teacher then I lose my credibility, I think . . . I watched [a superintendent in another district] who had no educational background totally blow up a system, and I will never understand what the school committee was thinking [when they hired] him” (Interview 1, p. 25).

James feels that he was well-prepared for the superintendency from an academic standpoint: “I think the courses I took . . . gave me a very good foundation for what I
needed to know” (Interview 1, p.11). However, he said, “It’s the practical piece [of the job] that is the most difficult” (Interview 1, p. 11). Like Carol, James believes colleges and universities need to focus more on real-life applications: “[They] could do some more with case studies and with how different superintendents approach the job in different places . . . And like I said, I have seen superintendents not do well because they pick the wrong issues [to tackle], and sometimes case studies can help you work through that” (Interview 1, p. 12). Also, James said that since most of the training for superintendents is on the job, “colleges and universities could probably do a better job of creating opportunities for people to get out into the field” (Interview 1, p. 11). Finally, James said that one of the reasons he was successful as superintendent was because of his background in human resources, but that “there’s more of a push right now for people to have worked in curriculum and instruction. And . . . I’m not sure that is the right skill set for the 21st century superintendent” (Interview 1, p. 2).

David spoke of the many professional development opportunities his state association is providing to superintendents. The association runs workshops and conferences in a wide variety of areas, including supervision and evaluation, leadership/team development, collecting and interpreting data, technology, school committee–superintendent relations, and other relevant topics. In addition, they have recently launched a training program for new superintendents “that provides [them] with eight six-hour days of formal training with about eight hours a month of coaching time in their first year, helping them to be successful” (Interview, 1, p. 3). Also, David reiterated how important relationships are for superintendents and said that his association continuously works with new superintendents on: “How do you work with your
administrative team, how do you communicate to your faculty and staff, how do you do outreach to parents, how do you connect with the community . . . relationships with these constituencies is really important” (Interview 1, p. 8).

**The importance of mentoring**

Many of the conversations with the six superintendents around training and preparation led to the topic of mentoring. Jennifer spoke of a former superintendent who “took me under his wing . . . saw something in me” (Interview 1, p. 1) and gave her opportunities in her job that prepared her to take the next step into the superintendency. Sean had a similar experience and said that “when we are talking about [becoming a superintendent] . . . it was important for me to be mentored by somebody” (Interview 1, p. 1).

Eric, Carol, and James all had similar things to say, and all three pointed to someone in their career who provided guidance to them, trained them, and, importantly, encouraged them to become a superintendent. What James said about his experiences summarizes what all five superintendents had to say about the importance of a mentor in their professional life:

I was enormously fortunate . . . [to have] a superintendent who took me under his wing right away [and provided me leadership experiences] . . . And then in two [other] districts where I worked before I was a superintendent, I had two of the best superintendents I could imagine that did the same thing. So I had two mentors when [I became superintendent] who more than adequately prepared me . . . And when I became superintendent they were a phone call away all the time . . .
they felt that it was important to give back and I know I wasn’t the only person they were mentoring informally. It was all informal. (Interview 1, p. 11)

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings of the study based on the analysis of the interview transcripts. The research results were organized following the study’s four secondary research questions, which, when answered, contributed to answering the primary research question: *What is the lived experience of a twenty-first century suburban school superintendent?*

The first subsection contained findings related to the secondary research question: *What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?* Although the interviews revealed that twenty-first century superintendents must serve a variety of roles, four major roles emerged from the findings. The findings in this section were organized under the following headings: Superintendent as a CEO/educational leader, superintendent as a politician, superintendent as an instructional leader, and superintendent as a community leader.

The second subsection contained findings related to the secondary research question: *What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?* Although the findings revealed that there are numerous factors that contribute to the complexity of the job, there were several major themes that emerged. They were organized as follows: Dealing with the unexpected, high expectations, school committee–superintendent relations, conflict, politics, and the personal toll. This subsection concluded with findings related to the topic of *superintendent turnover* and explored why the six superintendents may have left previous jobs.
The third subsection contained findings related to the secondary research question: *What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical to the challenges of the job?* There were many important skills that the superintendent participants identified. However, the analysis of the interviews revealed a consensus about four must-have skills. This section was organized under the following four major headings: Curriculum and instruction, personnel management, communication, and relationship building.

The fourth and final subsection of chapter 4 contained findings related to the secondary research question: *How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?* The findings from the six participants were summarized under that major heading. The section concluded with some related findings on the topic of mentoring.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent, which some researchers claim is one of the most complex leadership positions today. In the 21st century educational arena, the superintendent is responsible for balancing decisions and policies that address the social, political, economic, and legal problems that penetrate the schoolhouse, as well as for managing the tensions surrounding these problems. Because of that, Cuban (1985) contends that “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendence” (p. 28). The challenges of the position may be a contributing factor to the great number of professionals leaving the field, and a rate of turnover that some describe as historically high, leading some to ask the question of whether the superintendency is “evolving into a temporary position” (Shand, 2001, p. 2). With the seemingly endless demands being placed on school districts throughout the country, school superintendents are under fire. It is thus imperative to gain a better understanding of the unique profession. Many educators question the future of the superintendency, and whether, if the problematic conditions of the job remain unchecked, there is the potential for greater upheaval in the profession (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Research Questions

The superintendency is considered to be the most visible and influential leadership position in education today (Sovine, 2000). This research aimed to contribute to the existing research on the role of the school superintendent by drawing on individual accounts of lived experiences (Brunner, 2000). Toward that end, the researcher, using a
qualitative, phenomenological process, asked one primary research question: What is the lived experience of a 21st century school superintendent?

Four secondary questions provided a framework for the research:

1. What are superintendents’ perceptions of their role?
2. What factors do superintendents believe impact their leadership?
3. What are the leadership skills that superintendents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job?
4. How does prior academic and professional training prepare superintendents for the challenges of the job?

**Theoretical Framework**

The researcher will discuss the findings through the lens of the two theoretical frameworks that guided this research. The first can be found in the work of researchers, such as Boyd (1999), who contend that organizations should operate as “open systems, which assumes permeable boundaries and interactive two-way relationship between schools … and their environments” (Bush, 2003, p. 42). The second framework focuses on leadership—in particular on the unique challenges faced by chief executive officers (CEOs). Porter and Nohria (2010) provide a four-stage thematic lens for exploring this topic.

Supporting Boyd’s (1999) theory of open systems, the findings yielded evidence that 21st century superintendents frequently interact with their external environments, rather than work in isolation. In fact, one of their primary roles is to serve as a community leader. In discussing the *community imperative,* one of the three social forces that Boyd (1999) contends has impacted educational leaders in recent years, he theorizes
that “effective teaching and learning requires us to revitalize and reinvent relationships both for the internal and external communities of the school.” He further stated the need to build “a caring professional community with high academic standards and expectations within schools,” as well as to establish “productive connections with our school communities” (p. 288). The findings of this study support this contention. For example, one of the study participants, Carol, called her school system the “heart of the community,” and believed a key role for her to play was reaching out: “The community needs to know the educational leader knows their community and supports their community” (Interview 1, p. 13).

The research findings also correlated to another component of the open systems theoretical framework, namely, that open systems encourage interchange with the environment. That is, while organizations may respond to external influences, they also seek support from those influences for district objectives. One superintendent, Jennifer, spoke about some of the environmental and societal pressures affecting her district (i.e., drug abuse among teens and lack of parental support and involvement), and how she needed to engage the community to effectively respond to them. In short, she said, “I don’t think these are issues that a school superintendent or school district can solve alone” (Interview 1, p. 3).

Finally, the research findings also correlated to Boyd’s (1999) accountability imperative, which explores how the existence of various accountability initiatives place great pressure on school leaders. All the six participants in this study described their difficulty in living up to the high expectations of the 21st century superintendency. From
the sheer volume of work, to the numerous demands placed on them, to the fact that the demands are unreasonable, today’s superintendents are required to “do it all.”

The second theoretical framework (Porter & Nohria, 2010) explores the role of CEOs in organizations. Although the job titles certainly differ, the findings drawn from the accounts of the six study participants confirm that the responsibilities of a school superintendent closely match those of a CEO’s. What links the two positions are the inherent leadership challenges that come with being ultimately responsible for all of a school district’s activities. The six participants touched upon many topics that closely align with three of the theoretical framework’s major themes, namely: *the realities of being a CEO, the importance of indirect influence, and managing presences.*

Regarding *the realities of being a CEO,* the researcher explored several areas that are unique to the position of school superintendent (i.e., as compared to other school leadership positions). For example, superintendents discussed the important role that school boards play in their lived experience, which is something not shared by other people in the organization. The research findings demonstrate that superintendents have an extremely broad range of responsibilities, many of which are highly demanding and highly scrutinized.

Porter and Nohria (2010) discuss the importance of a CEO’s *indirect influence,* suggesting that CEOs must “principally harness the work of others” (p. 443) to achieve success. In this study, personnel management was identified as a key factor that influences superintendent leadership. Another participant, Eric, summed it up when he said that superintendents must depend on other people to be successful, and that they must have the so-called “right people on the bus, in the right seats” (Interview 1, p. 9).
Porter and Nohria (2010) also discuss how CEOs manage presence and how they communicate. CEOs, they contend, must communicate “relentlessly” internally and externally. The findings of this study supported this theory, as every superintendent identified communication as a critical, must-have skill. The participants conveyed how communication is an ongoing part of the job, and how communication strategies are both proactive and reactive.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size. With only six participants, there was a decreased generalizability in the findings. However, Patton (2002) suggests that sample sizes “should be judged according to the purpose and rationale of the study.” As such, “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected … than with sample size” (p. 245). The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of school superintendents. The sample size was selected based on the researcher’s judgment and “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 2008, p. 246).

Secondly, since the researcher shared a similar professional background with the six participants, and presumably a similar lived experience, researcher bias was a validity threat to be considered. In addition, the researcher had to consider his influence on the participants.

The researcher’s background may also be considered a limitation and strength of this study. The quality of the interviews is especially important for phenomenological studies, as “the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to
experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

Since the researcher/interviewer and the participants/interviewees had a professional association and was on a presumed reasonable comfort level with each other, the interviews promised to lead to considerably more open, honest, richer conversations. On the other hand, the existence of a professional association between the researcher and participants may have been a limitation. Because of the likely chance the participants would cross paths with the researcher in the future, they might been more guarded in admitting weaknesses or faults, or in providing very personal information.

Finally, this study considered only the lived experience of suburban school superintendents. This narrow focus, which excluded urban and rural superintendents, could potentially compromise the generalizability of the findings.

**Common Roles and Responsibilities of the 21st Century School Superintendent**

The literature review cited Carter and Cunningham (1997), who believe that the conventional role of the school superintendent is vastly oversimplified. In many states, state law usually stipulates that the role of the superintendent is to “assist the [school] board in policy making and to carry out policy” (p. 16). A deeper review of the literature and the findings of this study supported the above claim. In fact, in conducting this study, the researcher learned that the modern-day superintendent is expected to bring to the table a wide array of leadership skills and, further, must operate with consistent efficiency in a demanding and complex environment. Just how demanding the superintendency came as a surprise to the researcher, and that aspect of the study will be discussed in a subsequent section. However, in the matter of job responsibilities, the findings of this study were consistent with what was gleaned from the literature review.
Edwards (2007) found commonalities in superintendent job descriptions and acknowledged that the role is quite broad, usually including duties that cover almost every aspect of district operations. Some of those commonalities were as follows: serving as the CEO of the school district; providing leadership for the instructional program; overseeing personnel; and overseeing building programs, operations, and maintenance. A joint committee of representatives from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) identified similar common superintendency responsibilities. The findings from this study were consistent with that research. All six participants articulated that the superintendent is responsible for running the “day-to-day operations” of the school district, a daunting task when one considers the size of most school districts and the numerous aspects that need to be considered in their operation. The participants in this study have all led organizations with hundreds of employees, multiple school buildings, and, as CEOs, were responsible for multifaceted operations like school finance, school transportation, food service, and maintenance. They have all served as the “educational leader” of the district, another common, albeit obvious, job requirement. Finally, each of the participants has served as their school board’s “chief executive officer and preeminent educational adviser in all efforts of the board to fulfill its school system governance role” (AASA and NSBA, 1994, pp. 11–12).

In summary, the findings related to common superintendent job responsibilities were consistent with the existing research on the topic. The researcher believes this is an important, and positive, actuality. Given that the superintendency is a unique role in school districts and communities, it is beneficial therefore, to whatever extent possible, to
have a better understanding of the job’s functions and responsibilities. At the very least, this understanding could help create an important, relevant context within which to evaluate a superintendents’ job performance.

Superintendents’ Perceptions of Their Roles

The researcher discussed with all the six participants how they perceived their role as school superintendent. They all acknowledged that a successful superintendent cannot wear just one hat, and they subsequently described the various roles they serve. However, there were consistent findings around four key leadership roles: 1) superintendent as CEO, 2) superintendent as politician, 3) superintendent as instructional leader, and 4) superintendent as community leader. The findings aligned, in part, with the literature review, which found consensus among researchers of the major leadership roles of superintendents, namely: 1) superintendent as an educational/instructional leader, 2) superintendent as a political leader/politician, 3) superintendent as a managerial leader, and 4) superintendent as a communicator (Cuban, 1985; Bjork, 2009; Kowalski, 2005; Johnson, 1996).

In the literature review, Cuban (1985) contends that in order to exercise real leadership, a superintendent must play the role of teacher: “Teaching implies objectives and thus a sense of direction. Without a sense of direction … [political skills] become ends instead of means, and managerial skills are dedicated solely to keep the machinery running. The role provides purpose” (p. 30). Other researchers (Bjork, 2009; Johnson, 1996) concur and suggest that superintendents who serve as instructional leaders contribute significantly to the overall success of their respective districts. All the study participants agreed with the above, and several of them identified themselves as
“teachers” despite having been out of the classroom for many years. One of them, Carol, even suggested that the day she is not a teacher is the day she will leave the job. What is important to note from the findings is that superintendents exercise instructional leadership in different ways, and apparently, there is no right way to do it. There was widespread acknowledgment that because of their other responsibilities, superintendents have a different type of impact in the instructional realm than the employees “in the trenches” (i.e., the classroom). One participant, David, summarized it best when he suggested that superintendents do not have to be “fountains of knowledge,” but, rather, they have to be engaged in the instructional process by modeling expectations, visiting classrooms, and communicating regularly with principals and other staff about instruction. From the findings of this study, one can infer that today’s superintendents do not need to be instructional content experts, but they do need to be instructional leaders.

Another consistency between this study’s findings and the literature review is how politics play an integral role in the life of a superintendent. The literature review cites two prominent researchers (Johnson, 1996; Cuban, 1985) who discuss how superintendents must exercise political leadership for several reasons, and must act politically when dealing with various constituencies, including staff, school board members, parents, and local officials. Likewise, all the six superintendents who participated in this study considered themselves politicians. Interestingly, each one of them was somewhat reluctant to accept that reality, always pointing out the fact that they were educators first. However, they all shared Eric’s belief that politics “is a significant part of the job. The superintendent who isn’t politically savvy is not a superintendent who is long for the job” (Interview 2, p. 2).
In the literature review, *superintendent as managerial leader* was highlighted as one of the four key roles served by superintendents. Johnson (1996) articulated a key point: “The superintendent may foster creative teaching and nurture innovative programs, but if the buses do not run or children are unaccounted for, he or she is judged to have failed as a manager, not to have succeeded as a leader” (pp. 219–220). Interestingly, while none of our six superintendents ever specifically identified themselves as a manager, they did refer to themselves as CEOs, something the researcher attributes to a semantic difference. Both roles were discussed in the same context—that is, the reality that there is a vast amount of administrative tasks associated with the superintendency.

The researcher, however, was left with the impression that the superintendents simply viewed managerial responsibilities as a basic function of the job, and as something they could not avoid or neglect. The interviews were littered with references to many of the administrative tasks that Cuban (1988) identified, including “budgeting, hiring and firing, supervising staff, and managing conflict. The actions of superintendents may range from busing students, to evaluating principals, to allocating parking spaces” (p. 136). The participants’ attitudes toward these managerial tasks were also consistent with the perspective held by Kowalski (2006). He suggests that “even though the degree of emphasis on management has fluctuated, the importance of the role is rarely questioned … superintendents must be both effective leaders and effective managers” (p. 42). In summary, although all six superintendents viewed themselves primarily as leaders or CEOs, they appreciated and understood the importance of their managerial role.

Finally, one role that the six superintendents identified as important, but was not overtly identified in the literature review, was that of *superintendent as community*
leader. The participants agreed that superintendents, as leaders of the school system, play an influential role in their community. In each of the interviews, the superintendents discussed their community involvement. Whether it’s attending civic association meetings, participating in Eagle Scout ceremonies, or attending Friday-night football games, the superintendents described themselves as highly visible figures who are attuned to the needs of their multiple constituencies in town.

The researcher questions why previous studies did not address the superintendent’s role as community leader, particularly given the weight placed on it by the superintendents. One participant, James, even suggested that superintendents who choose not engage the community are “going to be in trouble.” This is an area that may be of interest to future researchers.

**Challenges of the Superintendency**

Research on the superintendency, as highlighted in the literature review, makes it clear that the superintendency is a highly demanding job. Many prominent researchers contend that today’s superintendents work in a challenging and sometimes volatile environment, with some suggesting that the job of a local school superintendent “is one of the most difficult chief executive undertakings in America today” (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999, p. 1). Admittedly, this study did not compare the superintendency to other positions, so the researcher cannot make claims that support that relative comparison. However, the findings clearly showed that the job of the school superintendent is immensely complex and challenging. The six superintendents all described a job that is complete with conflict, public scrutiny, unreasonable expectations,
complex relationships, and politics. Those challenges took both a personal and professional toll on superintendents.

**Accountability and high expectations.** In the literature review, the researcher explored the topic of accountability in two different ways. In the first the researcher cited the many researchers who suggest that waves of state and federal educational reform measures (e.g., No Child Left Behind) are placing a burden on school superintendents throughout the country: “Not only has the authority of the position been eroded, but the expectations have multiplied” (Houston, 2007, p. 30). Interestingly, while it is a fact that accountability measures are prevalent in schools, most of the participants in this study did not identify that as a challenge. However, Eric did allude to it, commenting that while education reform is important as a pathway for success for students, “at the same time it puts enormous pressure on all of us [superintendents] to perform—to produce the results that everybody is expecting” (Interview 1, p. 4). Similarly, David said that “accountability today is totally different [than even five years ago]. Everything is data-driven. So now superintendents have to show evidence [of student performance] around almost every decision they make . . . . That increases the exposure of the superintendent” (Interview 1, p. 5).

The researcher has no explanation as to why accountability as it relates to school reform was not identified as a challenge by the participants in this study, given that it was so prevalent in the literature. However, the researcher speculates that the issue of school reform is more relevant to superintendents in urban areas, whereas the six participants in this study were suburban superintendents. In fact, Sean alluded to that when he said that his colleague from a nearby urban district “is in a different superintendency . . . Here [in
my district], I am talking to parents about whether or not they are getting into the first
two or three colleges they are applying to, not whether or not they are going to graduate
from high school” (Interview 1, p. 9). Future researchers might want to consider how the
issues of accountability and school reform differ among suburban and urban
superintendents.

The findings of this study did address accountability as a secondary consideration,
which is that the ultimate accountability in a school district—no matter what the issue—
appears to rest with the superintendent. This theme from the findings was consistent with
the literature review. Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) said that no matter what the
department in a school district, “if something goes wrong . . . the buck almost always
stops at the superintendent’s desk” (p. 6). The six participants echoed that sentiment, and
it appeared that the combination of high expectations and high accountability pose a
constant challenge for them. Furthermore, most of the superintendents agreed that they
face unreasonable expectations, given that in large organizations, so many things are
beyond their direct control. It must be noted, however, that these issues, while real for
superintendents, may simply be a reflection of their position at the top of the
organizational chart (i.e., as CEO), and are therefore likely unavoidable. Sounding a
similar theme to the theory posited by Porter and Nohria (2010) about the realities of
being a CEO, David contended that whether or not the job expectations for
superintendents are reasonable or doable, they are, in fact, “necessary.”

Politics. Superintendents are, among other things, political leaders. While this
appears to be a reality of the job, it nonetheless poses challenges for superintendents. The
findings were consistent with the literature review, in which several researchers contend
that one of the primary challenges for superintendents, and a key inhibitor to their effectiveness, is dealing with politics within local communities (Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Edwards, 2006; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, 2005; Johnson, 1996). What the researcher found noteworthy in this study was how all six participants acknowledged that school districts can no longer work in isolation, and that modern-day superintendents must involve other constituencies in their decision-making process. As Carter and Cunningham (1997) contend, “What occurs inside [the school district] is quite likely to be a part of a larger political process outside the school system” (p. 43). This idea, that schools’ concerns are entangled with that of the general public, is also aligned with Boyd’s open systems theory. The research findings indicated that 21st century superintendents must respond to various constituent groups in order to be successful.

**School committee-superintendent relations.** Prior research on school committee-superintendent relations clearly indicate that the quality of that relationship is critical to a superintendent’s effectiveness. Perhaps most compelling is the study by Byrd, Drew, and Johnson (2006), which finds that superintendent tenure directly correlates with the quality of the relationship between the superintendent and school board. Carter and Cunningham (1997) add that “the superintendency is perhaps most clearly defined by its relations with school boards” (p. 93).

The findings drawn from the interviews with the six participants in this study were somewhat consistent with the literature review. In fact, all six had anecdotes about the significant challenges of working with their respective committees. Yet, there was a considerable lack of evidence to suggest that their school committees were detrimental to
their effectiveness as a superintendent, which is something the literature asserts. In addition, while all the participants had a healthy respect for, and an awareness of, the importance of the relationship, they did not appear overly consumed by it. They simply viewed having to work with challenging school committees as a reality of the job.

What this study suggested is that the quality of the relationship between superintendents and school committees can vary widely from district to district. In fact, of the six participants, three (Carol, Jennifer, and James) discussed how different their relationships were in their previous districts. David provided an important perspective that supported these findings, proclaiming that no two school committees are alike, and that how successful a superintendent will be in a particular community is due, in large part, to how the school committee functions.

**School finance.** Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) report that 97% of superintendents view finance issues as a factor inhibiting school effectiveness. In fact, superintendents in school districts with less than 25,000 pupils (i.e., the vast majority) rank financing schools as the number one leadership inhibitor (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Thus, the researcher was surprised when the six participants did not place a great deal of emphasis on how school finance impacted their effectiveness. The researcher broached many issues related to school finance during the interviews (e.g., lack of adequate school funding, needing to do “more with less,” etc.), but the superintendents did not appear particularly concerned with them. The researcher infers that they viewed having to deal with school budgets as simply “part of the job.” Eric was matter-of-fact in his views on school finance: “You know, every organization needs more money . . . I think what superintendents always have to do is think in terms of what it is they can do
with what they have.” He added that he saw complaining about money as “a little whiny” (Interview 2, p. 17).

What is interesting, however, is that most of the participants suggested, or at least alluded to, the importance of school funding as it relates to their job security. Sean proclaimed that “finances are the key to keeping this job. And it’s the quickest way to lose the job” (Interview 1, p. 14). Eric agreed: “It’s likely you will never get fired from your job because you don’t know enough about curriculum. It’s likely you will get fired if you . . . don’t do well with managing your money” (Interview 1, 5). These statements appeared to contradict the assertion that school finance is just another job responsibility. The researcher speculates that they were the participants’ generalizations, rather than reflections, of their respective lived experiences.

Since the interviews yielded little information concerning school finance, the researcher considers it’s likely that it is not a major inhibitor for the six participants. However, with prior research so emphatic that it is a critical issue for modern-day superintendents, it is a topic that should be explored in greater depth in future studies. With such a small sample size, and with purposefully selected participants whose experiences are confined in similar districts, this study might not have captured the essence of the topic.

The personal toll. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of superintendents’ lived experiences. Going into the study, the researcher assumed he would learn a lot about his participants’ professional lives, and that, indeed, was considerably achieved. However, the findings provided rich evidence that the participants’ professional and personal lives are intertwined, and are difficult to separate.
Although the literature on the superintendency paints a picture of a difficult job (i.e., “one of the most difficult chief executive undertakings in America today”), none of the studies cited conducted an in-depth examination of the personal toll the job takes on superintendents.

The researcher found that the 21st century superintendency is an all-consuming profession. For example, all six participants discussed how the workday frequently spills over into the night. They talked about being out at meetings or community events three to four times each week, in addition to weekend commitments, which are not at all unusual. That reality means not having enough relaxation or family time. Some of the participants acknowledged that the job had a detrimental effect on their home lives and general well-being. All of them acknowledged that the quality of their personal lives is at risk of being compromised by the job. Some of them shared stories of colleagues who struggled desperately due to the pressures and rigors of the job. Jennifer attributed the strain to the uniqueness of the position, and suggested that no one outside of the job truly understands what a superintendent goes through on a daily basis.

After delving into the lived experiences of the six participants, the researcher believes that Jennifer’s assertion may be true. There was substantial evidence in this study that the totality of the superintendency—the pressures, the accountabilities, the conflicts, and the responsibilities of being CEO—may be overwhelming. It is a topic that warrants exploration by other researchers.

**Superintendency Turnover**

As noted in the literature review, there is a perception of a high rate of superintendency turnover and the corresponding lack of applicants. Glass (2001b) even
suggests there is a “crisis” in the superintendency, the inference being that the superintendency is an untenable job. However, other studies, while acknowledging the great challenges of the superintendency, dispel the notion that the turnover rate is atypical. The findings of this study were similarly inconclusive, and sounded a familiar theme. All six participants acknowledged the enormous challenges they face. Some of them, namely, Carol and Jennifer, even suggested that the pressures of previous jobs led them to consider other options. Yet none of them were ever forced out of a job, and each one of them felt they were in total control of their decision to stay or leave a district. Based on the study’s findings, the researcher can make three modest claims regarding the topic of superintendency turnover.

First, it appears there is a “shelf life” for today’s superintendents. Regardless of why it exists, it appears that superintendents do not view the superintendency, in a particular district, as a career position. Even in this purposefully selected participant group, for which experience was a key criterion for selection, most of the superintendents had served in multiple superintendencies in their careers. James, who has the broadest perspective on the topic, agreed that “these are not lifetime positions anymore, just because of changing demographics, and changing experiences” (Interview 1, p. 8).

Second, the researcher speculates that superintendency turnover is, in part, a function of the community in which a superintendent works. In the interviews, the superintendents’ perception of their job, and the associated pressures, varied widely depending on what district they were describing. Future researchers may take into consideration the factors in a community that contribute to superintendency turnover.
Finally, the researcher speculates that superintendency turnover correlates to how a superintendent “fits” in the community they serve. Put another way, not every superintendent may be a good match for a given community. All the study participants supported this claim, or had experiences that demonstrated the importance of fitting in. Future researchers may want to explore how communities and superintendents can be paired more effectively.

**Essential Skills for the 21st Century Superintendent**

As previously noted, today’s superintendents play many roles. Both the literature review and this study’s findings revealed that superintendents must also bring to the table a wide and varied skill set. In the interviews conducted, all six participants shared that they held a job that required them to be experts in different areas—from finance, to curriculum, to community relations, just to name a few. However, some consistencies emerged from the findings, leading the researcher to conclude that there are a number of skills that superintendents must possess to be successful at their jobs. They include expertise in *curriculum and instruction, personnel management, communication,* and *relationship-building.*

**Instruction.** Earlier in this chapter, the researcher concluded that today’s superintendents must be instructional leaders, even if they are not necessarily experts in instructional content. Thus, how superintendents demonstrate “expertise” in instruction may look different than it does with other positions in school districts (e.g., principals). For example, both Jennifer and Sean discussed how they play an active role in the instructional arena by essentially “setting the tone” in the district—setting expectations, focusing the conversation on teaching and learning, and articulating why instruction is
important. Similarly, other participants, like David and Eric, believed strongly that instruction, as a skill, must be a core competency for today’s superintendent, and that the superintendent must play an integral role in increasing student achievement (i.e., instruction). Yet they also agreed that how a superintendent accomplishes that task may be through employing a variety of other leadership skills, such as leading through others or fostering dialogue with staff.

The findings of this study were consistent with the literature review, which suggests that 21st century superintendents must be instructional leaders. However, given the seemingly indirect way that the study participants influenced instruction, the researcher has outstanding questions concerning just how much expertise a superintendent needs to have in this area. Future researchers may consider investigating the many ways that superintendents can provide instructional leadership. They may also consider how instructional leadership differs among suburban and urban superintendents.

**Personnel management.** In the theoretical framework section of chapter 1, the researcher noted that while CEOs have significant authority, they nonetheless must rely heavily on others in the organization, particularly the top management team. Porter and Nohria (2010) contend, “Selecting the right members for their management team . . . is one of the key ways CEOs can exercise indirect influence” (p. 446). The findings of this research study validated that assertion, with all six participants making it clear that they cannot effectively do their job alone. As such, personnel management skills and the aptitude to hire the right people were deemed essential for today’s superintendents. James spoke at length about the importance of building a leadership “team”: “You need to surround yourself with the people who really know how to do the work in their
[particular] area . . . building that leadership team . . . is a key to the superintendent’s success” (Interview 1, p. 2). Eric added that a superintendent’s ability to survive in his job is very much predicated on the actions of those working under him: “That’s the perils of leadership, right, even though superintendents are in a position where they are not directly responsible for [everything], they are responsible for every bit of it. That’s why the HR function is number one” (Interview 2, p. 8).

Communication. In the literature review, the researcher identified superintendent as communicator as one of the four key roles played by 21st century superintendents. The evidence was clear: The ability to communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders is a skill that stands out as important for success. Prior studies (Kowalski, 2005; She, 2004; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Edwards, 2007) emphasized the many different ways superintendents can use communication skills to leverage their effectiveness, including the following: influencing school culture and productivity, leading change, gaining acceptance of a message, and building relationships within the community.

Similarly, the six participants in this study agreed that of all the skills a superintendent must possess, the ability to effectively communicate is perhaps the most important. Whether it’s managing personnel, educating the community, managing conflict, responding to crises, or making community connections, all the participants appeared to be in a constant state of communication. Because of that, the researcher agrees with the contention put forth by Kowalski (2005) that communication for superintendents is not simply a role-related situational skill. Rather, it should instead be discussed as a “pervasive role” (p. 102). In short, the researcher found evidence that
communication is embedded in virtually everything a superintendent does. The researcher speculates that 21st century superintendents will not be successful if they lack sound communication skills.

Future researchers may look into how technological changes are affecting the ways superintendents must communicate. Some of the participants in this study commented about the 24-7 nature of communication and pointed out that because of new technology and social networking (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, etc.), superintendents are forced to respond to issues more quickly than they had to in the past. How superintendents adapt to the new communication environment may be of interest to other researchers.

**Relationship-building.** Inherently linked to the ability to communicate effectively is the ability to build and maintain relationships. Although the literature on the superintendency does not specifically address the importance of building relationships, this study found evidence that superintendents’ success is largely predicated on their ability to do so. David, who has perhaps the broadest perspective on the topic, proclaimed, “If you don’t have [skills in] relationship building, I don’t believe you can be successful. Now, I’m not saying that’s all that’s required, but I’m saying . . . you begin with that” (Interview 1, p. 8). The researcher ascertained that superintendents have no choice but to interact frequently, if not constantly, with multiple stakeholders. The professional lives of these community leaders are literally filled with meetings, civic functions, and extracurricular activities. In short, theirs are lives filled with personal interactions. As far as the researcher is concerned, all six participants have exceptional interpersonal skills and were comfortable interacting with people. As such, they are able
to effectively build and maintain relationships in their communities, something that may have contributed to their overall success and longevity. In future studies, researcher may consider a topic well beyond the scope of this study and explore the possibility of determining a “personality profile” of successful superintendents. Although the researcher cannot make a generalizable claim from the findings of this study, he speculates that there is a profile that can be formed based on in-depth research.

**Superintendent Preparation**

The literature review explores whether or not superintendents are adequately prepared for the job, and the results of the study were inconclusive. Although researchers admit there is a perception that preparation program are inadequate, there is also evidence suggesting that superintendents are generally satisfied with their level of preparation. The findings of this study were similarly inconclusive. While some of the participants—namely, Eric, James, and Sean—believe their preparation programs were valuable, there was nonetheless a consensus among them that the current programs focus too much on theory instead of on practice. All the participants agreed that superintendents would be better served by programs that incorporate more case studies, scenario-based instruction, and hands-on experiences. These findings were consistent with the study conducted by Orr (2006), in which it was determined that most superintendents gave their graduate programs “mixed reviews,” but stated that they were most beneficial when they integrated theory and practice.

Beyond academic preparation, the six participants in this study also addressed their general readiness for assuming the superintendency. Jennifer described how different it is when one ascends into the top job in the school district: “You are no longer
observing, you are doing. You are confronted on a daily basis with situations that you never experienced before” (Interview 1, p. 17). Sean concurred: “I don’t know how you prepare anyone [for this job]” (Interview 1, p. 18). The researcher speculates that that feeling is typical of any CEO, not just school superintendents. Porter and Nohria (2010), as cited in the theoretical framework, discuss the realities of being a CEO. While many CEOs, including superintendents, have typically held leadership positions prior to their appointment, they are often surprised to learn how much more demanding the job is compared to previous positions they have held. The findings from this study supported their claim.

Superintendent preparation was not the primary focus of this study, and the researcher cannot make generalizable claims about superintendent preparedness. However, it does appear that preparation programs can be improved. In future studies, researchers may want to consider how academic and professional preparation programs align with the actual job requirements and the rigors of the 21st century superintendency.

**Future Research**

Throughout this chapter, the researcher recommended some areas of consideration for future research, relative to specific findings. Future studies may also want to explore the topic of the superintendency in a larger context. For example, it is likely that the lived experiences of suburban superintendents differ greatly from those of urban superintendents. A similar phenomenological study with urban participants may yield valuable information for both researchers and practitioners. This study also identified four essential skills for 21st century superintendents. A more extensive study on any one of those skills would be a worthy endeavor. Finally, this study likened school
superintendents to CEOs. The researcher had to ask outstanding questions about whether the challenges of the superintendency identified in the study were typical of CEOs’ concerns or unique to superintendents. Researchers may want to compare the lived experiences of private-sector CEOs with the lived experiences of school superintendents.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings clearly showed that the job of the school superintendent is immensely complex and challenging. The six superintendent participants all described a job rife with conflict, public scrutiny, unreasonable expectations, complex relationships, and politics. Those challenges took both a personal and professional toll on superintendents. The researcher acknowledges that it would be difficult to make wholesale changes to the superintendency. The reality is that all CEOs, including school superintendents, face extraordinary challenges. However, the findings of this study will be beneficial to practitioners developing training and support programs for superintendents. At the very least, superintendents must go into the job with an accurate and realistic idea of what it entails.

The literature review and the findings on superintendency turnover were inconclusive. There was no certain way to determine whether the turnover is a real or perceived problem. Yet, this study found some evidence that there may be a “shelf life” for superintendents, in part due to whether or not a superintendent fits in a particular community. This finding can have implications for school committees and search consultants looking to hire new superintendents—that is, to the extent that communities can, if they hire superintendents who match their particular needs, then the better the chance the superintendent has for success.
This study also explored the many different roles and responsibilities of school superintendents, as well as the essential skills they must possess. Like the CEOs described by Porter and Nohria (2010), this study showed that school superintendents have complex, diverse, and varied responsibilities. Likewise, the researcher agrees with Carter and Cunningham (1997), who suggest that the conventional role of the superintendent is vastly oversimplified. However, this study did identify some particular skills that the participants deemed critical for success. The researcher concludes that today’s superintendents should have expertise in instruction, personnel management, communication, and relationship-building. Considering these areas will be valuable for academic and professional preparation programs. While it is evident that superintendents must possess a wide array of skills, identifying the must-haves will help preparation programs to customize their programs to better prepare aspiring superintendents.

Finally, the findings of this study revealed that academic preparation for superintendents can be improved. Specifically, all the participants in this study agreed that superintendents would be better served by programs that incorporate case studies, scenario-based instruction, and hands-on experiences. University programs would do well to consider this and should strive to align their instruction with the actual job requirements and rigors of the 21st century superintendency.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent, which some researchers claim is one of the most complex leadership positions today. The challenges of the superintendency may be a contributing factor to the great number of professionals leaving the field and the rate of turnover that
some describe as historically high. Some superintendents even question the future of the position. With that in mind, this study sought to provide current practitioners and future researchers a richer understanding of this one-of-a-kind job.
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September 20, 2011

Dear Colleague,

I hope this letter finds you well, and that your 2011-2012 school year is off to a great start. I know this is a busy time of year, but I am hoping that you can find time to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my doctoral work at Northeastern University. I am providing some details of the study below, and I will also follow up with a phone call to you later this week. This letter is intended to serve as an official invitation for you to be a study participant, and I hope that you will consider my request.

The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent by drawing on individual accounts of their lived experiences. To that end, I will be conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews with several area superintendents who have at least seven years of experience. The initial interview will last approximately 90 minutes, and may be followed up with a second 45-minute interview after the first round of interviews is complete.

Attached to this letter is a Request to Participate in Research form, which contains several important pieces of information about the consent process, as well as a draft list of my proposed interview questions. As you can see from the questions, they are intended to gain a better understanding of the unique role in which we serve.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to speaking with you more about it later this week.

Sincerely,

John J. Antonucci

220 Nahant St • Westwood, Massachusetts 02090 • (781) 326-7590 Ext. 1134 • Fax: (781) 326-8154
jantonucci@westwood.k12.ma.us • www.westwood.k12.ma.us
Appendix B: Request to Participate in Research form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators:  
John J. Antonucci, Graduate Student,  
Dr. Frank Connor, Principal Investigator

Title of Project:  
The Experience of School Superintendent Leadership in the 21st Century

Request to Participate in Research

Dear Superintendent,

We would like to invite you to take part in a doctoral research project. The purpose of the project is to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent by drawing on individual accounts of their lived experiences.

As part of the informed consent process, there are several points we would like to explain:

- If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to make yourself available for a face-to-face interview, which will last approximately 90 minutes, and a second, follow-up interview, which will last approximately 45 minutes. The interviews will take place in your office, unless you request an alternative location. The first-round interview questions are attached to this form. Second-round interview questions, which will be developed after the first round is complete, will be forwarded to you prior to the second interview.

- The interviews will be digitally recorded, and subsequently transcribed. Upon request, I will provide you with a draft copy of the transcript of the interview so that you can review its content and add any clarifications and corrections that you feel are necessary.

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your answers may help us learn more about the superintendent, which is considered to be the most visible and influential leadership positions in the field of education today. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the existing literature on the topic, and inform future researchers and practitioners on the unique challenges of the job.

- There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in the study. However, the questions, though focused on your position as school superintendent, may be perceived by you as personal in nature.

- Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any report or publication based on this research will not identify you, your school system or any individual by name; however, pseudonyms may be used to distinguish the study participants. All digital recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

- The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

- You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call John Antonucci, the person mainly responsible for the research, at 617.462.5845. You can also contact Dr. Frank Connor, the Principal Investigator, at 508.455.8737.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subjects Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4888. Email: irb@northeastern.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

John J. Antonucci  
Northeastern University
Appendix C: First-round interview questions

1. Tell me about your background in education, and how you became a superintendent of schools? In your opinion, why were you selected for this position?

2. How you would you describe or define the position of “school superintendent” to a layperson? In your answer, consider the various roles and responsibilities of the position.

3. You've been in the position for ____ years. Describe how the superintendency has changed over time, or is changing now?

4. What factors contribute to your effectiveness?

5. What factors most inhibit your effectiveness?

6. What are the leadership characteristics that superintendents must possess to be successful?

7. What do you think that others expect of you as a superintendent? In your answer, consider the multiple constituencies your serve.

8. What do you think you need to do in order to keep your job?

9. What are the most pressing challenges for a 21st century superintendent?

10. To what extent, if any, has the superintendency impacted your personal life?

11. As you reflect on your experience as superintendent, do you think you were adequately prepared for the job?

12. How might you have been better prepared for the job? In your answer, consider both academic and professional preparation.

13. Are there any other comments you wish to make?
Appendix D: Second-round interview questions

1. **Communication**: “Communication” was identified by several study participants as a critical leadership skill for superintendents. How important do you believe communication is to your success, and can you describe the ways in which you communicate with your many constituents?

2. **Politics**: Similarly, many participants said the need to act and think politically was important for superintendents. Can you give me examples of times when you needed to act and think politically to advance a school department initiative, deal with a problem, etc?

3. **Instructional Leadership**: What does being an Instructional Leader look like for a Superintendent?

   a. Can you respond to the following comment: “No superintendent has ever been fired for a curriculum decision”. What do you think that means and why?

4. **School Committee**: Can you give me some examples of how a School Committee has impacted your ability to do your job effectively, or has simply made your job difficult?

5. **Conflict**: One prominent researcher on the superintendency has said that “Conflict has become the DNA of the Superintendency”. What do you think he means by that, and has that been your experience? Please provide some examples.

   a. Several study participants suggested that their community (parents, etc.) has an ever-increasing “sense of entitlement” which leads to pressure being placed on schools/superintendents? Is that your experience, and in what ways does that manifest itself?

6. **Community/Public Relations**: It is clear that the Superintendent is viewed as a Community leader (i.e. not just a school leader). What is your opinion on the importance of effective community/public relations, and in what ways have you developed and maintained relationships with your community?

7. **Complexity of the Role**: Can you detail for me a “Week in the Life” of your superintendency?

8. **Longevity/Turnover**: In your opinion, is there a “shelf life” for a superintendent in a particular district?

   a. How important is a superintendent’s “fit” in a community?