EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VERMONT SUPERINTENDENTS
DEVELOPING BUDGETS FOR NEWLY RESTRUCTURED DISTRICTS

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Abstract

The viability of any system depends upon its decision-making and ability to adapt to change. Superintendents, serving as the CFO of their school system, must be able to make ethically sound and fiscally responsible decisions that will ensure the success of their organization. This thesis examined leadership roles and responsibilities of Vermont superintendents undergoing school consolidation and governance changes in their districts. Specifically, the study explored the involvement of stakeholders throughout the merger and budgeting process; the role of leadership at multiple levels; the politics and values behind decisions; and the contextual differences between communities and stakeholders as influencing consolidation and fiscal planning. The interpretative phenomenological study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants to collect data, and through the incorporation of the Theory of Bounded Rationality, sought to address a gap in the literature related to the intersecting variables that impact school leaders’ decisions. Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data, which revealed that superintendents were able to successfully navigate mergers and build unified budgets through the development of deliberate structures in their unique contexts.

Recommendations for current and future school leaders committed to guiding their communities through consolidation, as well as suggestions for future research, are also offered.

Keywords: superintendent, public education, fiscal constraint, school-budget
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“The more we say thanks, the more we find to be thankful for. And the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we become.” Douglas Wood

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Chapter One: Introduction

The topic. On June 2, 2015 the state of Vermont passed Act 46, a school consolidation and spending cap bill whose goals were: 1. Educational equity, 2. Academic excellence, 3. Efficiency, and 4. Transparency (Pache, 2015). The reality of Act 46, according to Vondrasek (2016), is that it requires schools do “more with less” funding, with harsh penalties awaiting districts that go either beyond the spending caps, and/or do not reorganize according to the state’s preferred governance structures. With the enactment of Act 46 and policies and programs such as Obama’s Race to the Top initiative, schools remain accountable for maintaining academic expectations and fiscal responsibility, while also being forced to compete for both funds and students (Howell, 2015). Federal and state education policies and funding formulas, combined with Vermont’s struggling economy, has affected every school district’s ability to build a balanced and responsible budget.

Research problem. Superintendents make the final decisions in the preparation and presentation of any school district’s budget. The viability of a system depends on its decision making, which often takes weeks and months and can better be described as a process as opposed to a singular event. The current problem for superintendents focused on developing a balanced and responsible budget during times of both consolidation and fiscal constraint is that a clear framework, outlining both practices and ethical considerations, does not exist. The question and problem becomes, what factors guide a superintendent through the decision-making process in designing a budget that meets the needs and priorities of their newly organized school district?

A great deal is left to be learned about the impacting variables and intersecting factors driving the budgetary decisions of school superintendents in the state of Vermont. In expending
effort to move beyond a study of budgeting outcomes, or even the heuristic process of making judgments and decisions, this research has the possibility to understand both the human and organizational side of school budgeting. “Studying only one blade is not enough; it takes both for the scissors to cut” (Simon, 1955, p. 100).

**Justification for the research problem.** The challenges facing many school districts in the state of Vermont reflect those found nationwide. Balancing a school district’s budget in times of fiscal crisis requires a commitment to shared priorities and values, potentially veering away from outdated models for setting per pupil costs and staffing patterns. School superintendents have the opportunity and also moral duty to support their district in new ways under challenging constraints and yet high societal expectations for achievement (Heifitz & Linsky, 2002). Garvin and Roberto (2001) believe that the ability to make appropriate decisions and solve problems is one of the greatest defining characteristics of any leader. School leaders can and should be visionaries that follow an inclusive and strategic process for responding to fiscal problems, making difficult choices and balancing conflicting demands. To respond to the immense challenges facing Superintendents in Vermont and nationwide who are told to “do more with less”, attention must be paid to the process of making logically sound, morally ethical, and fiscally responsible decisions for students and schools (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2005).

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Many existing studies focus on the decision-making process of building a balanced budget, detailing a systematic series of actions that guide administrators toward the end goal (Kolbe & Boos, 2009). McDermott (2011) details the decision-making process model often found in the preparation of a school budget, as being based upon either the rational or intuitive philosophy models. In either of these models, the school administrator follows a procedure that is based upon data, in deciding which direction to lead
their organization. These models, although able to provide steps or criteria to follow, remove moral or ethical considerations from the conversation. Conversely, there is also much literature for leaders establishing shared beliefs and values with constituents to guide the decision-making process. As in the work of Fullan (2011), many of these studies focus on ‘leadership’ as opposed to ‘management,’ often providing a blueprint for creating and sustaining culture to respond to challenges. Thus, qualitative inquiry into both the formal process for establishing priorities and making decisions, combined with understanding the values and belief systems behind decisions, would allow insight into creating fiscally responsible and morally sound school budgets.

Relating the discussion to audiences. School budget cuts have affected all Vermont schools and their neighbors nation-wide. In consideration of Vermont’s Act 46, schools from both urban to rural, big to small campuses are being forced to make adjustments to how they do business. By examining the process used to set priorities and build budgets in individual districts that have reorganized or restructured, we can potentially understand the variables that go into determining what ‘do more with less’ means in schools. Researchers and school leaders in Vermont districts have the budding opportunity to craft budgets that are not only fiscally sound and responsive to political mandates, but also morally and socially responsible and relevant to their communities.

Significance of Research Problem

A school budget is a public document that expresses the priorities and goals of any district or supervisory union. Crafting a school budget is not a singular event, but instead a process that is based upon a variety of factors, and in consideration of competing and conflicting mandates and requests. The results of this study may be helpful to superintendents with leading
their district through difficult fiscal decisions, by providing them with insights into effective practices and procedures to meet current and future demands facing schools across Vermont and the nation.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the practices school superintendents abide by or abandon, in developing a balanced budget during times of fiscal crisis and organizational restructuring. The significance of the research is described in three main parts. First, it describes the context and impact of legislation such as Vermont’s Act 46, demanding schools maintain high academic expectations and compete for resources, all while remaining fiscally responsible to taxpayers and constituents. Second, the research illustrates a gap in literature that delineates a budgeting process combining both rational decision-making and value-laden priority setting within an organization or community. The research findings in this area can provide opportunities to improve leadership and promote transparency and collaboration in the budget-building process. Thirdly, and most importantly, the study examines opportunities for superintendents to build off the budgeting-process to shift their organization’s culture to accept new realities and meet expectations for both governance and accountability.

Successfully implemented and transparent strategies for meeting legislative mandates and responding to fiscal crisis, while still recognizing and adhering to organizational values, are beneficial for schools and communities. This research will help superintendents gain a stronger understanding of the process for making logically sound, ethical, and fiscally responsible decisions for their students and communities, preparing their organization in uncertain times (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2005).
Research Questions

The aim of this study was to explore the intersecting and often competing variables that impact school budget development for superintendents in their respective districts. Therefore, the central question guiding this study is: What processes, meaning making, and values guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting a budget for their newly restructured organization during challenging fiscal times?

The researcher chose a qualitative approach for collecting data in this study, as it allows for exploration and understanding of themes and common phenomena. This approach additionally provides researchers with the possibility of utilizing open-ended questions, without restricting the views and experiences of study participants (Creswell, 2010).

Positionality Statement

In order to deeply examine the practices used to set funding priorities for a school district in times of fiscal crisis and restructuring, I must be keenly aware of my biases and positionality, as well as the inherent dangers of researching without recognition of these factors. As Ravitch and Riggan (2011) contend, we must be willing and able to critically examine and make transparent ourselves, our beliefs, and our ultimate goals if we hope to move forward with unbiased research. In this positionality statement I will endeavor to share my background to provide a context for my research focus, before examining my positionality and the biases that may impact my study.

Author Background

I am an upper middle-class, 40-year old woman, who is married with 2 children. I have been an educator for the past 17 years, most recently serving as an elementary school principal after leaving the classroom in 2004. I both reside and work in an urban city in Vermont, living on
one side of the city with a population of predominately white middle to upper class families, but working on the other side of the city, with a demographic that is glaringly more diverse and impoverished.

**Personal experiences.** I was raised in a small town in Vermont, growing up with two married parents who both held college degrees and worked full time jobs. Although life raising four young daughters could certainly not have been easy, as a child I never wanted for anything, and knew that my parents could be counted on in any situation. We were taught that family came first, but school and community were a priority; adults in any setting were to be respected. It was never a question that my sisters and I would grow up valuing schools, teachers, and the potential of formal education and a degree.

I attended the University of Vermont, where I majored in elementary education because I believed it was my calling. Upon reflection, and in considering my experiences, more than 95% of the students enrolled in my program were white females with almost identical backgrounds to my own. I believed that although the world was not perfect, education provided opportunity and all students would want to learn in my classroom, because I was both enthused and “prepared.” In reality, I left my preparation program wearing rose-colored glasses based upon limited experiences with diversity of race, gender, class, and culture.

**Professional experiences.** I selected the field of education because I had always assumed I would be a teacher, and never really gave much thought to why or if this was the right “fit” for me. As a classroom teacher for many years, I was able to work with students in both elementary and middle schools, in a setting that was fairly similar to my own background and experiences. In any given year, with class sizes ranging from 15-20, I dealt with some working-class families
who hovered near the poverty line, but generally encountered parents who were able to both academically and financially support their children, the school, and the budget.

Although I deeply enjoyed the classroom, I often found myself feeling unsettled, as if there was more I could or should be doing. After many conversations with my principal, I decided that I was ready for a new challenge and opportunity. When I found a master’s program in school leadership, I came to understand that I not only had an occasion to change my thinking, but also a responsibility.

Many years later, still serving as a school principal, I have found that I am able to reach and know so many more students and families than I was ever able to as a teacher. Although it certainly sounds cliché, I relish opportunities to support teachers and students, making a larger/organizational difference whenever possible. I know each of my students and their parents by both name and history, and have come to deeply understand many of the tragic backstories that seem too common in our community. As tight budgets loom and deep cuts slowly materialize, I feel that I not only have the power to use my voice to support my school, but also the moral responsibility to do so.

Positionalities

School Principal. My leadership style and who I am as an educator and scholar-practitioner has slowly evolved over the past thirty years. I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher, and was thrilled at the prospect of being able to make a difference for children. I believed that teaching was a calling, and also that all of my colleagues maintained equal levels of commitment and dedication to the public-school system. After many years in the profession, I have met a variety of educators with varying levels of commitment and devotion to public
education. I have come to realize that receiving a paycheck is not necessarily indicative of a high commitment to the organization or its goals.

As a school principal I learned some hard truths, partly because my own perspective shifted from classroom to organization, but also because my setting changed. As a principal I have often been confronted with not only tough children and parents, but also community and staff members who talk about “those children” when discussing children of poverty and from diverse backgrounds. My positionality as a middle-class female from a nurturing home has always guided my belief and bias that everyone can and should maintain a deep commitment to students and their schools. As a researcher I must strive to recognize this bias in my research, to control and limit its impact upon my work (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

To further examine my leadership identity and positionality, I must pause to contemplate the influence of my direct supervisor. I often find myself considering my superintendent and the "power" that she wields, consciously being aware of ways that I align my leadership style in contrast or comparison to her own. As Kezar & Lester (2010) caution, I must be mindful of the ways in which my own style and thus research may be impacted by my perception of the power conditions created or manifested by my own Superintendent.

Community-member. As an individual both living and employed in the same community, I have both an added perspective, and also an extra level of bias. Working as a researcher within my community, I must be careful that my interpretation and representation of participants’ experiences is not flawed (Briscoe, 2008). As a scholar-practitioner investigating budget-building and the ethics-laden decision-making process, I must be aware of my dual identities as a school administrator and community-member, noting how they are linked to both the research process and outcomes (Maidmont & Milner, 2007).
Parent of children in the system. As a school principal, I have had the opportunity to get to know close to 300 students per year, multiplied annually by the last 11 years in the same district. Consequently, I am a mother of two school-aged daughters, who attend the same school system that I work in and thus know quite familiarly. I will admit that my children do quite well in school, both due to their inherent ability, but also likely due to their privilege and positionality as daughters of a school administrator in the system. I often feel entitled, both as a parent and also as an administrator, to advocate for experiences and resources that I deem are necessary for successful schooling. As Ravitch and Riggan (2011) caution, I must work to not let my own privileged point of view influence my research aims and outcomes, assuming that my fantasy of “opportunity” is the same as those who have been deemed ‘others.’

Socioeconomic status. Within my community there exists a clear divide between the “haves” and “have-nots,” a gulf that becomes glaringly apparent upon examination of the two primary schools. As the school principal, I believe I fight tirelessly to advocate for the needs of my families, staff, and school. Our state funding formula affords extra dollars to children of poverty, and at 85% free and reduced lunch, our school now receives 100% free breakfast and lunch for all students, as well as monthly fresh produce deliveries. Although I am professionally attuned to my school’s needs, I must consider my own positionality as I endeavor to begin research. I am a fairly privileged person both in my community and within a larger context. I own my own home, am part of a two-income household, and hold a full-time professional position in the city schools. I must be mindful and aware of how my own identity and also position in society and the community might influence the way in which I not only interpret my research, but ultimately also the representation of the problem (Briscoe, 2005).
Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to understand the values and ethics-laden decision-making process of setting funding priorities for newly reorganized school districts in times of fiscal crisis and constraint. This research seeks to consider political, social, moral, and organizational factors in building school budgets in Vermont schools. By examining the process used to set priorities and build budgets in individual contexts, we can potentially understand the variables that go into determining what ‘do more with less’ means in schools.

Researchers and school leaders in Vermont districts have the budding opportunity to craft budgets that are not only fiscally sound and responsive to political mandates, but also morally and socially responsible and relevant to their communities. Every financial decision made by school superintendents working in diverse and dynamic environments, has an impact on programs, people, and resources. Every choice, according to Bennet and Bennet (2008) is a guess or prediction about the future, where a school administrator takes a particular course of action and anticipates it will yield the desired outcome. The following section presents the tenets of bounded rationality theory to explore how school superintendents navigate complex decision-making during challenging fiscal times. In the following section, the researcher will describe the characteristics of bounded rationality theory, define key terms, identify seminal works, and address the rationale and application of this theory as related to the problem of practice.

Rational Choice Theory. To understand bounded rationality theory, one must first understand its placement within the context of the theory of rationality or rational choice. Rationality, according to Simon (1972) can be defined as a “style of behavior that is appropriate to the achievement of given goals, within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints” (Simon, 1972, p. 161). Rationality, is traditionally construed as a normative concept:
it recommends certain actions, or even decrees how one should act in situations or in response to variables. A fundamental premise of rationality is that each individual pursues his or her personal values and self-interest. The rational choice theory emphasizes the volitional nature of human action, and the competence of individuals making decisions and acting on the basis of their calculations of benefit and cost (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016).

Burns and Roszkowska (2016) explain that rational choice theories, of which there are many with several variations, have the following components: 1) an individual in a decision situation identifies the range or repertoire of options in the decision situation (that are permitted and known); 2) an individual determines the consequences resulting from each of the options, the possible outcomes or payoffs, and consequences of any alternative actions which may be taken; 3) the individual has preferences among the options, with what is assumed to be a consistent preference ordering; 4) the individual applies a decision or choice procedure to the alternatives to determine which maximizes net gain, selecting a single choice on the basis of its consequences for the individual (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016, p. 197).

In summation, rational choice theory suggests that a rational choice action is motivated by the self-interest of the individuals, seeking to distinguish costs, benefits, and alternative actions in an attempt to choose the “best fit.” Simply put, this theory suggests that a rational individual chooses actions in a manner that is consistent with their beliefs and valuations. Limitations of the theory of rational choice, led by the dissatisfaction of Herbert Simon, triggered the development of the model of bounded rationality. Simon (1987), who is commonly seen as its main pioneer, asserted that “the point of bounded rationality is to designate rational choice that takes into account the cognitive limitations of the decision maker – limitations of both knowledge and computational capacity” (Simon 1987, p. 266).
**Bounded Rationality.** Bounded rationality is a concept used throughout fields such as sociology, economics, and psychology as a way to explore how individuals and groups make decisions. Bounded rationality revises the previous assumptions of rationality, to account for the limitations of rational agents and the resources available to them. Herbert Alexander Simon (1916-2001) was the first to coin the term ‘bounded rationality,” as he explained the restrictions of rationality and the impact of emotionality on both decisions and actions. Simon used a pair of scissors in a metaphor to explain the process of decision-making, noting how one blade is representative of “cognitive limitations” while the other is illustrative of the “structure of the environment” (Gigerenzer & Selten, 2002). Human beings use both blades in action, with their rational decisions often limited by risk, uncertainty, incomplete information, and/or complexity (Simon, 1972). Additionally, individuals are also often forced to make decisions within specific time constraints or confines, propelling decision-makers to attempt to choose the most available and satisfactory option or strategy in the given situation (Simon, 1972; Conlisk, 1996). Klein (2002) explains that individuals often select an option “that is not clearly inferior to any other, given a reasonable examination of the situation” (Klein, 2002, p. 117). Thus, although individuals might make a different choice if there were no confines and unlimited time existed, in reality most individuals choose the approach that seems most satisfactory within the limitations presented (Simon, 1972; Klein, 2002).

**Four Principles of Bounded Rationality.** Simon’s model of bounded rationality has four principles that served to define it as a behavioral theory of choice: principle of intended rationality, principle of adaptation, principle of uncertainty, and principle of trade-offs (Simon, 1957). As these four principles are central to the research, and will provide a framework for
interview questions, data collection, and data analysis, each will be defined explicitly for the reader.

**Principle of Intended Rationality.** Simon’s model is based most heavily upon the principle of intended rationality, which explains that although individuals are often goal-oriented, they fail to accomplish goals due to the complexities they face (Simon, 1970). Simon explains that “rationality does not determine behavior. . . Instead, behavior is determined by the irrational and non-rational elements that bound the area of rationality” (Simon, 1957, p. 241; Jones, 2003). According to Jones et al. (2006), "the principle of intended rationality allows researchers to distinguish between careful cost benefit analysis that closely approximates utility maximizing decision-making, quick decisions based on heuristic cues, unthinking reliance on past strategies, or even spontaneous decisions that seem to make no reference to potential gains or losses. Given the time, costs, and demands of a specific decision, humans may rely on hardwired biological responses, generalized decision-making strategies, or full information searches (Jones et al., 2006, p. 44). In consideration of the research problem, although individuals may intend to be rational, often their decision-making capabilities break down under time constraints or high information costs, with no concrete evidence that people are more rational when stakes are high. Jones et al. (2006) offers a real-world example of state lotteries selling far more tickets when the pot is large, although it lowers the probabilities of a win and also the expected return or pay-out.

**Principle of Adaptation.** The principle of adaptation suggests that human thought is adaptive and basically rational, inferring that the more time an individual spends thinking about a problem, the more likely it will be that their understanding approximates the actual task environment, and their limitations will fade (Jones, 2003). Jones et al. (2006) explains that
"adaptation accounts changes in decision-making efficiency in a single problem space over time. When a problem is iterated over time, people learn or develop coping strategies. Even more intuitively, the principle of adaptation may explain why organizations encourage specialization in areas of complexity, and routinization in decisions under severe time constraints" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 45).

**Principle of Uncertainty.** The third component of the rational choice approach is the principle of uncertainty, which suggests that we must understand uncertainty in light of the calculus of probabilities. “An underlying tenet of bounded rationality from its early years centered on how human cognitive architecture interacted with an uncertain world; bounded rationalists saw uncertainty as far more fundamental to choice than the probability calculus implied” (Jones, 2003, p. 398). In consideration of school superintendents navigating decisions, this principle suggests that not may they be unaware of the outcomes that will result from strategic choices, but they are often uncertain of the procedures of choice themselves, and may in fact be uncertain about their own preferences.

**Principle of Trade-Offs.** Finally, the principle of trade-offs suggests that individuals struggle when forced to compare and trade-off goals against one another when making choices. Because of this difficulty, Simon argued that individuals and their organizations often choose the option that is 'good enough' as opposed to weighing all options and the payoff of each choice. In the world of school budgeting, individual decision-makers have limited attention for problem solving and must "address problems serially, one-at-a-time, which means they are forever juggling inputs, prioritizing them via the allocation of attention and the sense of urgency that inputs generate. The salience of a particular problem is almost always generated by non-rational elements in politics—by scandal, by crisis, by the mobilization of critics— rather than calm
decision to allocate the scarce resource of attentiveness" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 45). To operate within this final principle, and balance the difficulties, Simon proposed two behavioral tools: optimizing and satisficing.

**Optimizing versus Satisficing in Bounded Rationality.** Optimizing and satisficing are the two overarching approaches within rational choice theory. Optimizing in decision-making emphasizes the calculated and structured process that individuals undertake to evaluate and define the best potential outcome in any given scenario (Simon, 1972). Optimizing, or the process of examining each and every possible solution to a problem, is something that Simon describes as unattainable and impossible (Simon, 1972). A key component of optimizing in decision-making is a commitment to the often exhaustive search of all possible solutions, investing significant time and energy in the pursuit of the optimal or perfect solution.

Alternatively, satisficing is a tool for understanding trade-offs, wherein the individual chooses alternatives that are satisfactory or “good enough” (Simon, 1972; Jones, 2003). According to Simon, people tend to work on their goals sequentially, often resulting in a difficulty finding and understanding trade-offs within and among goals. Satisficing is grounded in realistic aspirations, where individuals complete a search process to select the best alternative, examining choices and arriving at a realistic aspiration, thus yielding a satisfactory response (Simon, 1972). Research that considers optimizing and satisficing serves to illustrate the process of identifying solutions and alternatives to complex problems, used as the backbone of choice theories, including Simon’s bounded rationality model.
Application to Research and Rationale

School districts, just like other organizations around the globe, make decisions and establish priorities on behalf of their members or stakeholders. District and building leaders regularly manage staffing, programs, and resource allocations, which in consideration of bounded rationality, would indicate that they must attempt to make these decisions after considering both risks and benefits for each alternative. When one bears in mind the sheer number of decisions facing district leaders, as well as the alternatives possible for each, the assumption that complete rationality is possible under challenging circumstances becomes less and less plausible.

When contemplating decision-making in practice, individuals and their organizations often are confronted with constraints and limitations. Bounded rationality was proposed by Herbert Simon (1957) as a way to represent how managers make decisions in real organizations. The bounded rationality theory challenges traditional rationalist perspectives by recognizing that decision making takes place within an environment of incomplete information and uncertainty. Simon (1957) asserted that people are only partly rational, and are in fact emotional and irrational in the remaining part of their actions. They experience limits in formulating and solving complex problems and in processing information. For district leaders, considering the bounds of decisions becomes a critical factor in the success of their organization. Hess (1999) explains that school superintendents are often constrained by issues of power, organizational complexity, bureaucracy, and finance.

The bounded rationality model is an appropriate fit for the problem of practice, seeking to understand superintendent decision-making in setting priorities and building budgets, as it
recognizes that actions and decisions are often based upon incomplete information, and preferences are subject to change and not always clearly orderable. In consideration of superintendents serving during challenging fiscal times, they may not always be able to find an optimal choice, and instead simplify the choices available, seeking a satisfactory solution rather than the optimal one. As Simon (1957) points out, individuals are limited by the information they have in order to make a decision in the decision-making process, due to the limitation of rationality of individuals. Selecting bounded rationality as the theoretical framework will allow the researcher to explore how superintendents make complex decisions with regards to budgeting, and the limitations they encounter when faced with challenging fiscal situations. Building off from the work of Simon (1957, 1972) the central research question became: What processes, meaning making, and values guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting a budget for their newly restructured organization during challenging fiscal times?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Issues around school financing and budgeting are not new, nor are conflicting emotions and opinions when student services and issues of equity are on the line. A school district’s budget is a vital document, as it enlightens the community about priorities and how their tax dollars/revenue will be spent. Although there may be times when a school district isn’t facing major cuts or reductions to programs and funds, given the current US economy and political landscape, spending constraint and restraint will likely be an issue for years to come.

Superintendents make the final decisions in the preparation and presentation of any school district’s budget. Exploring the procedures or practices that are used to set funding priorities for a school district in times of both restraint and reorganization, as well as examining the decision-making process used, has potential to guide superintendents in building a fiscally and morally responsible budget for their organization. A superintendent has the professional and ethical responsibility to navigate issues of equity, in consideration of values and ethics, to knowledgeably craft a sound and responsible budget.

The intent of this qualitative research study is to provide an honest depiction of the lived experiences of Vermont superintendents preparing school budgets during times of fiscal restraint and reorganization. In an attempt to describe related theory and practice, this review will synthesize pertinent literature dealing with the decision-making process, school-leader values and ethics, current federal and state policies impacting Vermont districts, and the politics of school budgeting.

Four themes emerged as being necessary for preparing a school budget in the state of Vermont. These elements are: understanding the political landscape (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005), issues of equity (Darden & Cavendish, 2011), following a sound decision-making process (Bird,
2011), and finally the recognition of personal values and ethics (Schulte & Hong, 2011). The literature review is organized according to the main themes above and preceded by definitions of key terms.

**Key Terms**

Four key-terms, public education, superintendent, fiscal constraint, and school budget are used consistently throughout the literature review and study. The complex ideas and concepts are integral to the research, and thus important for the reader to understand within the context of Prek-12 schools in the state of Vermont.

**Public Education.** As the setting of this study is based upon Prek-12 districts in the state of Vermont, it is important to recognize a few unique contextual features that impact education in the state. Although Vermont is fairly small (second smallest by population) and often rural in design, students consistently are among the highest ranking in the nation according to Education Quality Counts indicators. Education in the state consists of public, private, and parochial schools, although only public schools are governed by state and federal statutes such as Act 46. Property taxes are imposed by individual cities and towns for the support of education and municipal services. Vermont education has historically been based upon local control, although changes under Act 46 have shifted governance in many communities. According to Vermont Agency of Education, “Act 46 of 2015 provides opportunities for school districts to unify existing disparate governance structures into sustainable systems of education delivery that are designed to meet identified State goals while recognizing and reflecting local priorities” (n.d.).

Additionally, it is important to understand that the purpose of public education and its place in society can mean many different things and be defined in a variety of ways. There is much debate concerning the content of education and the processes or mechanisms by which
decisions are made (Bell and Stevenson, 2015). Education is more than just filling students with knowledge to compete and be successful, and often includes elements of accountability, efficiency, and social and economic objectives (Apple, 2006). Questions around what is taught, what counts as “official knowledge,” and who decides, shapes the conversations about the aims and purposes of schooling in the public sector (Apple, 2000). According to Spring (2011), three questions guide the parameters of how public education is defined:

1. What knowledge is most worth teaching?
2. What are the best instructional methods and school organization for teaching this knowledge?
3. What should it cost to disseminate this knowledge?

In order to fully grasp and explain the intent of public education, schools must have leaders who effectively envision, navigate, and then communicate its philosophical and financial purposes to constituents. For the purposes of this study, the role of the superintendent as a school leader will be explored.

**Superintendent.** Within the context of this research study, and Prek-12 schools, a superintendent is the leader or “Chief Executive Officer” (CEO) of the organization. The superintendent implements policies adopted by their local board and imposed by the state and federal government, making decisions concerning facilities, staff, programs, and district spending (Martens, 2012). As the sole individual serving as the chief officer for the district, the superintendent has responsibilities to navigate political waters, understand cultural and social dynamics, and make sound fiscal and instructional decisions in the best interest of those he or she serves. Superintendents are often viewed as “pivotal actors” in the algorithm of a school system’s success or failure (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). With so much at stake, and so many
competing and conflicting demands upon resources and time, school superintendents bear a heavy and varied burden in their efforts to lead the district. According to Great Schools Staff (2015), there are seven signs that a superintendent is effective in their role: have a clear vision for the district, are an effective communicator, are a good manager, are a good listener, are not afraid to take risks or make a commitment, and they are flexible. Similarly, Copeland (2013) also cites four important roles that superintendents fill in their district: manager, listener, communicator, and community liaison. The literature illustrates the importance and value in superintendents who are able to simultaneously and sometimes conflictingly “wear many hats,” worn either by their own choosing or thrust upon them (Jenkins, 2007).

**Fiscal Constraint.** Fiscal constraint refers to the ways in which school districts are forced to respond, over time, to various pressures such as increasing enrollments, the growth in students requiring special education, or even cutbacks in state and federal aid. The federal government and local state governments have implemented a variety of policies and legislation that have direct ramifications upon school funding formulas. Across the nation and in the state of Vermont, budgets are tightening while legislatures pass laws that mandate schools do more with less (Morford & Marshall, 2012). School superintendents must reduce budgets and define and refocus priorities to reflect a commitment to both efficiency and equity (Ramsey, 2001).

**School Budget.** A school budget is the formalized document that creates a plan for the allocation of resources to prioritize organizational needs. In school districts, the budget is built using “point in time” information about staff, students, and facilities. Schools use the budget as both a process and a formal document to outline their goals, priorities, and as a justification of the expenditure of public funds. School budgets are drafted annually, built by a combination of federal, state, and local contributions. In the simplest terms, a school budget provides a bridge
between a district’s goals and their plan or resource allocation. The school budget process forces conversation and choices between various programs, items, and staff competing for a pool of limited resources. The literature shows, as in the work of Hartman (1999), that integral steps in school budgeting include: establishing priorities, allocating resources, involving constituents, and decision-making and representative democracy in drafting a final budget document.

**Intersecting Variables**

Phipps, O’Connor, and Stellern (2014) suggest that the morals of an organization, as with a school district, are highlighted in the budget as it is representative of shared common goals. The superintendent, acting as the organization’s CEO, has a responsibility to understand the various influences that come into play in the crafting of this fiscal representation of goals. No one variable should be considered in isolation, but instead viewed in terms of its intersections and impact on organizational health. In the following section we consider the political landscape, issues of equity, decision-making, and personal beliefs.

**The Political Landscape.** The literature reviewed is brimming with references to the increasingly political nature of the school superintendency and district leadership. The roles assumed by superintendents have been evolving for years, slowly developing into that of democratic statesmen and politicians (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). In an American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, Glass, et al. (2000) detailed and verified increasingly political components of superintendents’ responsibilities and influences. The issue, according to Johnson (1996), is not about whether they choose to enter or engage in politics, but rather an understanding of the type of politics that prevail. In their role, superintendents have both a professional and moral responsibility to act as “democratic statesmen” to work on behalf of the children and community that they serve (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).
The American social and political backdrop has become increasingly more diverse in the last several decades, forcing school leaders to be prepared to move their system forward within a complex political environment (Kowalski, 1999). Since the mid-1950s, radical changes to society have required superintendents who are well-versed in politics and able to perform complex tasks. School systems are often defined in terms of being mini political systems that are nested within multi-level government structures (Scribner & Layton, 1995). Superintendents, then, are unavoidably engaged in political work to ensure that their system is successful.

According to the work of Hoyle and Skrla (1999), superintendents do not have the luxury of questioning whether they will engage in politics, but rather how well and ethically they will play it. Bjork and Lindle (2001) caution that although their role has changed drastically over the last several decades, many superintendents may struggle in their effort to completely understand and navigate the political waters.

Political scientists and researchers frequently tout two classic definitions of the word “political.” They are Lasswell’s (1958) “who gets what, when, and how,” and Easton’s (1965) “the authoritative allocation of resources and values.” As the school superintendent bears a heavy hand and potential burden for deciding the when, how and what within their district, it follows that their leadership can be defined as “inevitably political” (Bolman and Deal, 1994).

A variety of sources explain the political behaviors and responsibilities of school administrators (Kowalski, 1995; Bjork & Lindle, 2001; Hoyle & Skyrla, 1999). As Wimpleberg (1997) explains, since there is surely a consensus that superintendents must hold power that reduces them to political agents, we should move toward a complete analysis of political facets impacting their decisions. Those political facets include policies and legislative mandates that impact a superintendent’s school budget process and proposal.
There are many federal, state, and local policies that relate to education spending and fiscal planning, and impact superintendents’ budgeting processes. At the federal level, policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its reorganization into the No Child Left Behind act increased federal control over education, as well as compliance costs to receive federal dollars, as in the School Improvement Grant monies. Lips and Feinberg (2007) explain how legislation such as NCLB restricts states in using federal resources for locally directed programs. The policies clearly stated that federal resources were not available for classroom expenditures and other education programs that local leaders might believe would benefit their students; only those that the federal government outlined were of value in the requirements within the policy language.

Other federal policies, such as the Obama administration passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, set aside $4.35 billion for education through the Race to the Top competitive grant initiative. This competitive grant program affected policies, programmatic choices, and budgetary decisions at both the state and local level for school districts (Howell, 2015). The US department of education exercised considerable control over the “winners and losers” in the Race to the Top competition between states, deciding who would be awarded, and how much federal money they would receive to support existing and new education policies and practices (Howell, 2015).

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was enacted, which rolled back much of the federal government’s “big footprint” in education policy (Klein, 2016). ESSA allows states more power in choosing their own goals, although still needing to address issues of student proficiency and graduation rates, as well as achievement gaps. Under the ESSA, the current Title one funding remains intact, although there are some new programs and formulas, including
preschool block grant and technology dollars. Related to state and local school budgets, however, the ESSA requires that the “maintenance of effort law” remain in place, which requires states keep their funding at a certain level to receive federal dollars (Klein, 2016). These federal mandates, programs, and formulas roll out to states and determine policy decisions at that level, and ultimately school funding at the local level.

Most impactful on the problem of school budgetary decisions in Vermont, is the recent passage of Act 46 which impacts education funding, spending, and governance at the local level. Statewide, the spending caps outlined in the bill vary from district to district, as they are based on how much is spent per “equalized student” in the prior year. The caps, according to Vondrasek (2016), were designed to keep the overall increase in school budgets statewide to just 2%.

Federal mandates force many states to react and compete, enacting their own policies and guidelines to meet demands. Federal policy, as codified in Race to the Top (RTT), began to change the conversation from what communities want from and for their schools, to a market-based conversation where parents become consumers (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015). School districts around the country are making decisions to meet federal demands for equity while building rigorous academic programs to remain competitive. This causes the other shoe to drop in many communities, as fiscal caps and tightening budgets remain a reality, and something has to be cut. Bryant (2011) details how policy mandates at the federal and state levels force public school systems to redirect tax dollars meant for schools to various privately held concerns such as charter schools, private and religious schools, and contractors and companies tasked with setting up new systems for testing and accountability. Trujillo and Renee (2015) assert that these market-based reform policies thwart democratic schooling.
State and local education agencies are forced to do more with less. VT schools are being forced to meet the demands of ESSA, yet cut staffing to stay within Act 46’s spending caps. Burke and Sheffield (2012) explain how federal policies overreach into both state and local educational affairs, taking away autonomy to use education dollars in ways that local communities deem most appropriate for their students. Bryant (2011) explains how budgets passed by state legislatures are starting to have a huge influence on direct services to children, youth, and families. Decisions about priorities, people, and programs are left in the hands of Superintendents for presentation to the board and then public. If politics is “in the DNA of the superintendency, then effectiveness is its moral imperative” (Wimpelberg, 1997).

Superintendents make budgetary decisions within the context of federal, state, and local policies and laws. Regardless of the political climate and fiscal policy mandates, superintendents must navigate involvement with school boards, city councils and commissions, and state legislatures. According to the AASA New Superintendent’s E-Journal (McCord, 2008) there are nine tenets for guiding superintendents through political climates.

**Tenet 1. Own the facts.** Superintendents must know more about education and their district than others, arming themselves as an “authoritative source of information on the district” to build political affluence (2008).

**Tenet 2. Identify the influencers.** Powerful and knowledgeable superintendents get to know and work with elected officials and legislators to insure that they know about the impact of the laws they enact (2008).

**Tenet 3. Learn to count and embrace the quid pro quo.** “Martyrdom is not an effective strategy for politically affluent superintendents,” (2008).
Tenet 4. Understand the political process is imperfect and incremental. Savvy superintendents understand that they will often be forced to compromise, a move that should be anticipated and formulated in advance (2008).

Tenet 5. Use timing and talking effectively. Superintendents should carefully measure their words and actions, garnering greater attention to their message when they do weigh in on an issue (2008).

Tenet 6. Feed the process – but don’t only pull from the till. Superintendents must support and anticipate the investigative responsibilities of legislative bodies, searching for solutions and ways to build capital by offering needed technical knowledge (2008).

Tenet 7. Employ the strength of elected official to elected official. Superintendents are elected and hired by school boards, and should use other elected officials (as in school board members) at times to support and deliver facts to the community.

Tenet 8. Know the needs of the elected official. Superintendents must assess the needs and aspirations of their board and elected officials, hearing and spending time with both sides in any debate.

Tenet 9. Speak the truth. The currency of truth holds value forever, and cannot be understated or overturned. School superintendents must have a strong understanding of the political landscape, and their role as actors within it, to support their district and advocate for the students it serves.

Issues of Equity. Equity has been an issue of debate and concern since the early 1970s (Toutkoushian & Michael, 2007). States have a constitutional obligation to ensure that funding for schools is raised fairly and distributed equitably. Two types of equity are most often cited as related to school funding: horizontal equity and vertical equity. Horizontal equity is defined as
the equal treatment of equals, implying that similar districts and schools should be funded similarly. When the term is applied to education finance it becomes necessary to realize that funding streams come from various sources at the local, state, and federal levels. In order to determine horizontal equity within a school, these funds must be kept segregated in order to analyze similar students qualifying for particular funds. Conversely, vertical equity refers the unequal treatment of unequals, or suggests that districts or schools with greater need or more challenging/diverse populations are entitled to receive more funds. These dollars are often spent in order to help the student, population, or school overcome a risk category and achieve the same or similar access to a quality education of other subgroups. In striving to create a balanced budget for their districts in adherence to organizational goals, superintendents must consider issues of equity, focusing resources to improve student achievement in each sub-category or population.

On the surface, insuring equity of opportunity seems a fairly uncomplicated idea for districts and states to endorse. The reality facing superintendents, however, is that multiple factors often relate to needs and funding, even within a single state or region. Popular equity measures regularly force superintendents to make a choice to “either ignore the effects of these factors altogether or make adjustments for only one at a time” (Toutkoushian and Michael, 2007, p. 398).

Although a great amount of effort and research has gone into issues of inequity within certain areas of the country, a state, or even a geographic region, equity often fails to highlight or notice disparities within a school district or supervisory union (Darden & Cavendish, 2011; Burke, 1999; Roza, Guin, Gross & Deburgomaster, 2007). School superintendents, despite good intentions, often fail to realize that disparities regularly occur within their districts. High-poverty
schools frequently receive less support, with financial and human resources not evenly distributed among schools (Darden & Cavendish, 2011). Literature reviewed indicated that although debate still exists over types and impacts of disparities in resource allocation, surely inequity makes a difference. “The ethical will should exist for equity to prevail, but action often does not follow words and sentiment” (Darden & Cavendish, 2011). Superintendents do not have the luxury of being unclear about how, where, and why money is spent, as it has the potential to lead to disparities within their organization. Necochea and Cline explain:

> Districts that uncover inequities in funding need to discuss, analyze, and fully explore the possible negative effects of funding discrepancies on poor and minority students. It is imperative that districts seriously address this issue, even though it may be a painful and politically incorrect process, because the ramifications and implications of inaction may be severe. (Necochea & Cline, 1996, p. 76).

In attempting to make fiscal decisions based upon equity, Roza and Swartz (2007) urge leaders to examine (a) spending at each school in the district, (b) make spending transparent for all student groups, (c) compare spending across different types of schools in the same district, and (d) evaluate spending patterns in the context of stated district strategies (p. 71). School spending profiles can help provide needed insight into how funds are used across schools. When schools in a system have different or competing needs, superintendents can and should see if “categorical funds are used to supplement equitable distributions of basic noncategorical funds, or instead used to offset inequities in these resources” (p. 83). In the budgeting process, having a clear spending profile for each school in a district allows for comparison and as a means to counter factors that may influence allocation and lead to inequity (Roza and Swartz, 2007).
Ensuring equity of education funding is one of the most challenging tasks facing leaders at the local, state, and national level. Not only is equity challenging to measure and also implement, but district superintendents and their staff must meet the needs of a student body that may vary considerably in their characteristics from year to year and across buildings. As Darden and Cavendish (2011) urge us to consider, although we may not always be completely clear about the impact of inequitable funding in schools, it surely matters at multiple levels for students and staff. Superintendents must be willing to discuss, analyze, and potentially change their practices to interrupt funding inequities and make the best possible decisions in the best interest of their organization.

**Decision-Making**

School district leaders should have a plan and process that helps them maneuver through stressful fiscal times, ensuring that they remain successful and committed to the students and community. Being able to follow a sound process and plan allows superintendents to make rational decisions, instead of purely emotional ones, representing the priorities of their district (Norton, Sybouts, Dlugosh, & Webb, 1996). School superintendents should be proactive, designing and adhering to decision-making processes that are transparent, forthright, and credible (Bird, 2011).

**Definition, Application, and Models of Decision-Making.** The importance of decision making can be seen across a variety of research studies, with a basic understanding that if leaders “would only get the process right, they would make better decisions” (Hoy & Tarter, 2010, p. 351). For general purposes, decision making can be defined as the process of selecting the best choice, or course of action, from a set of possibilities. Bennet and Bennet (2008) explain it as a commitment to action, on the part of an individual and an organization. It is not the case,
however, that there is one correct decision-making model, and in fact, many models share 
common aspects and assumptions. Decision-making and the study of why people make the 
choices they do, has stretched across a variety of disciplines for more than two decades, gaining 
interest and attention from scholars in the fields of ethics, psychology, economics, philosophy, 
and the social sciences (Elm & Radin, 2012).

In an article by Brent and DeAngelis (2011), decision making is defined as a series of 
fairly easy to follow steps:

1. Define the problem or issue to solve
2. Specify objectives to be accomplished
3. Identify alternative ways to solve the problem
4. Predict how well alternatives will meet objectives
5. Predict costs for each alternative
6. Make the decision by balancing costs and effects of each alternative

Although the process is simple on paper, in reality, researchers and analysts have found that it is 
a much more complex and detailed process for leaders to maneuver through.

Hoy and Tarter (2008) explain several models that describe how decisions are made, 
culling through literature to define nine basic rules for “swift and smart” decision-making. These 
rules are established to offset the constraints and restraint facing school leaders in their 
professional roles and given their decision-making responsibilities.

**Satisficing Rule.** Even the most skilled and intelligent school leader will face limitations, 
as they can never possibly know all options or predict the impact of each solution. For this 
reason, superintendents must realize that making acceptable decisions, not necessarily the best 
decision, is realistic and desirable (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).
Framing Rule. Optimism and self-efficacy, or the belief that tasks can be accomplished, are necessary for positive results. (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Default Rule. School leaders should consider doing nothing as a first option. Sometimes watchful waiting is appropriate, and in fact, sometimes doing nothing is a decision in itself (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Simplicity Rule. Complex decisions require a small beginning, followed by incremental steps. Start simple (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Uncertainty Rule. School leaders should trust their intuition. Ignore irrelevant information; relevant experience and expertise are invaluable (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Take the Best Rule. Leaders should select the decision that meets their criteria. Take the first and best alternative; “stop the search, and act” (Hoy & Tarter, 2010, p. 355).

Transparency Rule. School superintendents should be open and honest about their decisions and the process. If there is nothing to hide, why perpetuate secrecy? Transparency is not just about making answers or data visible, but also about the practice of leadership and decision-making (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Contingency Rule. Given the fact that there is no one right answer or best way to make a decision, leaders should reflect on their successes and failures, thinking conditionally. A strong school superintendent is flexible in their thinking (Hoy & Tarter, 2010).

Participation Rule. School leaders should involve others in their decision making if they have expertise to contribute, have a personal stake in the outcome, and are willing to set aside their own preferences and biases for the good of the organization (Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Hoy & Tarter, 2010).
In many school systems or larger organizations, according to Pike (1988), a series of techniques and tools should be used to determine financial allocations on a consistent basis. When the tools and techniques combine with a transparent process and procedure, it forms the foundation for a decision-making model (Pike, 1988). A decision-making support model can be used to aid superintendents and decision-makers in defining items that maximize the benefit to schools and students as well as transparently and consistently support a district’s mission (Bhayat, Manuguerra, & Baldock, 2015). The authors explain that a decision-making support model provides discipline and a logical four step procedure (Bhayat, Manuguerra, & Baldock, 2015):

- Applying intelligence in understanding the need and objectives of a decision;
- Designing and analyzing possible alternative scenarios;
- Choosing amongst alternatives based on a desired outcome; and
- Implementing the chosen alternative and learning about the benefits and failures of the initial decision

A strong decision-making support model, in addition to the defined procedure, aids leaders as they seek to assimilate information from a variety of sources, explore the underlying dimensions of each of the scenarios or alternatives, consider things that are traditionally challenging to measure (such as qualitative or subjective factors), and guide the work of their team to improve upon the decision-making process in subsequent endeavors (Bhayat, Manuguerra, & Baldock, 2015).

A variety of other seminal authors have also contributed to the literature on decision-making, as in the work of Curseu and Schruijer (2012), who defined the importance of knowledge, cognition, and rationality as being important and influential in the decision-making
process. Their work was supported in the work of Stenmark and Mumford (2011), who studied situational variables impacting leaders’ ethical decision-making. Regardless of the discipline, literature points to the desire of researchers to understand the decision-making process, and also the impact of decisions once made.

**Pitfalls of Decision-Making.** In making any decision, a school leader must be able to process information and also make the decision. How well any leader is able to make decisions is based upon how well and quickly they process and prioritize, but also their ability to manage potential conflicting goals as decisions are made (Walumbwa et al, 2014). Heuristics in decision-making suggests that leaders should seek to “maximize accuracy, minimize cognitive effort, maximize justification of their decision, and minimize negative emotions related to the decision” (Walumbwa, 2014, p. 286). The issue or downfall with heuristics in decision-making, however, is that school leaders may not choose the most salient and important information to inform or direct their choices. To counteract potential pitfalls in any decision-making venture, according to Walumbwa et al (2014), leaders must “be aware of the heuristics and biases to which humans are subject, and to be aware of ways to reduce these biases, including developing greater self-awareness” (p. 286). The literature will now turn to personal values and ethics, and the requirement of school leaders to be self-aware in setting their district’s financial priorities.

**Personal Values and Ethics**

The school superintendent, serving as the CEO of their district, holds both great power and equally important responsibility. Leaders must recognize the importance of their role, and the impact that they have upon culture, the community, and a school district’s programs. Superintendents must not underestimate the degree to which they influence, guide, and instruct
others, taking time to scrutinize and recognize their personal values and code of ethics, to make sound decisions in the best interest of students.

**Personal Values.** A person’s values are the creeds that guide their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Hood, 2003). A value has been defined as an abstract form of social cognition, guiding an individual’s adaptation and experience with the world around them (Kahle, 1983). Values can be divided into two general categories: terminal and instrumental. Terminal values are those that are social and personal, whereas those that are instrumental are morality or competency based (Hood, 2003). Social values deal with freedom and equality, while morality values include items like forgiveness and kindness. Both of these types of values relate directly to society and our interactions and relationships with others. Personal values, on the other hand, include bravery and respect for self, while competency values deal with logic and skill. Both of these types of values deal directly with the individual and personal, without a necessary broader consideration for context and society at large (Hood, 2003).

The relationship between what an individual values and leadership has long been studied. Leadership, according to Smircich and Morgan (1982), is a process of constructing one’s reality, grounded in the organization of meaning. Things that hold value and meaning in one situation or context may be harshly opposed or different in another. Research suggests that values play a critical role for school leaders, helping them examine and define their criteria for decision-making, managing their leadership style, and swaying or changing the beliefs and behaviors of constituents (Groves & LaRocca, 2011). A leader’s choices can often mean a district follows either a constructive or destructive path, requiring someone who is aware of the role their personal values play in their decisions. Based on their value structure, certain situations can activate certain beliefs and values, causing them to be more influential (Eisenberg, Reykowski,
& Staub, 1989). Although leaders may in fact choose to make decisions that oppose their personal values, over time, most individuals will act in accordance with their hierarchical value system (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008).

In their article, Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) propose a value structure that is comprehensive and includes 10 types, easily grouped into four dimensions: openness to change (self-direction and stimulation), conservatism (tradition, conformity, and security), self-enhancement (achievement and power), and self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence). Furthermore, as Illies and Reiter-Palmon (2008) point out, these dimensions can be further broken down into two general value continuums: openness to change and conservatism as one pole, and self-transcendence and self-enhancement as the other. A school leader’s position on either continuum is directly related to the importance that they assign to the values within it (e.g. Valuing conservatism and traditionalism). A school leader’s values significantly influence how an issue or problem is perceived, and also ultimately how they manage the problem-construction and decision process (Reiter-Palmon et. al, 1998).

In his dissertation, Joshua Arnold (2013) advises that we must take time to understand what it means, and also what it takes, to be a leader. The Dennison Group (2009) structured a model that is associated with successful school leadership traits. At the heart of the leadership model are “beliefs” and “assumptions,” delineated as the core values behind decisions, behaviors, and actions. In order for any superintendent to be fully attuned with the reasons behind their decisions, they must be deeply aware of their underlying beliefs and values to move their organization forward in a positive and honest manner.

**Ethics.** With so much at stake and on the line with public education, ethical leadership and an understanding about what superintendents *should* do, is the topic of much research and
debate. Ethical leaders are individuals who are truthful and principled decision-makers, demonstrating a commitment and level of care about their community and society at large (Brown & Trevino, 2006). This side of ethical leadership is characterized as the moral person dimension, dealing with a leader’s efforts to influence others’ behaviors and decisions (Brown & Trevino, 2006). When leaders act in accordance to this dimension, they role-model ethical behaviors and decisions for others, while holding individuals accountable for conduct and choices. Truly principled superintendents communicate with others about ethics, “practicing what they preach,” as they strive to make just and sensible decisions (2006).

From the literature studied, three factors were provided that have the potential to contribute to the development and sustainment of ethical school leadership: ethical role modeling, an organization’s ethical context, and the moral intensity of the issues facing the leader in the organization (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Leaders, quite like followers, learn from others’ actions and behaviors. Through observation of an ethical role model, including opportunities to observe the consequences of behavior and choices, leaders have opportunity to internalize values and attitudes as well as strive to emulate the ethical behavior (2006).

Leaders hold a powerful position within their organization: “not only do their decisions and behavior, especially with regard to ethics, set the standard for the decision-making and behavior of their subordinates, but a leaders' ethical behavior has implications for important subordinate and organizational outcomes” (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011, p. 943). Although the literature points out that rules and codes of conduct are a necessary, they are not a “sufficient means toward improving ethical decision-making. There are a number of situational variables that must also be considered, in order to make the most effective decision” (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011; Brown, 2007; Trevino & Brown, 2004; Webley & Werner, 2008). In their
article, Stenmark and Mumford (2011) establish six highly impactful situational variables for ethical leadership: performance pressure, interpersonal conflict, threats to self-efficacy, decision-making autonomy, type of ethical issue, and level of authority of the people involved. Situational variables that influence ethical decisions are often found to be prominent in leaders' decision-making process, as they endeavor to make sound and responsible decisions for their organizations (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011).

Regarding the context of the organization, Brown and Trevino (2006) assert that stronger ethical contexts serve to bolster and encourage ethical behavior and decisions, while ensuring the maintenance of ethical leadership. Ethical contexts have “more positive models of ethical leadership, formal policies and informal norms that support ethical conduct, and reinforcement of ethical behavior” (p. 602). Finally, being aware of the moral components of an identified problem or situation is a first and important step in an ethical decision-making process (2006).

Jones (1991) contends that the moral intensity of an issue impacts an individual’s awareness, specifically highlighting the potential harm or consequence of a situation, and social consensus, as two dimensions that weigh into it. If leaders are unaware of the importance of the issues facing them, they are less likely to engage in highly ethical practices in formulating a response.

**Summary and Implications**

The school superintendency can be defined as being comprised of historical, political, and institutional forces (Feuerstein, 2013). Despite the obvious complexities of their position, and constraints facing each of their decisions, their choices influence issues of equity and social justice within the school system. Having a thorough understanding of the ethics and value-laden process of building a budget, as well as their responsibility as a political leader in their community and abroad, can help superintendents “advocate for changes in social policy that will
truly benefit the least powerful children in their schools” (Feuerstein, 2013, p. 879). In drafting, building, and selling a school budget each year a superintendent must draw upon “many skill sets from management to leadership, from personal assessment to program assessment, from cognitive logic to emotional intelligence” (Bird, 2011). All of this work is done within the very political and public world of making decisions and allocating resources that align with organizational values and the best interest of the students being served.

As our world and the educational system continue to become more complex, given the historic amount of legislation and growing accountability requirements facing districts, school systems and their leaders must react and adapt in response. Bennet and Bennet (2008) urge leaders to understand that as changes and external factors impact our world, the ways in which we make decisions must also change. Given that so much is always shifting in education, the outcomes and consequences of each decision made by a leader become harder to predict and potentially more perilous. The process of decision-making requires skilled leaders, who will work to define and understand all internal and external components at play and also on the line for the future of their organization (Bennet & Bennet, 2008).

After researching the variety of decision-making models available in the literature, although abundant options were discovered, the researcher will focus on ethical decision-making and the nine rules for swift and smart decision-making as defined by Hoy and Tarter (2010). With a structure to understand the decision-making process, the researcher will also examine the political, environmental, and value-laden factors that influence a school leader’s choices and actions. Insight into understanding the decision-making process with specific regard to the intersection of politics, ethics, and values requires close examination and study. Findings from
this research are potentially impactful upon superintendents’ decision-making and the success of an organization and its members, especially within the context of school district reorganization.
Chapter 3: Qualitative Methodology

The purpose of this research is to understand the process and intersecting variables considered by school superintendents in Vermont, drafting a budget for their organization during challenging fiscal times. This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology utilized throughout the research to investigate the problem, and is organized into six sections for review. First, the research question is presented. Second, the research method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), is offered to illustrate and examine the lived experience of Vermont public school superintendents drafting budgets. Included in the second section are assumptions, advantages, and also limitations of the selected research method. The third section reports on the alignment of the research methodology with Herbert Simon’s (1972) theoretical framework, as related to its usefulness in analyzing data collected throughout the research process. The fourth section addresses the criteria and considerations used in the selection of superintendents to participate in the research. The fifth section presents procedures used in both data collection and analysis. The final, sixth section, is a discussion of the ethical considerations and necessary steps employed in the protection of human subjects used in the dissertation research.

Research Question

This research considered how seven participating Vermont superintendents navigated the various pressures and influences on decision-making as they drafted budgets for their school system. One overarching research question was formulated to focus the direction of the study.

Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers employing qualitative methods develop an overarching research question to provide an “umbrella” to unify inquiry and support their understandings. Creswell (2013) asserts that “an overarching question can give direction for the study design and collection of data and offer potential for developing new, more specific
questions during data collection and analysis” (p. 435). Based upon Creswell’s assertions, it is important to also choose an overarching question that is suited to the IPA qualitative study. In aligning a question to the qualitative study, researchers must take care with both word choice and phrasing. Creswell (2013) explains that research questions in qualitative studies should strive to be non-directional and open ended to allow for deeper exploration of content and themes. Additionally, questions in qualitative studies should begin with “why” or “how” to convey the exploratory focus of the research aims. Based upon the above recommendations, the overarching research question for the qualitative study was:

- What processes, meaning making, and values guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting a budget for their organization during challenging fiscal times?

**Research Design**

When leading their school district during challenging fiscal times and through each budget cycle, superintendents inevitably are faced with competing and often conflicting choices and demands. In building a finalized budget that fiscally represents the values and priorities of their district, superintendents must navigate a variety of factors and influences in an effort to meet the needs of their students, schools, and communities. Because the fiscal climate and context varies from school district to school district, it was necessary to understand how superintendents make sense of their environment and budget cycle. The IPA methodology utilized in this research provided an opportunity to deeply understand the processes, sense-making, and values that guide superintendents’ decision-making (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was an ideal match for this research as it allowed for the interpretation of a shared or “lived experience” of Vermont school superintendents as they encountered intersecting and
competing variables during the budget cycle in their respective districts. Smith et al. (2009) explains that IPA is “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p. 1). IPA allows the researcher to utilize explorative inquiry, addressing the problem of practice and interpreting the experiences and understandings of study participants.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.** IPA is a qualitative methodology that pushes researchers to understand the lived experiences of participants in order to describe a phenomenon or topic within a specific context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008). IPA moves beyond basic explanations or descriptions to develop an interpretative analysis that places the accounts in relation to social, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Thus, the analyst offers “an interpretative account of what it means for the participant to have such concerns within their particular context” (Larkin et al., 2008, p. 113).

The IPA approach is based most heavily upon a Husserlian philosophical tradition that highlights the value of personal experiences to generate knowledge (Priest, 2003). Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, was noted for establishing phenomenology and valuing the meaning that people make of their lived experiences as a basis for his investigations. In line with the Husserlian tradition, the systematic investigation of school superintendents’ meaning-making derived from their experiences developing budgets supported using phenomenology for this research study. It becomes necessary to mention, however, that the utilization of phenomenology alone would have been limited as no direct observations of superintendent behaviors during the budget cycle were made in the research. Instead, this research study focused on how superintendents interpreted the variables impacting school budget development, thus leading
toward the appropriateness of the more flexible approach offered by the IPA research methodology.

IPA is informed by three positions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Phenomenology deals with the “what” and “how” of individuals’ experienced phenomena, describes the crux of the experiences, but falls short of explaining or analyzing descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation focusing on textual meaning (Smith et al., 2013). Finally, idiography focuses on details and the analysis of small cases, differing from mainstream psychological studies that are nomothetic (Smith et al., 2013). Smith (2004) established four key characteristics of IPA, as stemming from the three positions noted above. Firstly, IPA is noted to be idiographic because researchers perform a detailed analysis of one case or participant before moving on to the next. Secondly, IPA is inductive because research questions are broadly constructed, so as to allow themes and meanings to emerge. Thirdly, results from research are discussed through the use of literature, creating an interrogative component to the study. Finally, IPA researchers are noted to be influenced by their background and knowledge of existing literature, allowing them to interpret data through their own lens as they seek to develop themes (Smith, 2004).

Larkin and colleagues (2008) suggest that IPA researchers must be open to adjusting their ideas, and be responsive to interpretations of data based upon participant responses. Researchers using this approach must understand that study participants’ experiences are situated within a specific context, relating the person to the phenomena at hand (Larkin et al., 2008). Aligning with an interpretative tradition, IPA includes a double hermeneutic: the researcher tries to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of their experience (Smith, 2004; 2011). This research utilized IPA both to investigate and to interpret the lived experiences as perceived by
school superintendents who were engaged in the complex process of developing a balanced budget for their organization. The dual characteristics of the IPA tradition provided the methodology needed to gain an understanding of the research problem under examination. In the employment of an IPA approach, however, assumptions must be considered in conjunction with the researcher’s world views.

**Assumptions.** Creswell (2012) explains that when researchers begin a qualitative study, they agree to its underlying philosophical assumptions, that when combined with their own world view, shape the direction of the research. Creswell (2012) describes four assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodology. Ontological assumptions relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics. Epistemological assumptions are based upon how researchers know what they know, and their relationship to subject participants. Axiological assumptions deal with the role of values in research, and how researchers report their values and biases and make these known in their study. Finally, the methodology refers to the methods used in the process of research, and how it is shaped by the researcher’s experience (Creswell, 2012).

In an IPA study, a major assumption concerns the role of the researcher in analyzing and generating meaning and new understandings. Researchers embrace the idea of multiple realities, reporting out on these by exploring multiple forms of evidence from participants’ perspectives and experiences. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that the IPA researcher is actively involved in both the collection and analysis phases of the investigation. This understanding is aligned with the assumption of the double hermeneutic, wherein the researcher constructs meaning as based upon the understanding held by another. Given the role of the researcher in the process of both data collection and analysis, there exist both advantages and limitations of the IPA research tradition.
Advantages. In using an IPA approach to investigate the problem of practice, several distinct advantages are offered. Finlay and Ballinger (2006) describe IPA as a ‘variant of phenomenology’ that explores individuals’ experiences and perceptions. Taking this idiographic approach, the focus is on individuals’ cognitive, affective, and physical beings, and is distinct from a nomothetic method which tends to focus on generalizations as accounting for larger social patterns. For this research study, the idiographic characteristic of IPA allows for an understanding of how individual superintendents manage intersecting variables within their particular context and budget cycle. The idiographic nature of IPA is crucial, as it allows the researcher to deeply understand the problem of practice as experienced by each individual Vermont superintendent.

IPA was useful for this research because it is possible to use it within a pre-existing theoretical framework or model. In this research study, in addition to exploring the lived experience of superintendents, IPA can include existing theory as with Herbert Simon’s (1987) Theory of Bounded Rationality. IPA’s interrogative and reflective approach suggests that researchers can use existing theory as a guide for both interview construction and analysis, as well as a framework for understanding participants’ accounts.

Finally, IPA was advantageous to investigate this problem of practice due to its flexible analytic nature. Recognizing that multiple levels of self-reflection occur during semi-structured interviews, where each participant reflects on his or her own experiences, while the researcher considers their own reactions in response to the participants’ sense-making, makes the double hermeneutic aspect of IPA meaningful and appropriate for the study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Additionally, IPA helps to illuminate both similarities and differences in the experiences of superintendents crafting budgets for their organizations. As
Smith et al. (2009) explain, IPA allows researchers to conduct a cross-case analysis to look for emergent themes as they are, or are not, present in the stories and experiences of other participants. In this process of horizontalization, researchers interpret and capture the essence of each participant’s experience, enabling later comparisons (Moustakas, 1994). This aspect of IPA is especially appropriate for the research study, seeking to expand beyond individual superintendent’s experiences to ultimately draw connections related to fiscal decision-making. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2012) explain that data analysis serves to draw out the meaning of the experience, a combination of the hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of questioning, resulting in an understanding of what happened over time (p.36). It is for these advantages that IPA was well aligned to explore, examine, and ultimately comprehend the phenomena of superintendent decision-making within the context of fiscal challenges for their organization.

**Limitations.** Although IPA has distinct advantages for qualitative researchers, it also has its limitations. Critics of the methodology frequently point to four major limitations of using this as a framework for research. Firstly, IPA like many phenomenological studies has been said to give unsatisfactory recognition to the integral role of language. In a rebuttal of this criticism, Smith et al. (2009) accept that meaning making takes place in the context of narratives, discourse, etc., and although IPA researchers seek to gain insight into experience, their work is always intertwined with language.

Secondly, critics point to the concern over whether IPA can accurately capture the experiences and meanings of experiences rather than opinions of it. While phenomenology allows researchers to explore his or her experiences through ‘phenomenological meditation’, it ultimately relies on the accounts of participants and the experiences of researchers. The question of critics surrounds the concern that participants and researchers might not have the skills to
successfully communicate the nuances of experiences (Willig, 2008). Although this criticism of IPA could be considered elitist, it does provide a good reminder around the requirement of researchers to afford extra attention in collecting rich and exhaustive data from study participants.

Thirdly, IPA faces criticism because some aspects of phenomenology are not compatible with cognition, and the role of cognition in phenomenology is not properly understood (Willig, 2008). However, Smith et al. (2009) argue that the sense-making and meaning-making clearly encompass formal reflection, thus allowing it to resonate with cognitive psychology and the aims of qualitative research.

Fourthly, critics of IPA note that it focuses on perceptions and thus limits our understanding, because it does not seek to provide explanations. To avoid this pitfall, Willig (2008) suggests that researchers must also seek to explore the conditions that triggered experiences, by situating them within past events, histories or the social-cultural domain. Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) contends that IPA uses hermeneutic, idiographic and contextual analysis to understand the cultural position of people’s experiences, thus combatting the claim of limited understanding and explanations. The limitation of the researcher imposing meaning and perceptions on the data collected was mitigated in two main ways. First, communication around the purpose of the study was transparent and clear to all participants. Additionally, informed consent was provided to all participants, along with a disclosure statement, so that the analytic process of meaning-making and drawing conclusions was explicitly stated. The researcher also utilized member checking, which allowed study participants to review transcripts and also analysis, along with an opportunity for participants to clarify information and elaborate before the final draft was complete. Although IPA has significant limitations, it provided an appropriate
framework for investigating the problem of practice surrounding the lived experiences of Vermont school superintendents.

Alignment of Theoretical Frameworks

As discussed in Chapter Two, a significant amount of time and analysis of theoretical models often associated with leadership, school finance, and decision-making was exerted in the review for framework alignment. Although there was no perfect fit, considering the complexities surrounding the problem of practice, Herbert Simon’s (1972) *Bounded Rationality* served as an advantageous lens through which to understand the complexities impacting superintendents’ fiscal decisions.

Population

This section details the criteria used in the selection of study participants, including both the recruitment and access to the population. The population for this study was Vermont public school superintendents. In seeking to understand how this group of individuals examine and consider a variety of variables that potentially impact the development of their budget, it is imperative to explicitly state the criteria used to select appropriate research participants.

Criteria. Clear criteria were employed to determine the population of study participants for the research. First and foremost, all participants were currently serving active contracts as public-school superintendents in the state of Vermont. It was necessary to distinguish between public and private or parochial school superintendents in the state, because although all superintendents have to deal with fiscal decision-making, the processes, revenue sources and restrictions differ significantly between the public and private sectors of K-12 schools. For this study, only public-school superintendents were selected due to their experience with public school mandates and funding formulas decreed by the state and related to developing their
budgets. Given issues around declining enrollment, Vermont’s Act 46 and the funding and governance mandates, the research participants all had experience with balancing state requirements with local priorities while serving in the role of superintendent. Additionally, superintendents from diverse geographic regions within the state were solicited to participate, based upon anticipating that they would likely bring a wide range of experiences with navigating fiscal decisions during turbulent times around the state.

**Recruitment and Access.** This study applied purposive sampling to identify the population of superintendents based upon three inclusion criteria. First, all research participants were required to have professional experience as public-school superintendents. Second, it was determined that study participants must have active contracts for the 2017-2018 school year in the state of Vermont. The reason for exempting school superintendents that may have retired or were not actively employed in 2017-2018 was due to differing structures for school governance based upon Vermont’s Act 46, and potential changes to the political climate and landscape. The final criterion considered was that each of the school districts represented must be located in towns offering a range of student enrollments, ranges in student achievement and demographics, among other variables. Vermont’s Department of Education (VT-DOE) website was used to identify superintendents and school districts derived from public datasets that provided information on differing attributes.

**Justification of Sampling Strategies and Procedures.** This research study applied purposive sampling to constrict the pool of prospective participants. Purposive sampling assisted the researcher in selecting participants who fit research criterion and had characteristics deemed desirable for the study. In this study, the researcher desired results from a small but varied sample group of Vermont superintendents employed throughout the state. As a result, purposive
sampling was conducted prior to data collection and the individuals interviewed had first-hand experience in the area of school budgeting and finance (Creswell, 2009). Purposive sampling is described by Creswell (2012) as when “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (p. 156). Purposive sampling was done through the use of the Vermont Department of Education website and contacts in the field to identify school districts and superintendents that met the criteria for a diverse sample. Given the application of IPA and the research problem studied, purposive sampling served to increase the likelihood that participants would each bring experience in building budgets within the context of challenging fiscal times.

**Site and Research Participants.** IPA methodology advocates studies involving small sample sizes, although there has not been research that points to a precise or perfect number of participants. Smith (2004) suggests that IPA studies include sample sizes between five and ten participants. Smith et al. (2009) provide a more specific number, guiding researchers toward numbers of between three and six participants. Based upon the research and recommendations from Smith et al. (2009) and Smith (2004), a desirable and appropriate participant pool for this study was between five and eight superintendents.

The qualitative data collected for this study was gathered in settings convenient for each study participant. Each superintendent was asked to provide locations, dates, and times for interviews that were suitable to their schedule and needs, in an attempt to create a hospitable and comfortable atmosphere for them to share their lived experiences. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol in the collection of data at each site, following Clarke’s
(2009) suggestion to be both empathic and questioning, to allow participants to be open and honest in their conversations.

**Data Collection**

Prior to gathering any data, an application was made to the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board Office for permission to conduct the study. Participants were interviewed regarding values, beliefs, politics, and decision-making variables as framed by the researcher’s guided protocol. Throughout the collection and treatment of data, confidentiality of participants and any district identifiers were stored on password protected laptops and recording devices. Specific protocols were established that ensured confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms for both school districts and study participants.

Given the qualitative nature of the research study, the utilization of semi-structured interviews for the purposes of data collection seemed most appropriate. As stated earlier, qualitative research is best suited for studies hoping to gain an in-depth understanding of the study participants (Creswell, 2009). The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to gain a vantage point that is both deep and nuanced (Patton, 1990; Richards, 2009). The semi-structured interview data collection method also aligns with the IPA research tradition.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** A semi-structured interview protocol provides consistency of questioning while also allowing for researcher flexibility in the exploration of emergent themes. Although several data collection tools were investigated, a semi-structured interview protocol allowed for the greatest flexibility and depth, in alignment with the study’s objective to understand the lived experience of Vermont superintendents crafting budgets during challenging fiscal times.
A review of literature surrounding the use of semi-structured interview techniques provided the researcher with specific techniques and language to achieve optimal results. DeCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that researchers should choose a first question that is non-threatening, broad and reflective of the general subject to be discussed. Turner (2010) suggests that questions should be neutral and unambiguous, while still allowing participants the opportunity to elaborate upon important or meaningful concepts throughout the interview. Based upon the review of semi-structured interviewing techniques, a protocol was developed that included non-threatening warm-up questions, followed by a series of open-ended questions that were neutral, broad, and yet clearly reflective of the subject at hand. While designing the interview guide, it was important to consider the suggestions of Smith et al. (2009) to include a list of “…between six to ten open-ended questions, along with possible prompts…” (p. 60), which was expected to result in an interview that would last approximately one hour. In consideration of the theoretical framework of Bounded Rationality, which assumes the limitations facing superintendents drafting budgets, questions posed to participants will be neutral and reflective of the broad nature of potential professional challenges. Examples include the following.

1. Please provide me an overview of the budget development and approval process in your school district? Who is involved and what level?

2. What factors and audiences do you consider when making decisions as it relates to developing the school budget?

3. What groups or stakeholders do you need to educate about the school district budget?

What forms of communication do you use?
4. To what extent does equity constrain your decision-making as it relates to budgeting in your school district? How does equity influence the decision-making in your school district as it relates to the development of your final budget?

Prior to interviewing any subject participants, interview protocols were field tested to gather feedback and ensure relevancy. Creswell (2012) suggests that researchers “go to a panel of judges or experts and have them identify whether the questions are valid” (p. 162). In adhering to this practice, the interview protocol was field tested with two district-level administrators to provide feedback on content and language, while also providing interview experience for the researcher. The use of pilot testing in the field allowed for a refinement of protocol questions, data collection procedures, and guarantee ease of access (Creswell 2013). Additionally, the researcher chose to also review any relevant documents made available by study participants to further provide evidence of emergent themes or shared experiences.

**Document Analysis.** Document analysis is a tool that can potentially allow researchers to give additional voice and meaning to an area of study. O’Leary (2014) suggests that three main types of documents may be available and provide additional information beyond interviews: public records, personal documents, and physical evidence. Similarly, Cooper and Heck (1995) suggest that document analysis provides information that might otherwise be difficult to measure, allowing researchers to elaborate on the problem being investigated. Also, documents are stable, “non-reactive” data sources, meaning that they can be read and reviewed multiple times and remain unchanged by the researcher’s influence or research process (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). As public-school finance and the final budget is a public process and document, a variety of public documents were available for research analysis. These data sources included community demographic information from the US census and related news articles about the budget cycle to
understand the context of each study participant. Additionally, publically available school board minutes and agendas were collected to provide a data-based description of the budget building process for each superintendent’s organization.

The combination of interview data and document analysis provided rich and complimentary information for the researcher. Although Creswell (2013) cautioned that document analysis is often frayed with issues of access, the public documents available in this study provided supplementary research data and background information that was helpful in contextualizing the research within its field (Bowen, 2009). Documents can also contain data that no longer can be observed, provide details that informants have forgotten, and can track change and development, which made it an important complement to the semi-structured interviews used in the study.

Procedures

The research study included several steps to identify a participant pool and to collect data for review. To begin, potential research participants were identified through the Vermont Department of Education (DOE) public school directory. The Vermont DOE website provides information on public schools, school boards, and district superintendents throughout the state. This tool was used to identify school districts and superintendents that could provide for diverse comparisons when examining budgetary impacts. As a result, a pool of twenty-five superintendents were identified that were currently serving active contracts for their community (district and supervisory union levels). From this potential pool, the Vermont DOE website provided further information about Act 46 merger activity from 2015-2018. This data suggested that Vermont had voted to merge 151 school districts into 38 new unified districts, with each new community operating under a licensed superintendent. Given the nature of the study and
time commitment for semi-structured interviews, communities in excess of eighty miles were excluded from the research.

After the potential participant pool was identified by the researcher, individual superintendents were contacted via email regarding the nature of the study and establishing a request for their participation. If superintendents responded favorably to the email, a follow-up phone call was made by the researcher to explain the purpose of the study, as well as make clear their rights around confidentiality, participation, and withdrawal. During the phone conversation the researcher explicitly followed the telephone script that was submitted to the IRB before conducting the study, which concluded with a request for participation and opportunity for participants to ask clarifying questions. If a superintendent provided oral consent for participation in the study, they were informed that an electronic consent form and paper hard-copy would be provided before the start of their scheduled interview(s).

The semi-structured interviews were all to be held in a quiet and distraction-free environment, to minimize interruptions and also provide for a confidential and comfortable conversation. Superintendents were all offered an interview in a neutral and mutually agreeable location, or within their respective professional office space. The interviews were scheduled to range in duration from one hour to one and a half hours.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher employed the usage of a digital audio recording device to accurately collect and thus transcribe the data. The device was used with the full permission of each study participant, and was left in open view during the conversation. The use of an audio recording device is suggested for the collection of qualitative data and is in alignment to the recommendations for those undertaking IPA studies. Smith et al. (2009) contends that a semantic record of interviews provides an opportunity for the researcher to analyze data at a later
point, thus affording researchers the luxury to focus on each participants’ telling of their story without being distracted by vigorous note taking. The researcher verbally posed each question to participants during the interview, in addition to providing the protocol questions in paper format in an effort to increase comfort and also transparency. During the interviews it was the researcher’s goal to remain objective and neutral, striving to refrain from showing strong emotions in response to any of the participants’ answers or stories (Turner, 2010). To achieve this goal, a standard interview protocol was developed that included specific interview questions and related prompts.

Following each of the semi-structured interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, before being analyzed and provided to each participant for review. In the use of semi-structured interview techniques, the sharing of transcripts and subsequent analysis with participants allows for a greater degree of accuracy, reliability, and also validity of findings. This act of member-checking not only allows study participants to have access to the data and findings, but also lends itself toward a greater credibility of the study.

**Data Analysis**

This IPA study employed the analysis process known as the *Colaizzi method*, described by Shosha (2012) to include seven main steps for phenomenological studies:

1. Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content.

2. For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and line numbers.

3. Meanings should be formulated from these significant statements.

4. The formulated meanings should be sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes.
5. Findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.
6. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described.
7. Finally, a validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher’s descriptive results with their experiences (p. 33).

Colaizzi’s process for data analysis allows the researcher to build a description of the lived experience for Vermont superintendents. It includes understanding the data and identifying significant statements, which in turn are converted into formulated meanings. According to Shosha (2012), the accurate application of Colaizzi's process “provides researchers with an exhaustive description to the body of knowledge about human experience, and therefore would be an effective strategy to establish the basis for future research” (p. 42). Based upon this understanding, the researcher was then able to delve into a deep examination of the meaning gained from each participant.

**Deep Description and Analysis.** In adherence to the recommendations of IPA researchers, Larkin et al. (2006) suggest employing a level of descriptive analysis that captures the essence of phenomena as experienced by each study participant. By following Smith et al.’s (2012) suggestions to conduct a line-by-line analysis of each transcript, examining each independently of the others, significant statements can be found and categorized to later reveal trends related to the phenomena under study. This first and crucial phase of data analysis allowed the researcher to begin to understand the experience of Vermont superintendents.

To develop a deep description, after examining the verbatim transcripts and accounts of lived experiences, the researcher begins to work more with their notes. Smith et al. (2013) explain that at this stage, the researcher transforms their notes into emerging themes that are grounded in participants’ accounts. At first, the list of themes may be chronological, as they
come up in each transcript, but the next step includes an analytical reorganization to assist the researcher in connecting the themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Themes are ultimately compiled into broader emergent themes with coding represented from the original transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The purpose of this analysis is to find “convergences” and divergences” in the data “recognizing ways in which accounts from participants were similar but also different” (p. 73).

From the deep description and reorganization of themes, the researcher checked cross-case themes against all transcriptions in a form of Horizontalization. This phase of data analysis in IPA research allows for a greater degree of credibility and validity of findings, while also allowing similarities and differences to emerge from the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Once the final analysis was completed for all interviews, the researcher compiled the analysis into the results section, which provided a “narrative account” discussing the themes associated with accessibility awareness among participants.

Protection of Human Subjects and IRB Considerations

The intent of this research study was to explore the lived experience of Vermont superintendents as they worked to develop a budget for their organization during challenging fiscal times. The study was conducted in school districts and supervisory unions other than that of the researcher, so as to remove any influences or biases that may be present from previous interactions and/or relationships with administrators.

Extensive measures were employed to ensure the confidentiality of all participants, and to follow all IRB protocols. The informed consent procedure outlined by the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was followed. This study invited minimal risks and there were no direct benefits to study
participants. Two potential risks included the possibility of disclosure of confidential data, as well as loss of time for Vermont superintendents.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, the researcher used pseudonyms for participants in both interviews and comments “…as this allows the reader to follow the story of each individual through the analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 110). The names of each participant were removed from all data, graphs, and study findings. Additionally, all data was secured with password protection known only to the researcher as recommended by Cooper et al. (2012). The consent forms with the full names of participants were only available only to the researcher. A secure computer with password protection only known to the researcher was used, as well as an audio device with a numerical passcode. After a three-year period following the completion of the study and dissertation defense, all data will be destroyed (Smith et al., 2009) in a timely manner according to IRB guidelines. Data destruction will include a full wipe of the hard drives used to store study related data and recorded interviews. Only pseudonyms and non-identifying data were used in the final report. Loss of time for study participants was another possible risk. The estimated time involved for each participant in the study was three hours. This included time for the phone call, the initial interview, as well as the subsequent follow-up interview. All measures were taken to respect the needs and availability of study participants. As a result of each these steps to ensure confidentiality and the guard against extensive loss of professional time, it is believed that study participants were sufficiently protected from possible harm.

Credibility and Transferability

One of the goals of this qualitative study was to explore the various impacts upon superintendents’ understandings of and decisions relating to crafting budgets for their organizations. As such, a number to strategies were employed to maintain the credibility and
transferability of both the data and analysis. Creswell (2013) urges researchers to follow a validation strategy, to “facilitate the acceptance of qualitative research in a quantitative world” (p. 246). In order to ensure that the data collected was an honest reflection of the experience of participants, the researcher utilized a triangulation strategy, seeking evidence from multiple sources to validate themes and ideas (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, member checking allowed each study participant to review both transcripts and the analysis of data, ensuring a greater degree of accuracy and validity.

Regarding the transferability of the study and findings, the research was conducted at a variety of school districts throughout Vermont. As previously stated, study participants were selected based upon their involvement and experience as a superintendent during challenging fiscal times. As all participants represented communities from a variety of socio-economic and geographic regions, their experiences had a greater likelihood of being representative of professionals working with a range of diverse stakeholders and fiscal demands. Although this research specifically investigated the problem of practice through the eyes of Vermont superintendents, due to the idiographic nature of IPA research, study findings around decision-making and school budget development is transferable to superintendents and school boards in many regions throughout the country.

Self-Reflexivity and Transparency

Researcher reflexivity is a process that asks individuals to self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Hopkins, 2007). In order to investigate the problem of practice, the researcher needed to also be aware of the inherent dangers of researching without recognition of these factors. When conducting research within the IPA tradition, it is crucial to address ethical concerns associated with the interpretation and synthesis of meaning. During the data collection
phase of the study, the researcher acknowledged and bracketed biases while also taking steps to mitigate their potential impact upon the research. As Kezar & Lester (2010) caution, researchers must be cognizant of the ways in which their research may be impacted by their perceptions and experiences. Dodge, Ospina and Foldy (2005) urge researchers to use transparent communication regarding the purpose and methods used throughout the study, to avoid “re-storying.” To address and mitigate this threat, the researcher followed all deliberate steps to protect study participants in adherence to IRB requirements, and provided participants with repeated opportunities to review and provide feedback on all interview transcripts and the subsequent analysis.

**Limitations**

Qualitative analysis is often cited as being inherently subjective, as it requires the researcher to make judgments around analysis, identifying meaning, and assembling data (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Although there are many noted qualitative researchers who urge the field to demonstrate credibility, validity, and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013), critics claim that a general lack of rigor often renders this research devoid of usefulness. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher followed the strategies offered by Creswell (2013) and other scholars (Creswell & Miller, 2000) to minimize threats to credibility such as member checking, triangulation, and peer reviews.

Secondly, given the idiographic nature of IPA research, it is possible that study findings may not be generalizable or relatable to larger audiences. To mitigate this potential limitation, and ensure that study findings would be of interest to superintendents beyond the geographic region under review, the researcher followed the protocol established by Polkinghorne (1989) for phenomenological researchers:

- Did the interviewer influence the contents of the participants’ descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the participants’ actual experience?
• Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?

• In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the researcher identified these alternatives?

• Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?

• Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations? (as cited in Creswell, 2014, p. 260).

In adherence to the documented reliability and credibility criteria for qualitative studies, this researcher ensured that the research was well grounded and supported, allowing for findings to be of interest to a larger professional population than those directly under study.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The goal of this research was to garner a stronger understanding of the decision-making process of Vermont superintendents working to build balanced budgets for their newly merged districts. As the intent was to understand the experiences of superintendents navigating Vermont’s Act 46 while dealing with reorganization and fiscal uncertainty, the research was guided by a single overarching research question: What processes, meaning making, and values guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting a budget for their organization during challenging fiscal times? This section begins with a brief description of the five study participants and the communities they serve as superintendent of schools. Following the descriptions of participants, the themes that emerged from the interviews and data collection is described. Finally, a summary of research findings is presented for review.

Study Participant Portrayals

Five practicing Vermont superintendents participated in the research study. At the time of the research and interviews, each of the superintendents was employed full time, in districts that were each fully operational under the umbrella and timeline according to Vermont’s Act 46 merger language. Each of these superintendents served in geographically varied regions of the state, with student enrollment numbers ranging from 900 to 4,000 students, and poverty percentages between 10% and 80%. Every community in this study was governed by a newly merged unified school board, operating within a town meeting format and voting on budgets through an Australian ballot system. The relatively small population in each of the districts, combined with diverse statistics but similar political and governance structures, allows for comparison and contrast in how superintendents navigate and understand their experiences with budgeting and their communities.
Presented next is a brief description of each study participant, including their professional experiences and also the communities in which they serve as acting superintendent. Additionally, the ways in which each superintendent engaged with their community to bring about a successful merger and consolidation, and how they experienced challenges in the early days of Act 46, is described within the context of their communities. In alignment with IPA, the description serves to highlight the superintendents’ perceived struggles, priorities, and values, while also capturing the essence of their engagement with their communities. In each of the participant profiles, superintendents and their communities were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Following participant portrayals, a cross-case analysis of emergent themes is offered.

**Superintendent #1.** The first study participant, Mr. Browne, has been the Superintendent of his School District since 2013. He has worked in education both locally and internationally since 1990, serving as teacher, high school principal, and superintendent. Mr. Browne holds a Doctorate in Education Leadership and also a Master’s Degree in international education.

Mr. Browne led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of around 1,700 students, serving 9 different schools in 7 individual towns. Free and reduced lunch numbers varied greatly throughout the district, as did enrollment numbers, staffing patterns, and programs offered. In the 2014-2015 academic year, community members, board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and parents worked together to build a vision for what they wanted to see in their schools. After performing a needs assessment, and reaching out to the greater community, Mr. Browne and his team affirmed that they had exceptional community involvement, dedicated and committed educators, and a strong infrastructure to support student success. What they were missing, however, was a strong and articulated system that would allow them to innovate and grow as a newly merged district.
Mr. Browne and his team developed a Strategic Plan as a progressive roadmap to guide their merger work in developing a more personalized, engaging educational experience for students in each of the 9 schools. This plan was guided by their Vision and Mission statements, which reflected shared community beliefs in education and its role in the development of articulate, committed, and successful citizens. Although Mr. Browne recognized that it would take great energy and dedication to move his district forward with the merger and the Strategic Plan, in reflecting upon student achievement data over time, he found that their averages had stayed relatively flat. He pushed for consistent effort to closely examine their data and systems, and work to support increased student and community engagement. Mr. Browne, over the course of the interview, repeatedly recognized the need to ‘think and act differently’ to be able to support each student in developing to his or her full potential.

When approaching the merger and Strategic Planning, Mr. Browne and his team developed Action Teams, who worked with the community to develop three foundational goals that would guide their direction over the next five years. They developed a targeted supervisory union-wide indicator system using multiple measures to gauge student achievement outcomes and the impact of the Strategic Plan.

Mr. Browne presented as a committed and thoughtful leader, who seeks to engage with his community to rethink and reshape the educational experience through greater student voice and a move towards inquiry-based educational systems. He often paused to reflect before responding to any of the interview questions, and frequently asked the interviewer about her opinion or thoughts. It was clear from the interview that when considering mergers, school finance, and student success, Mr. Browne held three core beliefs. First, Mr. Browne consistently emphasized the importance of “voice” at the student level, at the school building level, at the
committee and board level, and also at the overall community level. He noted when asked about budgetary decisions and stakeholders, “People want to know where they connect and where their voice can be heard.” Secondly, Mr. Browne clearly valued engagement, at a variety of levels and with a range of stakeholders. During the interview, Mr. Browne discussed changes in governance and a shift to a single identity as a unified district, as a necessary “paradigm shift.” When thinking about unification, and the implications upon budgeting, Mr. Browne noted that conversations and engagement at every level was necessary in working together and finding success. In thinking about his own personal vision, he highlights student engagement. “We want students to be more engaged. We want to think differently and out of the traditional paradigms that were in our heads from when we were in school.” Lastly, Mr. Browne was exceedingly clear that he valued equity, in terms of student experience, programs, cultures, and staffing. When thinking about the budget, he noted, “We started to talk about what equity means in terms of budgeting. How do we move from these cultures, which have been really different in the past, to one where everyone might not get exactly the same amount, but we’re closer?”

Superintendent #2. The second study participant, Mr. Davis, had served in his current role since 2014, prior to working in a neighboring community as both a superintendent and also high school principal. Mr. Davis has his Master’s and Doctoral degrees in educational leadership and was recognized by the state and School Board’s Association (VSBA) for providing exceptional leadership under Act 46. Additionally, Mr. Davis also serves on a variety of state and local boards and committees and has been a very vocal supporter of school mergers and state-wide equity definitions.

Mr. Davis led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,700 students, merging three former school districts into one unified district serving three communities. Demographics,
including school enrollment numbers, varied significantly in the three communities, with free and reduced lunch rates also ranging between 25% and 80%. Mr. Davis credited Vermont’s Act 46 for being the catalyst that allowed the merger and reorganization to happen but noted that he and the board chair always had felt that consolidation was the “right thing to do for kids.”

To begin the merger work, Mr. Davis and the board chair formed a study committee, held a variety of community forums to educate people, and took nearly a year to have equity conversations and do the work that led up to the community votes. Mr. Davis noted a variety of struggles in consolidation having to do with different “cultures” or histories between the communities, but highlighted discrepancies or differences in finances, debts, and assets as being most difficult for individuals to understand and accept. Although it was not an easy year, Mr. Davis and his committee eventually called the vote, which passed by a margin of three to one in each of the three communities. Additionally, each of the communities also voted for 10 school board members to represent them on the new unified board, instead of individuals representing only the town in which they reside.

According to Mr. Davis, merging a union of schools can be both complicated and time consuming, but also very rewarding. He noted that the new school board and his leadership team had to work on many issues, such as budget, curriculum, policies, and mission. He and the school board worked to develop and approve a five-year plan to ensure that items were well planned and accomplished in a timely, but not rushed, manner. Mr. Davis highlighted the importance of creating a strong and effective budget that continued the quality educational programs he and the communities expected, while also keeping costs down. That work also served to begin the process of ensuring equity for all students in their new school district.
Mr. Davis explained that he thought they were in the middle of a very exciting time for their area and its schools. He expressed a deep belief that each of the three communities shared strong educational values, and each was exceedingly proud of the high-quality education that students receive in the schools. Mr. Davis highlighted how bringing the three communities together, around shared values, truly enabled them to expand upon a tradition of quality while also reducing costs through efficiencies in a shared system. He explained that “unification is allowing our educational governance structure to reflect our shared values and direct our collective efforts to what matters – our students; we will optimize opportunities for our students while better serving our taxpayers.”

Mr. Davis presented as an extremely genuine and devoted educator, committed to his communities both personally and professionally. He is well known and trusted in his district, and as a long-time resident, he also serves on a variety of community boards and groups that allow him access to the voices of his constituents. Throughout the interview, three themes emerged that are descriptive of his core beliefs as an educational leader. First, Mr. Davis accentuated the importance of “students first” both literally and more symbolically, throughout the conversation. His school board’s new mission statement incorporates the language of this mantra into its language, and they have even declared “children first and foremost” as one of the core values leading their work. When asked about his personal beliefs and values, Mr. Davis joked, “I assume you must mean more than education in general, because obviously that is what I value. Student learning; students first.” Secondly, Mr. Davis shared that the only way he believes a merged district or any organization can be successful, is through collaboration. “Within a merged district, my value and priorities are collaboration and working together. Also, not working in silos. Thinking of ‘we’ and not ‘I.’” Mr. Davis repeatedly noted that he believes his district can
go a lot further when things are done together instead of separately, across all areas of curriculum, programming, and educational component. Lastly, Mr. Davis values equity, and has even served on a state committee to develop common language and definitions to ensure that this work is able to happen. Within a merged district, Mr. Davis says that areas of inequity seem to be more easily addressed and even visible. When asked about equity in his district and specific examples, he commented “I talk all the time, and say equity doesn’t necessarily mean equal. Everybody needs a pair of boots, but those boots don’t mean anything unless they fit. And they are going to fit differently on different people. We have to talk about those things.”

Superintendent #3. The third research participant, Mr. Yardley, began his career as a substitute teacher and football coach, transitioning into full-time teaching as a middle and high school social studies teacher. During his tenure in education, he has served as a coach, athletic director, assistant principal, principal and superintendent. He taught and served in a variety of states before moving to Vermont, transitioning to his current role as Superintendent of Schools in 2014. He holds a BS in History and Secondary Education and a MA in Educational Leadership. Mr. Yardley actively shares that he is committed to the belief that all students can learn at their own unique, high levels and that communities benefit from outstanding schools that serve students with quality leadership, consistent care and relentless focus.

Mr. Yardley led a PK-12 district with only about 900 students, making it the smallest organization in the study, although not unique to many areas in Vermont. Prior to the merger each of the 5 schools in his district operated as single entities, but with the reorganization they are now seeing a lot more cohesion in both people’s thinking and also the programming and services provided to students. Although each of the schools in Mr. Yardley’s district share fairly consistent free and reduced lunch percentages, total enrollment and class sizes differ quite a bit,
with two schools offering multi-age offerings due to enrollment numbers, while others offer only traditional options.

Mr. Yardley began his story by noting that they have been able to seize upon the momentum created through merger, realignment, and lots of hard work by faculty and staff to position their schools as premier places for students to learn and educators to work. He shared that he thinks they are just beginning to see a situation that they anticipated, where schools and districts from Vermont and New England are beginning to look to them for guidance on implementing personalized learning for students, flexible pathways toward graduation, and the tenets of Act 77, which greatly reshaped the context and lay of the land for education in Vermont. He noted that he firmly believes his community deserves recognition from other places, and also that their students deserve the best schools that they can access. He added that all of this needs to happen “at a cost that our taxpayers can support.”

In thinking about his early experiences leading a newly merged district, Mr. Yardley discussed it as a fairly positive process that was akin to “ripping a band-aid off” and moving forward with a sense of urgency and purpose. He believes his team and the board are beginning to formulate their vision and direction for the coming years. Mr. Yardley works to ask important questions of stakeholders and leaders, trying also to identify the big questions that they should be asking. These include: “How do we ensure that the school experience is one that magnetically attracts students to engage and immerse themselves in learning? How do we embrace the history of our communities while boldly looking to the future? How do we keep all of our schools in each of our towns viable, thriving, and ultimately - amazing? How do we embrace the uniqueness of each of our towns and integrate that uniqueness and the assets that exist into the school experience in those communities? How do we distinguish ourselves as the premier school
district in Vermont and New England, while attracting new families and generating the intangible benefits to communities that come from outstanding schools? How do we do all of this with an eye toward efficiency, affordability, and quality?” To do this work, and answer these questions, Mr. Yardley notes that he must consistently engage with each of his communities in a way that meets their needs and recognizes their voices.

Mr. Yardley presented as an extremely engaging, passionate, and experienced educational leader, enthusiastically sharing experiences from his current role while comparing it to work in other states. When talking about his personal vision, he explained how deeply committed he is to public education, and shared how he believes “public education is the infrastructure project for our country.” Throughout the course of the interview, it became clear that Mr. Yardley had two other major premises and core beliefs that guide his work as a school superintendent in Vermont. First, Mr. Yardley values community, and finds it necessary to celebrate and support the uniqueness of each of his small schools and the constituents that reside in those town. He notes that “in a district like ours, with 4 separate communities, communication can be a huge challenge because each little town wants information delivered to them in their own unique way that works for them.” He continued to note that although the challenge exists, he has to focus on understanding where people are coming from, and “trying to understand themes from the voices and hear what they are saying loudly, but also maybe silently not saying.” The second belief evidenced from the interview centers on ethical leadership, and Mr. Yardley’s desire to be a person of principle and character. He asserted, “I want to make good ethical decisions always… But choosing how you make those decisions and how you play the long game, as opposed to the short game, is really important.”
**Superintendent #4.** The fourth research participant, Superintendent Pockette, has served in her district for 20 years. She earned her undergraduate degree in education and her Master’s degree in educational leadership. She worked as a principal at one of her local sites for several years, before transitioning to the Department of education. Feeling somewhat dissatisfied by work at the state level, and also hoping to return to schools and teachers, Ms. Pockette rejoined her current district where she has served as superintendent for the past 12 years.

Ms. Pockette led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of close to 4,000 students, making hers one of the largest in the state and consequently, the research study. Serving five different schools and their communities, Ms. Pockette’s free and reduced lunch rates were lower than others in the study, but with significantly higher populations of English language learners. Prior to the merger, in her first 10 years as superintendent, Ms. Pockette had to contend with 7 different boards and 34 board members. She did note, however, that despite 7 boards and different work plans for each, “from even before I was hired, our SU was on the path to doing as much consolidated work as we could, short of governance. We had one contract, and by the time we merged we already had a single contract for both our professional and support staffs. So we didn’t have that issue to deal with.”

In terms of the merger and consolidation work, despite her SU’s consistent levels of collaboration, it took Vermont’s Act 46 to push the communities towards accepting and voting in favor of unification. “So when Act 46 came up, there were major incentives. Right? There’s the tax incentive, but also the behind-the-scenes hammer, that if you don’t do this, we still might do it to you. That changes and leverages a very different kind of conversation.” Although Ms. Pockette’s communities voted overwhelmingly in favor of the merger, she noted that “that’s
when the hard work really starts.” Repeatedly throughout the interview, Ms. Pockette commented on the amount of time that the work, the merger, and the relationships can take.

In Ms. Pockette’s first full year of consolidation, the goal of the board was to ensure equity and autonomy across the district at a cost that their communities would support. To that end, she and her team worked to develop a matrix that would allow them to make standard comparisons of educational resources (number of teachers, para-educators, administrators, and other support personnel e.g.) to understand the differences that exist, to distinguish between what is merely a different way of doing things and what is either less effective or inequitable. Additionally, this matrix also served to allow her team to determine items that could be addressed in year one, compared to what might require a multiyear plan. In the beginning of the merger, the district chose to focus on class size, essential arts opportunities, administrator ratios, and their intervention framework. Their work was done in collaboration with local school administration, and Ms. Pockette firmly believes that it resulted in a substantially equitable system that still allows for local autonomy, a fact that is of crucial import to her communities.

Ms. Pockette presented as a very sociable and engaged educational leader for her communities, demonstrating consistency and commitment, as well as genuine regard for her team. Easily the most tenured of each of the study participants, it was refreshing to observe her enthusiasm and joy for her work, her district, and the consolidation process. Throughout the interview, three core beliefs surfaced as being crucial to Ms. Pockette’s work. First, she is unwaveringly devoted to building relationships. She repeatedly referred to the work necessary at the student, staff, board, and community level, noting that work takes time but there needs to be a direct link and relationship between each of those groups. At the district leader level, Ms. Pockette’s admiration and close professional relationships with her director of learning and
director of student services was evident, with staff frequently referring to them by an amalgamation of their three names. Second, Ms. Pockette has a clear focus on innovation, and all that it means and can bring to her district. For years before the actual merger, she and her team were constantly working to “think outside the box” and push the SU forward both educationally and fiscally. When discussing what she prioritizes, she noted “I value and support being a district that is always thinking and looking ahead – where will our kids be and what can we give them?”

Later in the interview, she again referred to her commitment to be the type of leader that supports this, “I support a go-ahead card that says be innovative, be creative, be progressive, and make it fun! But not just fun; make learning fun.” Finally, Ms. Pockette undoubtedly values equity within her district and the opportunities it provides to students. For the past two years, she has led her district in building an equity and autonomy matrix, focusing on staffing, resources, programs, and a variety of other educational components in her schools. “Obviously because everyone’s money goes into the same pot, we wanted to make sure that the kids in one community were getting the same opportunities as kids in another.” This required some tough conversations, but Ms. Pockette ultimately ensured that everyone could see that “this is where we are…we can’t stay here,” in terms of ratios of teachers to students and resources in each of the district’s schools.

**Superintendent #5.** The final research participant, Ms. Carroll, came to her SU in 2014. Serving in VT since 1994, Superintendent Carroll functioned previously as a special educator, special services director, and also superintendent before joining her SU. She has her Master’s degree in addition to a CAGS in educational leadership and serves on a variety of local and state boards to support the profession and also her community.
Ms. Carroll led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 1,500 students. When she joined the SU prior to the merger, her 8 towns and their community schools required her to work with 11 school boards and close to 100 school board members. Although she notes the original governance structure often felt overwhelming, their SU already had already centralized special education, transportation, finance, and curriculum prior to the consolidation, which she added “made a lot of things easier for us to go through the merging process.” Enrollment numbers and free and reduced lunch rates vary significantly between the schools in the district, with some schools only housing 30 students while others serve over 500. Of the superintendents interviewed, Ms. Carroll’s district has the most interesting and unique governance structure, shifting from 11 school boards serving 8 towns, to 2 distinct unified districts with newly merged schools. Additionally, one of the unified districts has opened up school choice as a result of their merger.

In reflecting on their first year of unification, Superintendent Carroll noted that they focused their lens on the equity of opportunities for all students, while keeping an eye on fiscal sustainability. In the interview, she discussed a few highlights of their progress in both areas. Beginning in the fall of 2017, two schools merged to create a PreK - 6th grade program that was spread over 2 campuses. This change allowed for class sizes that were slightly larger, with peer groups that were appropriate for every grade. Ms. Carroll firmly believed that it also allowed them to focus support at each setting based upon the grades served. Using staff attrition and looking at opportunities, she noted that they were also able to move teachers from one building to another, sharing staff across buildings rather than reduce employment. She added, “This led to less turnover and greater staffing stability as we started to ‘right size’ our district in the face of declining enrollment.”
Another highlight, according to Ms. Carroll was that their middle school model also got a long overdue and deep review, ultimately bringing consistency to grades five and six across the district, as students prepare to attend the one unified high school. Summer school programs, noted Ms. Carroll, also made changes for consistency and equity of opportunity. One school was able to partner with the Town Rec program to give students a more enriching, longer day program, while another school did the same, but also opened their doors to children from two of the smaller schools. In-district elementary school choice also began in the fall of 2017. According to Ms. Carroll, “The opportunity for choice helped families for a variety of reasons and met family needs and student learning styles.”

One very large piece of work since the merger, is the districts’ work to update a current Mission and Vision statement, as their administrative team set goals for the coming future. TMs. Carroll noted that their goals included a focus on early literacy, with the introduction of a single reading program in all kindergarten classrooms in the district. The goals also included ensuring all students would get what they needed to learn, and that all classroom instruction would be of the highest quality.

Ms. Carroll presented as a very outgoing and sociable superintendent and is highly regarded throughout the state and her communities. She was warm and very good natured, easily sharing her story and the “pains” and “gains” associated with school consolidation and budgeting. From the interview, three major beliefs emerged as guiding the work of Ms. Carroll and also her 2 unified districts. First, Ms. Carroll believes in engagement at every level: students, staff, families, and the larger community. Ms. Carroll noted that “My personal vision for public education would be that we have an engaging curriculum that engages students’ minds as well as their hearts. And also that we collaboratively develop the best potential in every student that we
can.” Second, Ms. Carroll highly values and demonstrates a commitment to relationships and communication. Repeatedly throughout the interview she discussed how important it is for her to be approachable and also reachable, noting the incorporation of a “Let’s Talk” communication tool that allows her to get input from everywhere and everyone. “One of the first things I did when I came here was to create a communication tool that shoots any messages to me and any administrator in the district, really to the top of the pile. It tracks both topics, and also our responses, so that we can be really responsive.” Ms. Carroll not only values relationships and communication, but also her responsiveness to the community and their needs. Finally, Ms. Carroll, quite like the other study participants, has a clear and steady eye on equity in the district, while also noting the importance of efficiency in making that happen. She repeatedly referred to her desire to have a district that is “students first,” as the first and foremost lens. To do this, she believed the district had to have a cost and system efficient and centralized system, that allowed every student to get their needs met at the classroom level in each of the schools.

Based on the participant profiles, and also on their experiences and stories related to budgeting and school consolidation, several themes emerged as being related to how superintendents make funding decisions for their newly merged districts and communities. The subsequent section presents the superordinate themes.

**Emergent Themes**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis directs researchers to understand a certain phenomenon or question through the experiences of others, which may or may not be unique for each participant. In adhering to the IPA tradition, the interview transcripts were reviewed using an inductive approach, to aid an understanding of meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data. Cross-case analysis was
employed to allow the researcher to generate themes related to how superintendents experienced decision-making and budgeting for their newly merged districts (Appendix C). Based upon this analysis, the data illustrated that VT superintendents understood the process of making decisions and building budgets in their merged districts in a variety of ways that were unique to their context, however, common themes arose. Five emergent themes were identified: (1) building and sustaining relationships, (2) understanding the voices and perspectives of stakeholder groups, (3) collaborative culture and leadership, (4) commitment to a shared vision and purpose, and (5) equity in the newly merged district. Importantly, there existed both similarities and also differences in each superintendent’s experience within the five emergent themes. Consequently, various subthemes are described that detail the complexities facing school superintendents consolidating their district and merging a variety of stakeholder voices and priorities within their local context. For example, the subthemes that emerged within building and sustaining relationships were recognizing shifted relationships and roles and cultivating new relationships. Description of the five emergent themes and the associated subthemes is presented next, framed within the context of the research study participants’ experiences.

**Building and Sustaining Relationships**

Over the course of this research, which includes both a review of relevant literature and also a reflection upon the experience of VT superintendents navigating significant change in their communities and governance, one of the most critical aspects that arose dealt with the relationships superintendents had with those around them. Each of the study participants repeatedly referred to their relationships with other leaders, their boards, and their community as being exceedingly important to their work as a superintendent, and also the overall sustainability and success of their organization. Once defined, understood, and established, these relationships
facilitated the overall merger process and the development of a newly unified school district budget. However, it is important to point out that within these relationships, superintendents reflected upon shifting roles that impacted their work, and also the necessity to remain committed to these relationships as they continued to move their districts forward. The following two subheadings, shifted relationships and roles, and cultivating and sustaining relationships, illustrate superintendents’ understanding of their experience within this theme.

**Shifted Relationships and Roles**

Participants in this study all noted a significant change in the relationships between themselves and individuals in each of the communities, schools, and boards as a result of their merger or unification. Relationship changes included those between the superintendents and individual communities, those between the superintendents and school boards, those between the principals and school boards, and ultimately the relationship between district leadership teams. Tying directly into these changed relationships is the understanding that “shifted roles” and responsibilities associated with a merged district and new governance structure impact the ways in which individuals are able to function together and do the work of their organization.

**Superintendents and Communities.** In the first category of shifted relationships and roles, changes between superintendents and individual communities were seen in each of the interview contexts, attributed to the merger and the unification of individual districts into one governing body. Superintendent Davis noted that the merger had created a board with representatives from each town, voted at large, and representing all students in each of the schools. This shift created less of a direct link between superintendents and each of their communities because the voices they hear are often less individual and more focused on the district needs overall. Superintendent Davis commented:
They are representing all kids and all towns. We do get a lot of community feeling from the board members from each town, because they talk to us about what’s happening and how people are feeling, but it certainly isn’t the same as going out into each of those towns all the time. We get some input from each community. But part of it is subjective.

Additionally, Superintendent Davis noted that they no longer get input from each community on every single decision, because they trust that the board is able to offer a representative voice. He continued by adding:

For everything little thing that comes out, we don’t canvas the communities any more. Any decision we make, all our board meetings are televised and folks do watch it. We do not do, even though the VSBA (Vermont School Boards’ Association) is very big on it, go out and get input from the community on everything. We don’t do a lot of community forums, although we did many forums for our merger, which was very helpful.

Superintendent Brown echoed the challenge of shifting from individual communities to a single organization, and highlighted how it impacts the relationship and level of discourse that occurs:

We started talking about what it means to be a single organization. We talked about what it means to be an SU and about what it means to have a single identity. One of the challenges that came after the strategic plan was written, was that we realized that for us to do anything significant, it was going to not have the consent of every single member of every community. That is near impossible and our governance structure doesn’t allow us to do that.
In his comments, Superintendent Yardley talked about how positive the process had been overall but noted challenges when individual communities lost the ability to directly make decisions that impacted only their students. This shift in ownership and change in communication and relationship between individual towns and the superintendent further trickles down to unique needs in specific contexts. Superintendent Yardley highlighted a challenge in meeting the communication needs of distinct towns in his district:

I’ve learned that in a district like ours with 4 separate communities, communication is a huge challenge, because every little town wants information delivered to them in their own unique way that works for them. I’ve got towns that love to use Front Porch forum and they are all over Facebook and will even get on Twitter once in a while. They can handle information that way. I’ve got other towns who want you to knock on their door and hand them a flier to let them know what’s going on. So figuring out how to use district resources, in terms of time and communication, to get information out to people, is a big tricky challenge that we’re still trying to figure out.

One of the relationship and information changes that Superintendent Pockette noted in her district surrounded budget meetings and how they disseminate information to individual communities. In a district like hers, with 7 distinct communities, information sharing and communication becomes a challenge that needs to get sorted out. She explained:

Because everybody used to have a local budget, those meetings always happened there. That meant seven budgets and seven meetings to get that information out and talk to those communities. So now, there’s one budget. So we decided, and this is our 2nd year, that we would still schedule the budget meetings in each of the communities. And people do show up for those meetings, but what they got was so wildly different. Because we do
instructional programming one night in one town, and facilities another night in another town. Then we do special ed one night, and buildings and operations another. So you know what I mean? Each town is getting and hearing something different. So depending on what your community is getting, even though we made sure in 2 years we didn’t do the same thing in the same community, it still is very different. We just went around the horn alphabetically to figure it out.

Superintendent Pockette further explained that the reorganization, while helping cut down on meetings and further centralizing everything, did impact relationships with each individual community. She added that her board and team recognize that they must continue addressing ways to guarantee everyone has access to all information, regardless of their town, and are already planning next year’s budget meetings to ensure that this happens consistently.

In her interview, Superintendent Carroll talked about the necessity to continue working with each community to get their voice and perspective but noted how the shift in governance changed what the term “community” really meant. She offered:

We really try and identify important places in each community that you can hang out and talk to people. You know, stores, coffee shops, weigh stations. Board members have to reach out to their circles in each town and bring back information, but it certainly isn’t a scientific process. We do a tv show to highlight the schools and don one specifically around the budget. I also use the Let’s Talk tool and I really do get a lot of comments. But I feel like it’s still missing a voice. The other piece that has changed is that the people who come to our forums, often don’t hear the other voices in the community. The board might, and I might, but the general parent community doesn’t really hear or understand what the larger community outside them is saying. Defining what community is and
means is important, so everyone understands that there are voices beyond the room. I
don’t know; 14 years and I still haven’t figured that one out. I just keep trying.

Superintendent Carroll recognized that in moving from eleven schoolboards to two, has changed
relationships and the general definition of community. Although the move from individual
fiefdoms has been positive and helpful in many ways, she describes the need to notice changes
for community members, and how it impacts their overall voice and also
relationships.

**Superintendent and School Boards.** Another significantly shifted relationship found in
the analysis was between the superintendent and their school boards. In newly merged districts,
in each of the five participants’ experience, governance changed dramatically as boards went
from many, to one or a few. This shift not only changed the work of the school boards, but in
most instances, strengthened and deepened the relationship between each board and their
superintendent. Superintendent Carroll jokingly explained the previous relationships with
multiple boards as often being overwhelming and not allowing for close relationships:

> At that time, we had eleven schoolboards and I have eleven school board meetings. I
> think I spent my entire first year in the SU just saying, “where am I going tonight? Who
> am I talking to? What board are you on?” It was really, really tough.

Superintendent Pockette further illustrated the awesome oversight required when working with
many boards:

> For ten of my twelve years, we were a supervisory union with seven boards and thirty-
four board members. We have five schools and 4,000 kids. That’s a lot. And really, that
meant thirty-four distinct board members serving in the roles of fifty-one board members,
because some also served on the SU board.
Overall, each superintendent made mention of the drastic shift in the number of meetings when moving from separate entities to one merged or unified system. This shift also allowed superintendents to form more meaningful relationships with each of their new boards and the members serving in those leadership roles in their communities. Superintendent Davis noted that previous to the merger, he often felt like an outsider at many of the board meetings, because he was somewhat removed and individual board members often went to the principals for information:

The superintendent was really the outsider. So they were all a little worried, about coming into a centralized board that is now run by the superintendent… but they are all really pleased with what has come out of it.

Superintendent Yardley discussed the changed relationships and work of the board and superintendent when discussing the specifics of the budget approval process in his merged district. He explained:

Our system since then has worked relatively well. We now have a finance committee, which is one of our five board committees. We are able to have buildings and grounds, finance, policy, personnel, and negotiations. Those are the groups that they work in. The finance committee is able to meet with the superintendent and the business manager, and sometimes other members of our administrative team. It really works well. They give us parameters to start with.

Overall, each superintendent noted that the shift in governance allowed their boards to function at a much higher level, doing governance and vision work as related to the budget and overall mission. Since the mergers in each of the districts, study participants each noted how the work of
their respective boards now centers around various committees that oversee all areas of education, with a high level of trust and transparency between superintendents and board members.

**Principals and School Boards.** At the building level, the unification of school systems also led to a shifted relationship between individual principals and their school boards. Prior to the merger, most building principals had a significant amount of oversight and local power, that has since shifted to the superintendent. Superintendent Carroll noted that although budgeting has been more efficient since the merger, the change for building principals has been difficult. She explained:

> For principals, there was this huge paradigm shift, because it used to be that building principals could go to their boards and advocate for what they needed. One principal might have gone to the board and advocated for Spanish, but a principal down the road had to cut foreign language. So principals used to have a lot more direct control over financial decisions. So it’s led to a sort of grieving process for many of our principals. The decisions are now made more at my level, with principals’ input. That’s hard, but at the same time, we’ve been able to take advantage of some real opportunities because of our merger to get more students ready to enter high school than ever before. And I think principals see the benefit of that, even though they’ve lost some ability to maneuver. They don’t miss board meetings, but that ability to maneuver finances has been tough.

Superintendent Pockette also explained that the overall adjustment of principals in terms of their relationships and responsibilities had taken some time. She noted:
It all takes time. It even takes time to adjust to, what’s the new relationship between the principals and the board? When we were organized as an SU, there was a direct link between board members and the principals. And now there isn’t, and I’m seeing a clear difference in the schools. When I had my mid-year evaluation meetings with principals it was really clear – our principals are now doing more instructional leadership. They are in classroom more. But some of them are grieving that they don’t have to do buses, transportation, budgets, and food services. I’m saying that sarcastically, but some of them really are. They were good at it, and now they aren’t involved in it anymore. So that really plays into what the transition looks like. All the growing pains.

In his interview, Superintedent Yardley highlighted the work to build cohesion, noting that changes for principals rated as one of the most difficult. He explained:

One of the bigger and more unanticipated challenges and changes had to do with principal leadership. In single district entities, when one elementary school was the district or single school, principals were used to having their hands in pretty much everything. In a unified structure, you don’t need that anymore. You have people to look at the broader spectrum of services and supports, so principals are able to focus on instruction and climate/culture, and the things principals want to do. But really, a tough transition for some folks that were used to having their hands in pretty much everything. There was a little bit of loss. Loss of pull and loss of influence. We’ve navigated that, but I honestly didn’t see it coming.

Superintendent Davis echoed the theme of loss for principals in the newly merged district, but offered hope as the new roles and relationships opened the door for greater levels of efficiency. He explained the loss and shift for principals by noting:
I think most principals went through the grieving process, although they are at number five now. They don’t have that loss anymore. They love the new board, although they were definitely worried at first. It’s true in most places in Vermont. There was this whole thing that principals really used to, for all intents and purposes, run their own board.

On the whole, although each superintendent noted a significant change for building principals and their direct link to boards and fiscal decision making, the process of merging has ultimately offered them more freedom to run their buildings and focus on the work of schools. The shifted roles and responsibilities, and also level of relationship, although initially upsetting, has been positive in a variety of ways.

**Building Leaders and Central Office Administrators.** The final shifted relationship noted in each of the participants’ accounts was that which existed between individual building leaders and also central office administration. Superintendent Davis used the reorganization of his district to develop a strong leadership team, as well as build regularly scheduled meetings, to help the transition process. He explained this as being necessary to the merger work:

The principals really fell into place too, which I thought was going to be much more challenging. I mean, we have some very strong and hard-headed principals who are philosophically very different and in different places. And yet, it’s pretty much there.

He went on further to explain how their relationships have evolved over time, and the necessity of building in time for them to work together. He noted:

One thing that was really important and worked for our school district was creating a leadership team and meeting on a regular basis. That is key to us working so well together. Pulling together those folks to meet three times a month, plus with central office
once a month, is really important. What’s really interesting is that in the beginning they would get right out of those meetings right after they were done. Now though, after our 2-hour meeting, they schedule things together because that’s their time together to talk about other things. You how it is as a building principal; that’s their time to talk to one another.

In her account, Superintendent Pockette noted how the merger allowed her leaders to all “get on the same page,” defining what leadership meant and how they could ensure that schools and students were getting their needs met. She explained:

That’s really the leverage of all of this. I would have said before that our leadership team was very tight and supportive, with nobody trying to keep resources for themselves. But that has just enabled the development of that even more. People really feel like they’re on a team; here for all kids, and fairness.

To get everyone on the same page in a unified system, Superintendent Yardley noted that having defined relationships with building principals was key to successful work. He explained, as he sought to hear and understand the voices of his principals:

It’s been really interesting. The first piece is having and establishing a strong relationship with my principals and being in the buildings on a regular basis so I can actually see what our population looks like and interact with parents. Prior to becoming a merged district, I was in each individual community a lot more and didn’t rely on the principals quite as much for that.
Therefore, the superintendents all needed to be cognizant of changed relationships between and across their newly merged districts to move their organization forward, and as the second subtheme exemplifies, they did so by building and sustaining their relationships.

**Cultivating and Sustaining Relationships**

The research participants universally detailed the belief that building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders was critical for ensuring the success of their organization and passing a school budget each year. Superintendent Yardley captures the importance of relationship building in his work, while noting the challenge of serving in a somewhat detached central office leadership role. He stated:

> On the human side, I want to take care of people and know that they have bills to pay, or also sometimes the newest teacher is the best one in the district. These things can sometimes tug at and frustrate you. As a superintendent, I can be a little removed from that, because I’m in the place where I make the decisions that force the principals to have to do some of that work. It’s an interesting place to be. I have to keep myself emotionally connected to the reality of it, and the people in it. That way I don’t lose track of the fact that we are dealing with people, and folks who have children and mortgages. Trying to be human through it all is really important; showing people that I’m human, without looking fake, is important. It’s a balancing act.

Superintendent Carroll talked about relationships with everyone in her district as being crucial to her work, and the mission of her schools. She explained her values as:

> I think I value most, the building of relationships as a way of motivating and engaging students in their education.
She went on to further explain that relationships are key in successfully building a budget that expresses the vision and mission of the district. She noted:

It really comes into play in how the budget building process is multi-layered. Relationships have to be a part of that, and stakeholders have to have input.

When dealing with difficult issues and shifting resources, Superintendent Carroll noted that relationships and trust enabled change to be enacted. She explained:

Change is hard. There’s no way around it. I’m still living the challenges. Initially, it goes to the board and the community comes to the board meeting and screams, “we’ve never heard this before!” The answer is, yes, you are right. You haven’t heard it before. There were no secret meetings where it was discussed before you knew about it, so you’re right; you didn’t hear about it before because I’m presenting it right now. And we’re going to go through this together, and we’re going to come out on the other side with something. And your voices, everyone’s voices, are important.

Superintendent Carroll’s efforts to build trusting relationships, at every level, led to the successful merger and passage of the school budget by a strong majority. Similarly, Superintendent Brown talked about transparency in conversations and frequent communication to build relationships and change the paradigm toward unity. He explained, “Obviously there’s a lot of fear involved in giving up power, and trusting other people. It’s hard, but it needs to happen to move us forward with governance work.” Superintendent Brown further discussed how important stakeholders are to the passage of budgets, and in terms of forming his budgetary decisions. He noted the value of relationships as being critical to the budget process:
It’s actually hard for me to think of a group that isn’t important or involved in some way. I think part of what you do in a unified system is construct who gets what decisions and where. Because people aren’t accustomed to that. There are some places where people are accustomed to going up to a board member, from the community, and working to get something shifted in a really small town. But when the board becomes more elevated and is doing more governance work, those decisions become more at an administrative level. So relationships and understanding are key and a really important part of it. People want to know where they can connect and where their voice can be heard. The community is a really critical part of the budget process.

In her interview, Superintendent Pockette could not think of a group or relationship that didn’t guide her organization’s work. She explained how collaboration and cohesion were necessary for a merged district, and how relationship building to get everyone on the same page was significant. In her district, when two schools and their leadership faced challenges regarding student supports and resource allocation, Superintendent Pockette pushed her time and attention toward the problem to offer support and solidify her relationship with the principals. She explained:

The director of student services and I, met in those schools, on our schedule by design, every week for half the year. To problem solve, to provide expertise, to provide direction, and provide support. In a way, that high level of support and relationship was one way we could address the problem and the inequity in the building.

Quite like the other participants, Superintendent Davis believed that building and nurturing relationships was key to a successful merger and the overall accomplishments of the new district.
He defined his philosophy as being based upon collaboration, and how the relationship building and systemic approach to decision making continues to guide his work. He noted:

My philosophy over funding decisions is definitely collaboration. We have to talk together, and know each other, as we make our decisions. So we have all sorts of systems in place for that and making sure it happens. Whether it be central office teams, or leadership teams. And we have to come to some consensus on where things go. Now I may be the final arbiter in things, but rarely do I ever have to say, “it has to be this way.” Everybody is in it for the right reasons. We all know that about one another.

**Conclusion.** To be successful as a school superintendent in Vermont, serving as the CEO of their organization, administrators need to be able to make decisions for their schools that are ultimately supported by their boards, their communities, and the leaders in their buildings. In a newly merged district, superintendents’ responsibilities multiply, as they are responsible for making decisions and passing budgets that meet the needs of unique communities in a single unified fiscal document. Each of the study participants described the importance of relationships in regards to building and passing their budgets in newly merged districts, while also recognizing the necessity of identifying and supporting changed roles and connections within this context. To be successful in the context of reorganized districts in Vermont, superintendents must be able to recognize shifting power and changed relationships impacting community members, school board commissioners, building and central office level leadership, and themselves, in order to move their organization forward with governance, budgeting, and priority setting.

With a recognition of shifted relationships and roles, Vermont superintendents navigating reorganization must also focus on building new relationships while fostering existing ones, if they are to do the work of passing budgets and supporting their districts. To further solidify these
relationships and move toward successful budgeting practices, superintendents must also work to hear the voices of individual community contexts and various stakeholders, to understand their values and priorities for schools and students.

**Understanding the Voices and Perspective of Stakeholders**

The second theme that emerged from the data was the desire of superintendents to understand the voices, perspectives, and values of the stakeholders within their district and communities. Especially in consideration of governance changes and reorganization, the superintendents expressed the need and desire to determine what was important for their communities. The following two subthemes, defining important stakeholders and gathering the voices of their communities, illustrate how superintendents experience this theme.

**Defining Important Stakeholders**

Superintendents identified a variety of stakeholders with whom they needed to engage in order to effectively navigate changes in their district, and also successfully pass a merged budget for their schools. Some stakeholders are those who officially participate in governance and budgeting, but many more do not. Superintendent Pockette identified a variety of stakeholders as being necessary for the successful merger vote and subsequent unified budget. In her comments, she explained the work and the individuals that needed to be considered:

When the board was meeting around the merger, the themes that I heard that relate to budget were really tied into equity. Because obviously, everyone’s money goes into the same pot and we wanted to make sure that the kids in one community were getting the same opportunities a kids in another. And also autonomy. They really didn’t want cookie cutter schools. We are a pretty innovative district, and people really pride themselves on
that. So consequently, they didn’t want to imagine that if we merged we would turn ourselves into everyone doing the same thing, and looking exactly the same, just because it was easier to sort everybody. So we really had to listen to everyone from the board, all the way to each community.

In his comments, Superintendent Brown recognized that stakeholders meant everyone. He echoed the belief that a variety of stakeholders were necessary for a successful merger vote and the move toward a unified budget for his district. He explained:

I meant it’s actually hard for me to think of a group that isn’t involved in some way I think part of what you do in a unified district is construct who gets what decisions, and where. Because people aren’t accustomed to that… people want to know where they can connect and where their voice can be heard. I think the community is a really critical part of the budget process. I think there’s not a shared understanding across the state about what community involvement looks like and to what degree.

In her view, Superintendent Carroll considered important stakeholders to be those who are important to the passage of the budget and are part of the community. She explained it occurring at a variety of levels, those impacted directly, and those impacted only fiscally in their taxes. She noted the stakeholders she considered in this comment:

Students are first and foremost. What is the best classroom environment that we can possibly create within the resources that the community can give us? That’s first. Then I think about the faculty and staff, who need to understand the process and what’s happening when, even though I think most don’t. Then I think parents need to understand, and also taxpayers beyond parents need to know what’s going on as well.
In his description, Superintendent Yardley echoed many of Superintendent Carroll’s comments, but also included a much heavier explanation of the value of school board members as stakeholders. In the consideration of passing a successful merged budget, Yardley expressed a significant need to focus on his school board and specific community populations. He contended:

The reality is that I have a board with eleven members, and six of them are seniors. I think that’s what they look at; what is the tax bill going to look like for me and my friends and neighbors, who might be living on fixed incomes. And that’s who votes for our budgets. In many ways, we aren’t constrained necessarily, but we also kind of are. If we had more young voters with a mindset that “if it’s good for kids, it’s for schools, and I can get behind it and pay for it,” I think things would be different. But we don’t have enough people who think about it or look at it that way. We have people who really want to protect pocket books and what people can afford.

When analyzing the various stakeholders identified in Superintendent Davis’s comments, he suggests a need to consider each and every community in his district. In a newly merged district, Davis notes that the process is easier, as he relies upon his board to serve as representatives of the stakeholder audience as a whole. To successfully pass the merger and build a unified board to get to that point, Davis noted that he had to consider a much larger audience. He explained in his comments:

We did a lot of work, a lot of forums, and had to talk to a lot of people. We spent close to a year to come to a vote. We had some struggles, not everybody wanted to do it, for the reasons we’ve heard all over the place. Not to mention, the town and the city don’t really speak to each other. And Forestville is seven miles away and didn’t know if they wanted to be part of the city at all! So there were struggles with it.
Beyond the obvious importance of school boards, communities, and the taxpaying voters in each category, study participants noted the importance of considering building principals, staff, and students as they create budgets for their newly merged districts.

Superintendent Yardley explained his focus on kids and schools, as he passionately explained his vision for education in his merged district. He pointed out that education is the foundation that everything is built upon, and believes that he has a responsibility to fund this foundation in his merged district. He commented:

Our business is to take what walks in our doors each day, and do the best we can for eight or ten hours, or however many hours kids are with us.

Yardley further explained his focus on kids and schools when budgeting as he described complex decisions related to pupil costs and tax rates. Yardley suggested that while being able to explain the tax rate and number is really important, it all boils down to schools and students. Yardley remarked:

I don’t want to be too simplistic, but ultimately I’ve approached it as regardless of what it does to the budget or tax rate, as long as I can justify it and know that it’s good for kids and our system, and follows along with the vision that the board has set out, I’ve felt comfortable with it.

Superintendent Pockette repeatedly expressed a commitment to students, her staff and building leaders throughout her interview. In consideration of budgeting and setting priorities, she explained:

The first thing I think of is kids. I’m a big advocate for kids and what they’re getting. It’s very easy to figure out if you have enough FTE, but what are the kids actually getting? So
I think the kids, which really comes through the principals and always having that lens. For me, the principals are an important stakeholder because they know their schools better than anyone. When things aren’t going so well, that’s when things get a little tougher to tease out and understand. Parents too, are definitely an important stakeholder group and the folks voting on our budget.

In consideration of budgeting and setting priorities for the district, Superintendent Carroll repeatedly referenced her schools and the students and staff within it. Conversations around class sizes and programs, in Carroll’s opinions, are ones that boil down to a focus on students. Carroll explained her high focus on student learning and opportunities in her comments:

Looking at research and what’s best for kids, and looking at statewide data on student and staff ratios and revisiting each line of our central office budget, and asking if the infrastructure we’ve developed is really supporting our classroom instruction and students, or not. What’s happening in the classroom is the first lens we look at, and then we build out. I almost see it as concentric circles from there. And what are these other concentric circles doing to support what’s happening in the classroom? And if they aren’t working to support what’s happening in the classroom, then we don’t need them.

In their comments, superintendents all described the relative importance among the different stakeholders, all considered critical in the development of a school budget. Analysis revealed that although some groups may be more peripheral than others, students, staff, leaders, families, and community were all centrally important to study participants. In newly merged districts, however, superintendents must also focus on gathering the voices and understanding the values of each of these groups, to develop a budget that meets the needs of their communities and schools.
Gathering Voices and the Stories of Communities

In order to move forward with governance changes, and also develop a budget that reflected the fiscal priorities of their newly merged districts, superintendents recognized the importance of understanding the values, perspectives, and priorities of each of their communities. Especially in the context of developing one larger unified budget document, that merged the priorities of several former school boards and communities, superintendents shared the desire to collect the voices of both the majority and minority in their district. Illustrating this notion, Superintendent Brown reflected upon ways that he considers values and hears the voices of each of his communities:

I think it can’t just start and end at the budget cycle. You’ve got to be working throughout the year to gather community understanding and vision, in an effort to guide your educational vision work. It’s bigger than just, where do we put our money? The budget cycle doesn’t allow enough time to do the work of assessment, in terms of what’s important to our community and what’s not. The budget cycle is reactive and quick. So you’ve got to do the work the other ten months of the year. I think that’s something that we are increasingly working to do; thinking outside of the budget season about the budget, so it’s not a separate process, but is part and parcel of what we want student to learn. And we want it more braided with our educational vision for what all of us want our schools to look like.

Superintendent Carroll recognized that knowing stakeholders, and gathering their voices, are two very different things. She expressed a desire and goal toward reaching out to her community, beyond parents and those that attend meetings. Her comments suggest she is still trying to figure ways to gather input and understand priorities and values. She explained it as a “process”:
We try, we do try. We go into senior centers and things like that, but we haven’t really figured out how to reach everyone. Board members come in here as important, because they have a lot of conversations. We try to identify important places in the communities that you can hang out and talk to people.

Superintendent Pockette explained the process of understanding community voices and values as one that takes time, but is based upon an ability to show people the work of schools, so that they can zone in on important things. She expressed a commitment to understanding the values of her communities, but also in helping them understand what they are voting on. She explained in her comments:

We need to make sure that everyone believes their kids are getting the best education that we can provide them, which as our current board chair would say, at a price they can afford. So I think that’s important, as is something our communities value. And I mean the whole community really; even people who don’t have kids. I hope the people in our communities are proud to live somewhere that has good schools, and they believe that. I hope that when people see things in the paper, for instance, about the high school that they are proud and say, “Wow, we have a great school and I’m proud to be a part of it.” I really do hope that. But I wouldn’t fool myself for a minute, because the value of the schools and communities and how are people are feeling, is so dependent upon principals too. How principal structures work, and how that principal communicates with folks on the ball field; all of those things are part of it too.

In his interview, Superintendent Yardley echoed Pockette’s sentiment that building principals were a major part of a successful equation. He explained his process of collecting community values and voices as a little more cumbersome, but none the less, critical to his work. He noted:
What I find in our unified system is that we really only hear from people when they are upset. They show up to a public deal to have an opinion heard, which is often a contrary opinion to the work that is being done… That’s kind of a pattern that I see everywhere. We’ll get a silent majority that’s pretty supportive of the work and vision for schools. You’ll get a loud minority that wants their contrary voices heard. The process of pulling back from that, to try and draw conclusions and understand themes from the voices, has been a really interesting process. What I’ve learned is it’s dangerous for me to make assumptions about what people want, because it might be based on a limited sample size that I’m drawing from.

Superintendent Davis made constant reference to the importance and value offered when school board members, superintendents, and other leaders live in and take part in the community. In his interview he explained how the merged board’s configuration allows board members to represent all kids, while still offering community feeling. Davis felt that although part of their knowledge of community voices was subjective, it was incredibly important and valuable information. He explained:

I think we have a very good idea of our communities. We live in this community and know what their values are; they value education a lot, and trust us here. We had a seventeen cents increase here, and our communities still passed it. I’m also involved in a lot. I’m in rotary right in town, and am connecting with business folks on a weekly or biweekly basis. Our board members too; we are all very community connected, and we get lots of input from all three communities.

**Conclusion.** To effectively navigate the process of unification in Vermont, while drafting a school budget that serves as a fiscal representation of the priorities in a newly merged district,
superintendents need to be able to identify important stakeholders, along with their values and voices. Even in the face of conflict and difficulties, superintendents in this study found it important to gather the voices of a variety of important groups. Although some voices may be louder or more oppositional than others, recognizing and finding ways to connect to the stories of community members, the school board, staff, students, and families, is of paramount importance to the success of Vermont superintendents. The data related to this theme made clear that superintendents placed a premium on understanding the voices and values of stakeholders, as it ties directly to relationships and the likelihood that school budgets will be passed by each community in the newly merged district. When superintendents understand who has an important voice, along with recognition of what the voices (both silent and loud) are saying, they are more far more likely to be able to build budgets that match stakeholder priorities, and ultimately get their communities to vote favorably each March.

**Collaborative Culture and Leadership**

The third theme that emerged considered how superintendents experienced collaboration within the context and culture of leadership, specifically in reference to the process of merging and school budgeting. Superintendents in this study reported a significant paradigm shift for their newly merged district, moving from several single entities to one larger unified system. This paradigm shift, with a specific focus on building a more collaborative culture, was noted by Superintendent Brown, even pre-unification, and has carried the work in his district for the past few years. He specifically made note of the paradigm shift in his district, where people are able to move beyond “what’s best for my school?” to “what’s best for all of our students?” He explained it as a process, that takes time and can be challenging, but is truly based upon collaboration and unity.
Just in terms of changing the paradigm to being a truly unified district takes time. It happens over years as we continue down this path. I mean it obviously takes time. I think ultimately everyone here gets it and even wants it, but it doesn’t mean it’s easy.

For Superintendent Carroll, unification has enabled more collaboration and leadership teams that work together, making funding decisions and deciding upon shared priorities. In thinking about how she develops the budget in her district, Carroll explained:

There’s many, many voices that go into the final budget product. Then my administrative team, starting at the central office, gets to work. But building principals have several sessions as well, to shape it all into the final budget. It’s multiple stakeholders; so relationships and collaboration are key for me.

Carroll continued to describe her overall budgeting process for the merged district, noting the necessity to work with and share responsibility with her business manager, central office team, school board, and building leaders. She explained work with her team in these comments:

Working with our curriculum director to get data around programs and needs, and also with our special services director. So everyone and everything kind of has a thumb in the pie, and we really have to pull all of that data together. It’s really important to take a communal look at it; going out to the people who have the data to get what we need, and sharing it out.

In Superintendent Pockette’s experience, moving from seven school boards to one, with a unified budget and centralized services required a huge amount of collaboration and shared leadership and responsibility. From school board members, to central office administrators, to building level leaders, everyone had to shift from a “my” mindset to an “ours.” Pockette noted that in her newly
merged district, budgeting and the work of schools, really becomes the shared priority of everyone. She explained in her comments:

We have service planning meetings which are much longer. It’s a special schedule, because it’s an hour and a half of digging into all the numbers. But I say, and I really mean, at the end of those days we all feel a little bit smarter. When you all focus, together, and specially on budgeting, at the end of the two or three days you all really know a lot about each of the schools. That way, when we all come back to the LEAD meeting that happens at the high school with everyone, we can unpack all of it together. We can say, here’s what we heard, here’s what we saw, and here’s where we think there might be some issues. It lets everyone get on board and trying to solve it together.

In Yardley’s experience, the move from single district entities to a unified structure proved a bit challenging, but was a major component in ensuring his organization moved forward in a cohesive way. He explained the urgency of the merger and unification, was that his district was really not overly successful with the separate entities and individual work plans. Unification, and the subsequent collaboration, has been very positive for his team. He explained it in his assertion:

Lots of our decisions needed to be made quickly. Lots of our protocols and procedures hadn’t been systemic or considered, because everything was kind of unique in a “mom and pop” sort of way. So a lot of those things had to be developed and cultivated. I would say, just to stay away from budget for right now, just from the standpoint of having a cohesive vision and ensuring that our leadership team is all on the same page and pulling in the same direction is really important. It translates into schools, because all of our elementary schools feed into the same middle and high schools. It was just important to really build
that cohesion. That’s been much more doable in a unified system – when you aren’t trying to manage six different entities – it’s been much easier to get our work done.

Superintendent Davis noted that the merger, and subsequent collaboration and cohesion, was something that he “always felt like we needed to do.” Davis repeatedly referred to the necessity of working in collaboration. He commented:

Within a merged district, my values and priorities are collaboration and working together. Also not working in silos. Thinking of “we”; I always talk about the “we” and not “I.” We will get a lot further working together and not separately… I don’t care what it is. We need to work and communicate as a group.

When specifically discussing is philosophy for making funding decisions and setting priorities, Davis further explained how his team is so crucial to this process:

I think one thing that is really important for us and has really worked has been creating a leadership team and meeting on a regular basis. That is key to us working so well together. And that has been in place even before the merger went through. Pulling together those folks to meet three times a month, plus once a month for the whole leadership team, just to discuss everything is really important.

Conclusion

Within a newly merged district, each of the superintendents experienced a deep need to collaborate with their teams to ensure a successful transition and the passage of the school budget. In each of the contexts, although elements of centralization may have already been occurring, as with contracts or professional development, there still existed a “single district mindset” with many building principals operating in silos to get work done and pass their local budgets. Especially in
the context of changed governance, a paradigm shift towards meaningful collaboration and true unification, was shared as being critical by each of the participants. This paradigm shift led to a new collaborative model for decision-making and leadership, a requirement for a consolidated district with shared governance and resources.

Commitment to a Shared Vision and Purpose

In addition to the importance of building relationships, understanding the priorities and values of stakeholders, and shifting the culture toward collaboration, superintendents also emphasized the necessity of developing and supporting a common vision and purpose for schools. Superintendent Brown believed that his newly merged district all shared his personal vision for schools and education in their communities. He explained in his comments:

We want our students to be more engaged. We want to think differently and out of the traditional paradigms that were in our heads from when we were in school. I think we also want to be designing things that work for all kids. We know that keeping the status quo is going to keep us where we’ve been. So this work requires some changing, and it’s going to require that all of us need to reflect on what we do and shift slightly. Getting to a more engaging school experience for students means having students be more a part of designing their education, and also what’s happening in the classroom.

Brown admitted that while getting a shared vision may have not been the challenging work for his team or community, timing was a huge part of why it was successful. He further explained that in year two, some conflict arose around funding for the shared vision and purpose of his district. He noted:
In year one of our newly unified district we really made a point with the budgeting process and operations, that we really weren’t going to do a lot of big and significant changes in year one. So I’d say that my experience over year one of unification was that it was helpful, just in terms of starting to change the paradigm of truly being a unified district. And also one the very first things the board did was approve our move to International Baccalaureate, which aligned with our vision, which was very significant. In terms of significant changes that would create tension and conflict, that really didn’t come until year two, which is this current year. And that has to do with funding. So looking ahead, I knew we were facing a shortfall going into this year, and so we needed to start having conversations at the principal and board level, and send out information to the community.

In her experience, Superintendent Carroll described her commitment to her professional code and the vision of her schools. In making fiscal decisions and setting priorities, Carroll says that it is not easy to get everyone on the same page, but if everyone is clear about the vision and mission of schools, it becomes more manageable. She explained in her comments:

I would say that my code is students first. We exist so that our students can gain the skills and tools that they need to be us, someday. They are going to be in charge of my pension! So if I screw it up now, it’s me that will be screwed up later on! We exist for the purpose of educating students, so that’s the first and foremost lens, and has to guide our decisions. Having said that, I recognize that what’s difficult for people to understand in Vermont, with an SU type system, is that in order to serve our students, we need an infrastructure in place. And when I hear budgets being attacked because money isn’t going into the teacher standing in front of the classroom, like this year we cut ten positions, then I can get frustrated. They say things like, we’re administrator heavy and central office shouldn’t get
so much. Well, my answer is this: if you don’t want central office to be in charge of things like special education, then we have to find a way to put that money out and into eight different schools. It’s more cost efficient and system efficient to do our business centralized. That’s difficult for people to understand, but is important to our work.

In his district, Superintendent Davis has a board and team that he firmly believes is committed to the mission statement “kids first.” He explained that although he may have to draw attention back to that mantra at times, all adults who have the power to make decisions around finances or resources must think that way. He went on further to explain that the community also values schools and education, and trusts the board and administration to do what is the best interest of students. He contended that although he and his board chair have always been committed to consolidation, because they felt it necessary for their communities, getting others to understand, accept, and move forward with this work and vision was not as easy. He noted:

I think our meetings helped a lot. There were a few principals that were at each other’s throats. Folks who have been here longer than I think that some of that was because they weren’t meeting or talking to each other about anything. They didn’t get the nuances of what was happening in each other’s schools. It has allowed us to move forward better with our merger because we were all on the same page. Otherwise, I’d just like to say that I’m a complete advocate of this and always have been.

In her district, Superintendent Pockette noted that equity and autonomy were on the front of her board and communities’ minds as they considered their vision for a newly merged organization. To all get on the same page, however, took time and many meetings. Pockette detailed this experience:
So in the first year, I took it upon myself to figure out, how can we do that? How can we share our data and resources in a way that allows the board to make some reasonable decisions around that (their values)?

She further explained that the merger work has allowed her to bring each of the schools and their leadership teams together to focus on the overall mission and vision of the district, while allowing them to work together to see it to fruition. She noted:

I just need to be able to put the data out and show people what it is, so we can talk about what is a better way to do it. That’s another project. But that’s how the merger has helped us zone in on important things to us. And fortunately we have a board that’s giving us time to do this work thoughtfully, and in a way that will hopefully raise the bar.

Conclusion

To be able to do the work of schools successfully, superintendents need to be able to create and sustain a shared vision for and understanding of the purpose of education. Superintendents in this study each noted the requirement of moving beyond a “me” mindset to an “our” mindset with regards to funding and resources, so that the work of educating students can be taken on by everyone in a much more global way. When building and adopting a school budget, it becomes the single fiscal representation of what a superintendent, school board, and the community values and holds important for students. Although developing a shared understanding and commitment toward fiscal priorities is critical for all superintendents, in a newly merged district it becomes even more recognizable, as it serves as a tethering representation of what each community holds true and values. This work, on the part of superintendents, necessitates their constant conversation and unwavering commitment to what is important in Vermont’s schools.
Equity in the Newly Merged District

The final theme that emerged from the participants’ stories involved how superintendents in newly merged districts defined equity and managed areas of inequity. Education spending across Vermont, and the nation, varies widely. Even within districts and supervisory unions, there are often major discrepancies between staffing patterns, programmatic offerings, and per pupil spending numbers. In consideration of school mergers, where superintendents need to navigate a variety of boards and communities unifying into one larger body, differences in spending and resource allocations can lead to significant issues around equity for students and schools. All of the participants emphasized the necessity of defining equity for all stakeholders, and managing inequities around the district, to move their newly merged organization forward. The following two subheadings, defining equity and managing inequity, illustrate the essence of the participants’ understanding of this process.

Defining Equity

Participants in this study identified a variety of struggles with defining equity and managing inequity, both pre-merger and post-consolidation. Superintendent Yardley noted that defining equity, as well as understanding what people were comfortable with, was a somewhat challenging process. That notwithstanding, he recognized it as crucial to the work of the merger, and helping everyone get on the same page with supports for students across the district. He explained:

I think it’s really important first to clarify what equity is. My experience away from Vermont, is that equity was all about racial and social justice. In Vermont, folks tend to be less comfortable talking about that. So they like to make it more about the dollars. My
opinion is, that it’s really both. It needs to be both. How do we take care of every kid to give them what they need? How do you make sure the resources are where they need to be? And that’s not necessarily equal, right? We don’t necessarily distribute just based on a per pupil basis.

Superintendent Davis served on a state level committee that worked to build a common definition for equity, which he believed was crucial for everyone in education, and undoubtedly for those going through unification under Act 46. He discussed what equity meant to him, and his work guiding his district toward developing common language in his comments:

Have you seen the new state equity definition? We did that; I was part of it, and am very proud of our work. It took us two full days, but it was a good two days. So that was me; that’s important information that I believe in. Here, we are constantly looking and talking about those equity issues within our administrative team meetings. Less so in our board meetings, although tomorrow I will do a whole presentation on equity so that they use the same language and have the same understanding as admins. I’ll bring that definition to the board for conversation. I talk all the time, let’s not forget, which is what is in that document, that equity doesn’t necessarily mean equal. Everybody needs a pair of boots, but those pair of boots don’t mean anything unless they fit. And they are going to fit differently on different people. So we have to talk about all those things and educate our board. They are already talking that language, so it isn’t too much of an education there.

Knowing that it may be challenging for administrators and towns to shift from only thinking about themselves and the students in their school, to considering all students in every school a part of the community, Superintendent Carroll recognized that conversations around equity were crucial to her district’s work. She explained that equity was a part of every conversation from budgeting, to
staffing, to programs, as they began their merger work. She noted the difficulty of working towards defining and truly understanding the concept in her comments:

Equity is a really big question. In our merger, equity was at the top of our conversations and was a real priority for us. So Brigham is its own district. But we have five elementary schools that feed into the same high school right now. And one of our schools is over four-hundred kids, and one is two-hundred kids, and three of the others add together to about ninety students. So Raleigh has a lot of support for kids and is bigger than some high schools in Vermont. So it has two guidance counselors, some behavior supports, and some really good things in place. Plainfield has somewhat of the same supports, but not as much, so I often hear things like, “why don’t we have what Raleigh has?” My answer is, right, you don’t. But you don’t have anywhere near the same number of kids, so let’s talk about what that means. And over the years, individual boards were making their own decisions and so Raleigh kept Spanish, but Plainfield had to cut French. The smaller schools never even had a language or even a guidance counselor. They also only had nursing services one day a week and didn’t have library, or maybe just one day a week. So you can tell, that is a lot of inequity. And that’s a problem. So first, we need to understand what equity really is. You know, equity doesn’t mean that every school has to offer the same thing; the needs aren’t necessarily the same. The story that I often say, and people around here kind of throw around, is that equity mean means that equality means everybody gets shoes…. equity means that everybody gets shoes that fit them. That’s a tricky conversation and concept.

Throughout the interview, Superintendent Brown repeatedly referred to equity as one of his top priorities for making fiscal and programmatic decisions. He explained that even pre-unification, his board and communities were digging into “what does equity mean in terms of budgeting? How
do we go from these cultures, which have been really different, to one where everyone might not get exactly the same amount, but we’re closer?” When discussing what equity in decision-making and budgeting meant to him, and how it fit into his priorities, he explained:

It is definitely something that we need to continue building our understanding on and around. You know, I might have a certain definition that others don’t share. I think it’s constraining and challenging when you’re telling a community that you are going to take money from here and put it there. And everybody wants the maximum amount for their school and kids, which is totally understandable. But that’s a challenge of any equity conversation and definition. The challenge comes when you’re talking about anything that’s a little different. If you aren’t just talking about things that are absolutely equal, which is the first thing people say, “equity doesn’t mean everyone is equal.”

Superintendent Pockette’s newly merged board made equity one of their top two themes, specifically related to budgeting and the allocation of funds to schools. She explained that because all of the money from each town was going into the newly unified “pot,” her board and leadership team decided that they wanted to ensure all students were getting the same opportunities. In defining equity, she explained the work as being based upon a fairly simple ideal:

We want to continue marching along and doing cohesive work in all of our areas, because all of our kids go to the same high school. It just makes sense. They don’t have to have the exact same experience, but they should definitely have similar opportunities. If you’re looking at equity, you might say that one school needs more resources than another, because they have tougher kids. That’s a hard one and we need to think about it. Part of it is that we can deploy resources differently, so that if we had a particularly difficult situation, we could either deploy new resources or shuffle things around.
Managing Inequity

With a solid and cohesive understanding of the definition of equity, especially in regards to funding, programs, and resource allocations to schools, superintendents all saw the merger as an opportunity to recognize areas of inequity while also working to address or manage them. The unification of several school districts into one larger governing body opened up conversations around what students in each school were getting, and ways to address imbalanced or unequitable opportunities. In Superintendent Brown’s district, the merger began conversations around what equity meant for budgeting and how best to make decisions that got all schools and students closer to having similar opportunities and levels of access. He explained in his comments:

So we started to look at all sorts of ratios, school by school, to see where we were and where we stood with this. And we looked at comparatives between large elementary schools and small elementary schools. And we went through the budget cycle, working towards more equity. We did have to make some reductions as well. You’ve really got to have a long view of these things. It requires there to be a deep connection among the community to go through that process of understanding equity, as opposed to it just happening to them.

In Superintendent Carroll’s experience, getting everyone to understand that every school doesn’t have to be exactly the same, but students should have similar experiences and get their needs met, required a lot of conversations and took a good amount of time. She explained:

It’s a tricky conversation to have. However, we were able to say, as we made small school changes, that it was time to think about these things around equity. Last year we had a librarian leave mid-year, and we took advantage of that opportunity to hire a new librarian
who would only work 80% of the time in one school. Because of the merger, we were then able to send her into the small schools one day of the week. So now, everyone has library services for the first time ever. We’ve also been able to increase some music services by restructuring so that some kids are getting band for the first time ever. Next year, we will also take one school’s Spanish teacher, even though we really need more than one so we have to live within our resources, so that next year she will teach at all of our elementary schools in grades five and six. And we hope that it will grow from there. But at least now we know that every student in our elementary schools will have had some exposure to foreign language. So the equity conversation is a lot easier when all of your schools feed into a union high school. It can also be a question of, ok this one school, you have more support. Maybe you didn’t care so much before about supporting what was happening in those other small towns before. But now, everyone is moving towards the same page and understanding that all our kids will be together in the end, and wouldn’t it be better if everyone had access to the same types of opportunities to prepare them for high school? That really helped a lot. Those are the kinds of equity and equality conversations that we have had to have with folks, and have really keep having.

Similar to Carroll’s experience, Superintendent Davis spoke about the equity opportunities that opened up post-merger. He explained that his building leaders have had to have a lot of dialogue around equity issues across the newly merged district, moving towards similar opportunities for students regardless of their sending town. One such area of inequity surrounded transportation, which he explained:

Some of the minute things, for instance, are those like taking a look at afterschool events. One school never had transportation for any of those things, because buses just weren’t
available for those students after school. So we made sure to put money in the budget, because some students had it and others did not. So we made sure we could offer that, and although it isn’t huge money, it is a piece that was important to the community and was an inequity we could address.

He explained that his district has been able to slowly “pick away at some of the inequities” through collaboration and shared understanding of equity amongst building leaders and board members. He explained this team approach to problem-solving inequities in his comments:

Like years ago, one school had to cut their foreign language program but the other schools still had it. That to me was a huge inequity. We actually solved it pretty easily. In our first year as a merged district, our high school principal was hiring a new foreign language teacher and found out that he didn’t need it full time; he really only needed about .6 FTE because of enrollment. Because of our leadership team meetings that we have all the time, he knew that one of the elementary schools had nothing. He actually said, “let’s allow a .4FTE to go there.” It’s definitely easier to hire a full time teacher anyway, and it ended up working out great. So basically, most mornings this teacher works at the high school and then travels over to the elementary school. It didn’t cost us anymore money, and now those kids have foreign language just like all the other elementary kids do. It was because we were merged that we were able to look at that inequity.

In Superintendent Yardley’s experience, managing inequity often came down to moving beyond hyperlocal decisions to understand the bigger picture about what is best for all students across the district. He explained one such example of helping building principals understand equity issues and working together toward common experiences and opportunities for students:
Now we have had to work on the shared ownership and equity mindset around where resources are. A good tangible example is something we tackled this past budget season, and it had to do with general ed support staff. When I came to VT, that wasn’t something I was familiar with. I only knew about special education paras, and had never heard of general education support staff or extra folks. But the FTE in the various schools had just developed in its own way over time; there was really no rhyme or reason to why many general ed paras were in a certain school. We worked with the finance committee to establish some protocols. We arrived at, for now, one general education para for every fifty students as being a good rule of thumb. So that means that one school of fifty students has one para. Our schools of one-hundred sixty have three. One of our schools of one-hundred sixty had five paras, so there was some reduction and loss there. Helping the principals to understand that those are decisions about equity, and helping our affected staff to see that those decisions are about equity, are really tough conversations. But after a couple of years in, it does become normal. We can justify the money and the staff now. I’ve really been saying and have known all along that the benefit of a merged system is that the dollars are where the kids are. If you’ve got logic and equity behind your decisions it works out and makes sense in the end.

In the experience of Superintendent Pockette, every conversation has had an equity lens, allowing her district to address and manage inequities in student supports and also in the deployment of resources. Although most of her individual communities are fairly similar, her team has worked to understand differences, and what that means for equity conversations. She explained in her comments:

There’s still work to be done around that, right? Because you could say here are the interventions and everyone has what they have based upon their population. But what if the populations were radically different? And obviously in special education we can take
care of that because we have a service plan. And then we also have title one funds, which
three of our schools receive, and the fourth school is in and out, which is kind of weird.
Now some of our schools have many more ELL students, so they have to have more ELL
teachers. So there’s just some things where the resources obviously come with the need.
But just regular tier 1 work in the classroom? We’re looking at that, because that doesn’t
address those differences.

To understand equity issues and ensure that they address and manage inequities in their district,
Pockette worked with her team to develop an equity autonomy matrix. Pockette understood that
her board and communities valued everyone getting similar opportunities but knew that she needed
some data to truly understood areas of inequity and also strength. She explained how she, with
help from her “tech guy,” developed this matrix:

So this matrix chooses around ten or twelve elements. It looks at classroom teacher, support
to the classroom teacher, essential arts, social support like guidance services, world
language. There were about ten or twelve of these things, all about learning; nothing about
bonding, facilities, food services, or transportation. It looked at what kids were getting in
each of the schools. And we normalized the numbers so that we could actually make
comparisons, because that’s what we really needed to do. Without it, you just can’t look at
dollars, because some schools have the most senior teachers and are going to look like big
spenders even if they have the exact same thing. So we normalized the numbers. So for
every category, imagine all those lines in a spreadsheet, we know the exact number that
goes in there. When we did this, we could say and see the total support in each category.
So we were pretty surprised by what we found from this matrix. I shared with the board, in
year one, the ratios. I shared with them how we met EQS everywhere, except in one school
in guidance services. And I shared with them what the ratios were for teacher to students, and all of the different areas. But I didn’t yet share the big numbers, because it was startling to see the differences. I did share it with my principals, and said, “here’s where we are, and we can’t stay here.”

Quite like Carroll’s experience of helping building level leaders understand and work toward solving inequities through the use of data, Superintendent Brown also relies upon data and deep conversations to help his team move forward. He explained the process:

I think we’ve really had to work hard to build an equity lens with our administrators, and looking through that as we make our decisions. What we came up with will provide funding where we need it most. So that leaves open the interpretation of the question, “what does that mean? How do we define needs?” It’s really more than a simple metric like free and reduced lunch counts, which title funding helps cover. Is it more qualitative? Where does that come in? I think that’s part that we still don’t fully know the answer to. Ultimately, we have to keep having conversations about how we differentiate our funding. Currently it’s built on need and scale of schools, and that brings with it certain requirements in terms of funding. You might have some wiggle room, but at some point you have to define standards. So I think we’re working through minimum standards to figure out our base for all of these positions and decisions.

**Conclusion.** In moving from single district entities to one larger unified body, study participants and their communities were able to understand significant areas of inequity that related to programming, access, transportation, and resources. Once they were armed with a common understanding of what equity meant to their district, and a shared belief that all students deserved a similar experience K-12, superintendents were able to navigate areas of inequity by changing
conversations, shifting finances, and leveraging resources in a way that made equity possible for their newly merged districts.

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this research was to advance an understanding of the ways in which Vermont superintendents made sense of the Act 46 merger process within the context of newly unified communities and school finances. This chapter introduced five study participants, each serving active contracts as Vermont superintendents in newly reorganized districts across the state. Five themes, and several sub-themes emerged from interviews with this diverse group of superintendents. First, superintendents placed a tremendous value on their ability to build and sustain relationships with important stakeholders, noting that many relationships and roles changed due to their district’s reorganization and changed governance structures. Second, although superintendents were able to articulate that relationships were crucial throughout the merger process and subsequent budgeting and organizational success, they noted that fully understanding the voices and perspectives of diverse communities was often challenging and even unattainable at times. Third, to successfully navigate responsibility and governance changes that come with unification, superintendents recognized that the paradigm and culture of their organization had to change, and thus made a concerted effort to build a collaborative and cohesive system of leadership in their new district. Fourth, while building relationships and understanding perspectives was crucial, superintendents recognized that a commitment to a shared vision and purpose for schools and their district was necessary so that the unified budget document could serve as a fiscal representation of the communities’ values. Fifth, the final theme that emerged involved the critical task of defining equity for all stakeholders, to begin to manage inequities and ensure similar opportunities for every student across the newly merged district.
It is important to recognize that the results only represent the experiences of the five superintendents interviewed. Although they may be reflective of a similar perceptions and understandings, findings are based upon their personal accounts and individual contexts. After hearing how these individuals engaged with their newly merged communities and balanced values and priorities with equity issues to develop a unified budget, several final conclusions can be drawn: (1) superintendents successfully navigated their mergers and built unified budgets through a recognition of changed relationships and roles, and through the establishment of new guidance and governance structures; (2) superintendents’ ability to build a budget that represented the values and priorities of their district is based upon their understanding of individual contexts and pressures; and (3) superintendents’ decision-making around finances and resources is shaped by the framework for equity within their organization and communities.

The next chapter discusses these conclusions and the data from which they are drawn through the theoretical framework of bounded rationality. It also seeks to situate the findings within the context of the body of literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two and suggests possibilities for the research to contribute to the field of school finance and decision-making, most notably within the context of Vermont’s Act 46 merger and consolidation plans for communities.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The goal of this study centered on the desire to understand how superintendents navigate complex fiscal decisions for their organization amidst consolidation and challenging fiscal pressures. Although a variety of stakeholders, including school board members and building administrators, are known to have a role in the school budgeting process, it is overwhelmingly the responsibility of the superintendent to craft a document that represents the fiscal priorities of their district. The viability of a system depends on its decision making; thus, the ability of superintendents to identify priorities and values, all while balancing and managing resources appropriately, is of critical import for newly merged districts hoping to successfully transition under Vermont’s Act 46. The current problem facing superintendents around the state is that a clear framework, outlining both practices and considerations for budgeting and mergers, does not exist to support practitioners in the field. To achieve its purpose of supporting current and future superintendents, this study especially focused on how superintendents engaged with their communities and stakeholders to develop a shared decision-making process that met the needs and priorities of their newly merged district. This investigation centered on the complexities facing Vermont superintendents seeking to support their newly merged district while developing a fiscally sound budget that meets the needs and priorities of students, schools, and communities.

The phenomenon of processes, meaning making, and values that guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting budgets for their newly merged organization during challenging fiscal times was investigated using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2008) and framed by Simon’s (1987) principles of bounded reality for decision-making and prioritization. Three significant conclusion are presented in light of the review of extant literature and theoretical models of decision making presented in Chapter Two (Bennet & Bennet, 2008;
Hoy & Tarter, 2010). The conclusions are as follows: (1) superintendents successfully navigated their mergers and built unified budgets through a recognition of changed relationships and roles, and through the establishment of new guidance and governance structures; (2) superintendents’ ability to build a budget that represented the values and priorities of their district is based upon their understanding of individual contexts and pressures; and (3) superintendents’ decision-making around finances and resources is shaped by the framework for equity within their organization and communities.

As the report of findings from Chapter Four outlined, five emergent themes were found in consideration of the ways in which the study participants understood consolidation and the budgeting process for their newly merged districts. These themes showed that superintendents managed Act 46 mergers and school budgeting for their organizations by: (1) building and sustaining relationships, (2) understanding the voices and perspectives of stakeholder groups, (3) collaborative culture and leadership, (4) commitment to a shared vision and purpose, (5) and, defining equity in the newly merged district. Although the five emergent themes illustrate a multifaceted portrait of and for Vermont superintendents, the themes and ensuing findings only represent the experiences of the five superintendents who participated in the study. Subsequently, although each of the five themes were distinctive and unique, they were also interconnected and thus consolidated into three major findings. Discussion of the study findings with regard for the overarching research question, extant literature, and theoretical models of decision making are presented next.

Based upon the emergent themes that were extrapolated from interview data and analysis, the three major findings from this study include:
1. Participating superintendents successfully navigated their community mergers and built a unified budget through a recognition of changed relationships and roles, and through the establishment of new guidance and governing structures.

2. Superintendents’ ability to build a budget that represented the values and priorities of their district is based upon their understanding of individual contexts and pressures.

3. Superintendent decision-making around finances and resources is shaped by the framework for equity within their organization and communities.

It is important to recognize that each of the superintendents was employed in the state of Vermont, serving towns and communities that were geographically and demographically unique. The theoretical efforts of Herbert Simon (1987) allow the participants’ distinctive and collective experiences to be appreciated, along with a cognizance of the complexities involved in district consolidation and budgeting.

**Discussion**

The conclusions presented in this section are representative of both the shared and also unique experiences of participating superintendents operating within their diverse Vermont contexts. The connections between ethics, politics, decision-making, and values within the context of school consolidation and budgeting are considered. It also contributes to the existing literature on the role of school superintendents in budgeting, while considering the gap in literature around school mergers and budgeting. Rogers et al. (2014) recognized a gap in literature and research around school mergers in Vermont and the impact upon budgets and resources. They concluded that even once a merger is planned and approved, the costs and challenges are often underestimated or unknown, even after years of careful planning. They explain that “there is an inadequate base of theory-informed evidence to help guide officials and board members in crafting merger plans
that forge new social structures to strengthen rather than threaten the community ties of those they serve” (p. 11).

The discussion is organized to support common understandings from critical and relevant literature, emphasize the value of analyzing the data within the Bounded Rationality framework (Simon, 1987), and (3) explain the complexities facing Vermont superintendents building budgets for their newly merged communities within the context of Act 46 and consolidation. New approaches and considerations for school budgeting and superintendent decision-making are presented.

Participating superintendents successfully navigated their community mergers and built a unified budget through a recognition of changed relationships and roles, and through the establishment of new guidance and governing structures. The superintendents explained the critical importance of understanding how consolidation impacted relationships at every level, and changed the way that business was done in the new district. This first finding weighed heavily in the accounts of each of the five superintendents. Although there were some differences in the stakeholders that were mentioned in each of the five explanations, superintendents overwhelmingly reported the importance of recognizing shifting roles, responsibilities, and relationships throughout the district as they worked through the merger and eventual budgeting process. Furthermore, taking time to build relationships and offer tools for collaboration, was seen as an essential component of not only successful consolidation but also for the budgeting development and approval process.

Relationship and trust-building. Throughout the interviews, participating superintendents consistently emphasized the tremendous importance of establishing relationships with stakeholders. To build and sustain these relationships across communities and buildings,
superintendents pointed to the need for establishing confidence in their leadership and the new governance system, often through a deliberate process of trust-building opportunities. These opportunities often included open and honest communication vehicles, public forums, and private conversations to ensure that these trusting relationships were built. A comment from Superintendent Carroll emphasized the value of relationship building when building a budget for a newly merged community, “It really comes into play in how the budget building process is multi layered. Relationships have to be part of that, and stakeholders have to have input.” To build relationships and ensure trust in governance and fiscal decisions, superintendents each recognized the importance of transparent leadership and communication, as well as a focus on both the personal and professional components of their position in the community and with stakeholders.

**Communication.** Connected to the notion of building and sustaining relationships, participating superintendents each recognized the necessity for communicating with constituents and stakeholders. Throughout the merger process in each of the districts, superintendents commonly held community forums and meetings, along with providing regular opportunities for feedback and questions through a variety of tools including newsletters and technological applications (“Let’s Talk Tool”). Superintendent Davis highlighted the value of intentional communication in his comments, “We did a lot of work, a lot of forums, and talked to a lot of people. We spent close to a year to come to a vote.” With frequent and transparent communication with stakeholders at a variety of levels, superintendents indicated that the merger and subsequent budgeting process was often smoother than they had anticipated.

**Collaboration tools and processes.** With the value of relationships and communication vehicles recognized, superintendents next considered the importance of collaboration for successfully merging their district and developing a consolidated budget document. In order to
move their reorganized districts forward, superintendents unanimously highlighted the importance of shifting the paradigm from several single entities to a shared and collaborative organization that worked together. Superintendents recognized the importance of getting school board members and building level leaders on the same page, moving beyond the “me” mindset to the “we” mindset with regards to student services and fiscal resources. Superintendent Davis summed up the necessity for collaboration in stating, “Within a merged district, my value and priorities are collaboration and working together. Also, not working in silos. Thinking of ‘we’ – I always talk about ‘we’ and not ‘I.’ We will get a lot further working together and not separately..” To collaborate with stakeholders, including building level leaders, each superintendent recognized the need to establish collaboration routines, structures, and tools to do the work of merging and budgeting. In the new governance structure, participating superintendents highlighted the value of administrative teams, board level committees, and regularly scheduled meeting times to do the work of both governance and budgeting.

**Connections to literature and theory.** A review of the literature points to a deep understanding that positive relationships, and the ability to build and sustain them, are an important component of the job of school leaders. Bjork and Kowalksi (2005) note that superintendents must be able to understand cultural and social dynamics within their communities, serving as “pivotal actors” in the algorithm of their system’s success or failure. Similarly, Copeland (2013) recognizes that superintendents have four major roles to fill, each tied to their ability to develop and sustain relationships: manager, listener, communicator, and community liaison. This important concept noted in the literature was also found in the shared experiences of study participants. Specifically, superintendents worked to develop important and transparent relationships with their
communities, their school boards, and their building level leaders to guarantee the success of their organization.

The literature also confirms the idea shared by superintendents, that consistent and transparent communication, both on the topic of budgeting and overall district operations, was a necessity for their organization’s success. Hartman (1999) recognized that involving and informing constituents was an integral step in drafting and passing a final budget document. Similarly, McCord (2008) developed nine tenets to guide superintendents in their work, with two specifically focused on communication. McCord (2008) explained that superintendents should use timing and talking effectively to garner attention to their message, while also noting that they had to communicate truthfully, as the “currency of truth holds value forever, and cannot be understated or overturned.”

Superintendents in this study also repeatedly made efforts to develop tools and dedicated times to ensure that collaboration and relationship-building occurred, during the budgeting and merging process and also as part of the new model for governance and decision-making. This important idea was supported by the literature, as an example in Bird’s (2011) work, which recommends superintendents use open communication methods to gain input from stakeholders. Correspondingly, Fullan (2011) talks about the critical responsibility of the superintendent to serve as the change leader, working together with everyone in the organization. His book highlights the importance of leaders who work not top-down or bottom-up, but instead by using a collaborative and “all hands on deck” approach to make decisions and set the direction of the organization.

Superintendents involved in the research unanimously pointed to the importance of relationship building, communication, and collaboration in the merger and subsequent budgeting process. In moving their district forward through challenging fiscal times and decisions,
superintendents must have well-developed systems in place to work closely with all stakeholders. Both the research, and the literature review continuously stressed the importance of establishing and sustaining relationships with community members, the school board, and building leaders to support a successful merger and the passage of a unified budget document.

In consideration of theory and its connection to the study, *Bounded Rationality* presents a framework or lens from which it becomes possible to understand how superintendents navigated complex change and the establishment of new governance structures. Simon’s *Bounded Rationality* (1987) explained that individuals are often limited or constrained by their own cognitive limitations and also the structure of their environment. Decisions, then, according to Simon, are often limited by either uncertainty or incomplete information, or complexity and time constraints (1987). In consideration of superintendents working to build budgets that meet the needs of a newly reorganized district, superintendents are often forced to choose the most available or satisfactory option or strategy. To do this work successfully, superintendents needed to build and sustain relationships to minimize the impact of their decision-making limitations, while ensuring the successful merger of their community and organization. Limits on superintendents’ rationality made it imperative that important stakeholder relationships were recognized, and new guidance structures were developed.

**Superintendents’ ability to build a budget that represented the values and priorities of their district is based upon their understanding of individual contexts and pressures.** Participating superintendents reported that their understanding of, and the ability to maneuver through the various contexts and pressures directly impacted their ability to draft successful school budgets for their district. They also cited the importance of recognizing each community’s distinct values and priorities, as well as the overall culture, as it was significantly impactful upon both the
merger and subsequent resource allocations. This second study finding was especially pronounced when comparing the specific experiences of participating superintendents. Throughout this study, superintendents reported noteworthy differences between individual contexts, while also recognizing some community dissimilarities and disagreements that impacted their work. As such, a relationship emerged in the data between understanding community contexts and differing values and priorities, which ultimately affected the process for developing shared values to guide the new unified budget.

**Understanding values and priorities.** Participating superintendents consistently reflected upon the need to understand the values, priorities, and perspectives of their communities and individual stakeholders. Superintendents unanimously pointed to communication and outreach opportunities as being a vehicle toward hearing the stories of their towns, while also addressing misconceptions and misunderstandings about consolidation and unified school budgeting. They reported doing this work by attending public events, holding community forums, and participating in local boards and activities to demonstrate their willingness to form connections and understand the needs of their area and its families. Additionally, study participants explained the need to meet the communication and participation needs of a wide variety of stakeholders, including senior citizens, community business members, and voters without children, in an effort to understand concerns and values that may differ from those of parents and board members. This idea is supported in the literature, specifically in the work of Hartman (1999), who recognized the importance of involving constituents and understanding and establishing priorities for the district.

**Different contexts and pressures.** Beyond a necessity to understand the values and priorities of stakeholders, superintendents in this study also pointed to the essentialness of recognizing differences in each of their communities, and how this contextual understanding and
savvy played into their ability to do the work of district leadership. They cited the context of their local communities, as well as the culture in each of the schools and on the individual boards, as influencing the work of the merger and subsequent budgeting and decision-making process. This finding was especially profound when comparing the experiences of the five research participants. Each of the superintendents noted that the culture, dynamics, and pressures in each of the communities was especially noticeable as they worked through merger and budget conversations.

Participating superintendents reported that in some towns in their districts there were divergent priorities and beliefs around the aims of schooling, and thus the goals of school budgeting. Additionally, it is also important to understand that many towns had a greater scarcity of resources than in others, which often times impacted budgeting and resource allocation conversations. Superintendents noted that although each of their communities expressed a commitment to the new unified school district and its students, priorities around programs, costs, and staffing patterns oftentimes reflected a general desire to retain services and supports in specific places and buildings. While superintendents’ understanding and interpretations of the needs of their unified district varied with respect to their individual contexts and cultures, they all overwhelmingly valued understanding the uniqueness of their community and drafting a budget that was reflective of its priorities.

*Developing shared priorities and values.* The five superintendents were each highly aware and also focused on the public perception of their school districts. Each superintendent discussed a desire to not only successfully pass a unified school budget, but also to insure that their communities and stakeholders believed their schools were “great,” and that unification was positive and constructive. To move their district forward, shifting the mindset and priorities of stakeholders towards unification and shared purpose, superintendents uniformly agreed that vision
work and collaboration was crucial. When reflecting on how they did this work, superintendents remarked that their advocacy for each of the schools and students in the newly merged district was actually in alignment with the interests of most stakeholders and building leaders. The superintendents reported that frequent conversations, directly tied to equity and mission/vision for the district, ultimately helped propel everyone past a culture of competition toward a culture of collaboration and shared purpose. In instances and communities where this effort was more challenging, superintendents shared a common understanding that relationships and communication were a valuable tool and asset that served to provide leverage for this work. It is important to note that in each context, superintendents unanimously counted on the support of building level and central office leaders, as well as school board members, to carry the shared vision forward while working toward unification and a consolidated budget.

**Connections to literature and theory.** The ways in which superintendents understand their context, the increasingly political nature of their role, and the various pressures facing their communities are well documented in the literature. Glass et al. (2000) delineate a variety of increasingly political components and influences facing today’s school superintendents. According to Bjork and Kowalski (2005), superintendents have a professional and moral obligation to learn how to operate as democratic statesmen, working on behalf of the students and communities that they serve. As with Vermont’s Act 46 and a variety of other mandates and funding formulas that infringe upon the work of school systems, superintendents must be prepared to support their district moving forward within a complex environment (Kowalski, 1999). Furthermore, within the context of mergers and consolidated budgeting, superintendents are unavoidably engaged in complex and often political work of restructuring to ensure that their system is successful (Scribner & Layton, 1995). Moreover, academic research offers the
significant conclusion that superintendents do not have the luxury of questioning when and how they will engage in politics and complex community issues, but whether how well and ethically they will play it (Hoyle & Skrla, 1999).

Research explains two common definitions of the word political, both impactful upon school superintendents and our understanding of their role. They are Lasswell’s (1958) “who gets what, when, and how,” and Easton’s (1965) “the authoritative allocation of resources and values.” As the superintendent is the main decision-maker with regards to allocation of staffing and fiscal resources, it becomes understandable that their role is inherently political. Research participants in this study understood their position as carrying a heavy hand and potential burden, wielding the pen that writes the unified budget. Thus, they repeatedly referred to the necessity of understanding their context and the values of their communities as they crafted this fiscal document each year. Also notable is the connection to Simon’s (1987) Bounded Rationality Theory, as a way of understanding superintendents’ decisions with regards to budgeting and consolidation. Gigernezer and Selten (2002) offer a scissor metaphor to explain how decisions are made within this behavioral theory of choice, noting that one blade of decisions is based upon “cognitive limitations” and the other is “the structure of the environment.” Within complex contexts and various political or professional pressures, school superintendents seek to understand their environment and the priorities and values of stakeholders, examining choices and trade-offs within the budget cycle.

Quite like the importance of relationships and roles was reflected in the connection to theory, so too is true with the ability of superintendents to build a budget that is reflective of stakeholder values and contextual intricacies. Simon (1987)’s Bounded Rationality recognizes that decision-makers often have to work under three unavoidable constraints: (1) only limited and
unreliable information may be available about consequences and alternatives, (2) the human mind can only evaluate and process information that is available, and (3) only a limited amount of time may be available for an individual to make a decision. Within the context of school consolidation and budgeting, superintendents are faced with making decisions based upon often uncertain information about the ways in which the merger will impact budgets and communities in the long run. Additionally, many decisions as with the budget, require action within a certain window of time or calendar year. Based upon these limitations, participating superintendents consistently reflected upon the need to recognize the uniqueness of their community contexts, and also the values and priorities held within them. Superintendents spent time to understand the culture of their organization and communities, drafting budgets that matched priorities and values. Limits on superintendents’ rationality and choices, in the absence of a recognition of community context and values, would make it nearly impossible to draft successful budgets and support successful organizational change (Simon, 1987).

**Superintendent decision-making around finances and resources is shaped by the framework for equity within their organization and communities.** Participating superintendents noted an understanding that to successfully merge communities and develop a unified budget that represented values and priorities, it was a necessity to build common definitions and considerations around equity for students and schools. It was a unanimous assertion from study participants that the goal of their new organization was to insure that students had the best possible education, at a rate and level that was equitable throughout the merged district.

**Defining equity.** Superintendents in this research study reported experiencing inconsistent stakeholder understanding of the term equity, and what its application meant throughout the district and at the local level. Furthermore, some superintendents noted that
equity confusion or disagreement permeated every level of the district; from voters, to board members, to staff, and to administrators. To counteract this confusion and move toward a unified definition, study participants universally reported the need to have open and frank conversations that provided the basis for a transparent understanding of need and supports. Superintendent Carroll’s comments illustrated this level of work and commitment, explaining the difference between equity and equality as one that is based upon need.

It was universally reported that although specific and intentional work was done to build a common definition for equity, most stakeholders came to quickly understand that all students in the newly merged district were entitled to common experiences, opportunities, and supports.

**Managing inequity.** With a universal understanding of what equity truly is and means to a school system, superintendents reported being able to move their district forward with an examination of inequities. It was commonly reported by superintendents in this study that the consolidation process brought many inequities to light, especially when comparing some of their smaller and larger schools in their respective districts. In examining areas of inequities, superintendents who participated in this study noted several mutual categories that they were able to identify through the merger and budgeting process: transportation inequities, foreign language inequities, library/media services inequities, and para-educator supports. Once areas of need were identified through conversations and collaboration between individual schools and their administrators, superintendents expressed understanding the critical nature associated with effectively allocating both human and fiscal resources to manage inequities. In his interview, Superintendent Davis’s comments were illustrative of this understanding and process for managing and negating inequity. He explained an inequity in the district’s foreign language program which was solved through mutual collaboration, problem solving, and the reallocation
of staff and supports. He further explained how the governance structure associated with the merger was what had ultimately allowed staffing and programming to address inequities.

To overcome the challenges associated with inequity, superintendents in this study reported using strategic, inclusive, and collaborative practices with their school boards and building level leaders. With an understanding of equity, and an eye for examining areas of inequity for schools and students, superintendents were able to move their district forward toward building a framework that would support future work and the direction of the organization.

**Building an equity framework.** Superintendents in this research study reported experiences around the challenges of budgeting that were cited and supported in the literature. Specifically, superintendents struggled merging multiple schools and communities into one consolidated district, while also working toward crafting a unified budget that represented the priorities of equity and opportunity for students. The school budget forces both conversations and choices between programs, people, and pools of limited resources. In the context of this research, superintendents recognized that they often had to reduce, define, or refocus their priorities to reflect their commitment to both efficiency and equity in the new district (Ramsey, 2001).

To build an equity mindset and framework for their district, superintendents all made mention of formal processes for defining equity, recognizing inequity, and mapping out a plan to allocate resources appropriately. The specific work done by study superintendents, in developing frameworks to address equity in budgeting, was often time consuming but also incredibly valuable. In her story, Superintendent Pockette detailed the formal process for examining not only their thinking and practices, but also determining fiscal allocations and staffing patterns.
Her comments explained how her newly merged district was able to move forward with an equity mindset and framework, that was supported by people at every level. Pockette recognized that by looking at data and specific areas of need, she was able to leverage change in a quicker and more meaningful way.

**Connections to literature and theory.** Equity in school funding decisions has been well supported in academic research since the early 1970s (Toutkoushian & Michael, 2007). Although equity in funding is not only cited as a legal obligation from the federal government, but also a moral and professional one, it can be quite challenging for school superintendents to ensure that resources are raised fairly and distributed justifiably across all schools in a district. Although a great amount of research exists which dives into the realm of inequities across certain areas, as with rural school systems or highly impoverished regions, most measures fail to recognize disparities within a single school district or supervisory union (Darden & Cavendish, 2011; Burke, 1999; Roza et al., 2007). As recognized by both the literature and the study participants, disparities within districts are often quite challenging to recognize without intentional equity conversations and measures soundly in place. Similarly, both participating superintendents and the work of Darden and Cavendish (2011) identify certain schools within a district that receive less support, on both the human and fiscal sides of the equation. Armed with an ethical will to examine inequities in their district, study participants found that they were able to shift the how, where, and why money was spent, to support all students in a fairer and more justifiable manner. This “will,” to make fiscal decisions based upon equity, is supported in the work of Roza and Swarz (2007) who urge school leaders to examine (a) spending at each school in the district, (b) make spending transparent across all student groups, (c) compare spending across different types of schools in the same district, and (d) evaluate spending patterns in the context of stated district
strategies (p. 71). This idea and process for ensuring equity across schools and funding decisions was summed up in the comments of Superintendent Brown. He explained how his district began conversations around equity in terms of budgeting, and moving from cultures of difference to ones of similarity and equity.

Regardless of the challenge facing study participants, each superintendent recognized the moral and professional imperative to discuss, analyze, and also explore the effects of their funding decisions. Research supports the understanding that although equity can be quite challenging to measure and implement, Vermont superintendents and their teams must be prepared to meet the needs of all students in each building. Superintendents recognized the necessity to examine their own practices, potentially changing some, to interrupt inequity and make the best possible decisions in the interest of students, communities, and their organization (Darden & Cavendish, 2011).

In connection to Simon’s (1987) theory of *Bounded Rationality*, this framework has an important conceptual connection to the issue of superintendent fiscal decision-making and priority setting around the theme of equity. *Bounded Rationality* accounts for the limitations of individuals making decisions and also considers the resources available to them as they do this work. Without a defined understanding of equity and a uniform practice for addressing and managing inequity, prior to Act 46 mergers, superintendents and their teams unanimously reported the challenge in making appropriate and equitable decisions. Therefore, even individuals who intend to make rational choices are bound to make satisficing (rather than maximizing or optimizing) choices in complex situations (1987). The limits (bounds) on rationality made it nearly impossible for superintendents to cover every contingency and necessitated reliance on rules of thumb. Therefore, a commitment to equity in budgeting and
resource allocation was deemed critical for the successful reorganization and budgeting of unified school districts.

**Conclusion**

The ways in which Vermont superintendents understood Act 46’s merger process and the subsequent tasks associated with consolidated school budgeting found in this dissertation are reflected broadly by the concepts presented in Herbert Simon’s (1987) *Theory of Bounded Rationality*. Additionally, they also provide insight into a context-specific gap identified in academic literature. The overarching research question asked: What processes, meaning making, and values guide the decisions of school superintendents crafting a budget for their newly restructured organization during challenging fiscal times? Specifically, superintendents participating in this study had come to understand their role in guiding their district’s reorganization and setting fiscal priorities as a relatively challenging one, made possible only due to their success with building and sustaining relationships, identifying values and priorities for their communities, and safeguarding equity within the decision-making and allocation process.

Superintendents recognized that to lead their newly reorganized district positively through Vermont’s Act 46’s merger process, followed immediately by the development of a single unified budget document, they had to engage successfully with a variety of stakeholders and across settings. The findings showed that superintendents had to navigate shifting roles and relationships in a variety of contexts, establishing new school boards and administrative teams, along with creating collaboration and communication tools that made partnership possible in the new district. The literature firmly supported superintendents’ recognition that establishing and sustaining relationships was critical for the work of both school budgeting, and ethical decision-making in general. Additionally, the research findings demonstrated the need for superintendents
to not only understand the voices, principles, and priorities of their communities, but also to work toward developing common and shared values that would sustain the new district in the future. The literature provided a significant body of research that supported the importance of gaining stakeholder input and aligning values, which was critical for participating superintendents creating a single unified budget to fiscally represent the new district’s priorities.

Lastly, superintendents’ ability to define equity and manage areas of imbalance in their newly formed district was found to hinge significantly upon their ability to change the paradigm from “me” to “we” in their organization. Armed with a consistent understanding and belief in the tenets of equity, and the need to address areas of inequity, superintendents were able to move toward developing tools and opportunities to analyze, discuss, and address equity in budgeting and resource allocation. Although the findings documented an examination of equity measures across the new district as critical to the work of study participants, a gap in literature was found in equity work within a single school district, and certainly within the context of consolidated and reorganized communities.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this research study have significant potential implications to the profession of school superintendents serving in Vermont, and also for the communities and districts within which they work. Additionally, the research findings may provide valuable insight for other geographic regions of the country considering school consolidation and mergers as a potential direction of study or course of action. Current superintendents in Vermont might make use of this research in order to contemplate the pressures, intersecting variables, and contextual factors that may influence budgeting, mergers, and governance work within Act 46. Additionally, future or aspiring superintendents may consider the findings with regards to a
variety of factors that may influence their work and approaches to collaborative budget
development. Presented next are recommendations for practice to current and future
superintendents and other school leaders, directly tied to research themes: (1) building and
sustaining relationships, (2) understanding the voices and perspectives of stakeholder groups, (3)
collaborative culture and leadership, (4) commitment to a shared vision and purpose, and (5)
equity in the newly merged district.

Recommendations for building and sustaining relationships.

Superintendents understood their collaboration and communication with a variety of
stakeholders within the context of district consolidation and reorganization, and the various
values and priorities impacting their work. Deliberating on this connection may allow other
superintendents to consider their role in collaborative work and relationship building within the
context of mergers and school budgeting. Superintendents may benefit from additional
opportunities to develop their personal and professional comfort levels in building,
strengthening, and relying upon stakeholder relationships. Additionally, these opportunities may
allow superintendents to demonstrate a commitment to collaboration, trust-building, and shared
decision-making within the context of allocating both fiscal and human resources.

The process of district consolidation and mergers is one that may be marked by massive
and varying amounts of change, discomfort, resistance, fear, and also hope. Within the context of
Vermont’s Act 46, governance changes often result in new school boards, different leadership
teams, and transportation and programmatic adjustments. The superintendent leading this work
should pay special attention to serving as a “change manager,” working with the board, school
leaders, and community stakeholders to develop a timeline and approach that meets the needs of
the organization. To successfully consolidate and draft unified budgets, the state of Vermont and
Superintendents’ Association (VSSA) should consider providing training for leaders in community change work and Act 46. Specifically, superintendents may benefit from formal opportunities to learn about: (1) supporting the new School Board with its role, (2) working with the community to ensure they have enough information and support to make decisions, (3) managing change at the building level for students, staff, and leaders, and (4) dealing with difficult stakeholders.

**Understanding the voices and values of the community.** The findings of this research also highlight the necessity to identify and understand the values and priorities of communities, schools, and stakeholders at multiple levels. Especially when superintendents and districts are undergoing restructuring and governance changes, superintendents should actively seek out information to understand what “drives” each community and its stakeholders. Superintendents can gather information and voices from community forums, public meetings, technological applications/tools, and informal meetings with varied stakeholders in each of their communities. Regardless of the communication and collaboration means chosen, superintendents in this study made clear the need for frequent outreach and conversation with diverse stakeholders to engage them in both the consolidation and priority setting leading up to the new school budget.

Additionally, in consideration of identifying the values and priorities of the community, superintendents and their teams should focus on four areas: (1) developing leaders in the new district who value collaboration and engagement; (2) creating partnerships with a variety of groups from the community such as The Rotary Club; (3) building a formal communications plan that offers open and transparent information in a variety of formats; and (4) collecting and analyzing data on progress towards these goals. Superintendents that participated in this study
all believed in the importance of involving their communities through partnerships and formal opportunities.

**Collaborative culture and leadership.** To fully realize both their opportunity and also responsibility to support district consolidation and budgeting, superintendents and educational leaders should spend time to examine what effective leaders do to engage their communities and leadership teams in support of student learning. Through a formal examination into the collaborative practices of other successful leaders, superintendents have a greater likelihood of developing similar strategies, and increasing the probability of successful school reform. In the state of Vermont, and in other areas of the country that are considering consolidation, districts and leaders should learn from colleagues, as opposed to going it alone.

To fill the gaps in their newly merged district, and address potential areas of need, superintendents around the state and country should look to expand their repertoire of partners and leaders. To continue being successful, especially during challenging fiscal times with “tightening belts,” superintendents may need to reimagine the traditional leadership paradigm to invite others into the fray. Furthermore, time for coordination, planning, and assigning of specific tasks must be set aside to ensure that all building and district leaders are on the same page and clear about responsibilities and parameters. Successful school superintendents should seek out opportunities and resources to increase the motivation for collaboration amongst their leadership teams, while also providing ample times for leaders to plan and build relationships.

**Commitment to shared vision and purpose.** As is true with almost any change effort in a school community, involving stakeholders in the process is one of the most valuable and proven strategies towards aligning goals and ensuring commitment. In the process of reorganizing, restructuring, and budgeting, school superintendents must learn to articulate a
compelling vision and mission, and to convince stakeholders that their mission is both moral and
worthy. As was seen in each of the participating superintendent’s stories, superintendents
seeking to navigate this level of change must keep the mission front and center, and be
completely transparent in the evaluation of resources and dollars along those lines. School
superintendents must be tasked with learning to ask important mission and vision related
questions of their communities, focusing on the purpose of schools and public education dollars.
Eventually, successful superintendents will be individuals who can guide their communities
towards answering the “What is our purpose?” question with “Kids First,” or “Every Child,
Every Day.”

**Equity.** Finally, this research also makes clear the need to define equity and work
towards its full implementation in the world of school consolidation, budgeting, and resource
allocation. It is essential that superintendents check their community’s definition of equity before
moving forward with a “deep dive” into a variety of metrics that examine schools, programs, and
personnel to ensure that all students are receiving equitable services and opportunities. Since this
research was situated in Vermont, a new state “Equity definition” exists that has the potential to
support both current and future superintendents seeking to begin this work in their district.

Additionally, school superintendents, serving as the CFO and CEO of their newly merged
district, need to arm themselves with a solid understanding of the impact of budgetary inequity
upon student learning and school success. It is recommended that superintendents navigating
consolidation and budgeting seek to address and answer the following questions in their work:
(1) What are the competing pressures our district will face when it comes to allocating local and
federal funds?; (2) What is the timeline for district decision-making regarding the budget? Is the
budget a single process, or a year-round project?; (3) What is on the horizon for our district in
the next year(s)?; and (4) How can we ensure greater transparency and increased spending on the highest need kids and schools in the district? Is our district poised to consider vertical and/or horizontal equity measures, and take steps to combat inequity?

School superintendents and other professionals engaged in leadership activities are the intended audience for this research study. Additionally, local school boards and state level professional boards (Vermont Superintendents’ Association and Vermont School Boards’ Association) may discover value in the dissertation’s findings. Considering the audience pool, and the geographic region that the dissertation was situated within, it is important to note that there may be a potential limitation in the transferability of research findings. While the context of Vermont and Act 46 may differ from other areas of the country, considering the diversity of school demographics chosen for the study, the findings may still be transferable to other areas undergoing school consolidation and the subsequent budgeting process. Specifically, the research findings provide insight into superintendent relationship building and priority setting, within the context of school governance and budgeting changes.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

With the implications for educational practice in mind, future research should be considered along four major veins. First, future researchers may consider repeating the study with other Vermont districts not included in the original research. Vermont’s Act 46 will see several other districts following the merger deadlines and consolidation plan in the next few years, and it would be worthwhile to see if those superintendents and communities experienced consolidation and school budgeting in similar ways to the first study group. Similarly, future research may look further at the demographic differences between these districts, making note of potential similarities or differences in experiences based upon geography and district make-up.
Secondly, because Vermont’s context is so unique, and Act 46’s language and requirements are so precise, future research may look at other areas of the country that are considering school consolidation and district mergers. This research may seek to include the political and financial reasons behind state driven consolidation, to provide direction and oversight for politicians, local leaders, and school administrators. While each of the participating superintendents recognized a level of “fiscal tightening” with regards to their spending and level of fiscal responsibility under the merger and Vermont’s mandates, it is important to note that superintendents generally felt as if their communities were in a relatively healthy financial climate. Future research may seek to examine how consolidation and budgeting are impacted when states and communities face deep fiscal stress or crisis, and how this potentially drives organizational and financial decisions.

Third, although school superintendents play a crucial role in the reorganization of their districts and the subsequent budgeting process, their story is only one piece of the school finance and general governance change puzzle. Future researchers may look to engage other stakeholders to explore their perspectives, including individuals such as school board members, parents, building level leaders, and central office staff. As an example, research that studied the changed role of a school board member who moved from a small community board to a larger consolidated board, and the changed roles and relationships as a result of school mergers, may provide valuable insight into governance, priority setting, and financial decisions. Additionally, future research may also consider the employment of a single-district case study, following one superintendent and their team as they worked from initial merger conversations through successful consolidation, and the passage of a unified school budget.
Finally, because this research indicated that equity was a critical part of the funding formula for superintendents and their districts, future studies may seek to examine equity and funding through a social justice lens. For example, future studies might look to apply John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (1971), as an approach to alleviating inequity by targeting the most disadvantaged. Additionally, studies might also look through Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice* (2009), which might hypothetically consider school funding as a means to alleviate specific and individualized needs of disadvantaged schools or populations. Future research may consider using this lens to examine mergers and school funding as a way to understand if services need to be prioritized in the most central manner possible, or rather based on specific demographic or communities’ particular needs and capabilities.
References


https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/files/SchoolBudgetBriefFINAL.pdf


Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date: ______________________________

Interview Location: ______________________________

Time of Interview: ______________________________

Interviewer: Kristin Hubert, doctoral student

Interviewee (name): ______________________________

Position of interviewee: ______________________________

Opening Comments:

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of Vermont superintendents developing a budget for their newly merged districts, within the wider context of school financing. While the nature of individuals’ viewpoints and beliefs may vary from district to district, superintendents commonly report challenges relating to fiscal restraint, decision-making, and stakeholder pressures and influences.

The data collection tool used in this qualitative study will be today’s semi-structured interview. It is expected that the interview will last approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim, in accordance with phenomenological research practices.

The qualitative data collected from today’s interview will be analyzed and the researcher’s analysis will be made available to you, to validate that your experiences are not misinterpreted. A follow-up interview may be conducted to clarify the researcher’s interpretation, as well as allow you to elaborate further on your experiences.

Before we start the interview, you will be provided with Northeastern University’s Human Subjects Consent-to-Participate Form. Please note that your identity will be kept confidential and that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

While there are several guiding questions to help the researcher stay focused, this interview is also an opportunity for you to share your experiences in response to my questions. Please take your time in your responses.

Introductory Question:

- Could you please tell me about your newly organized district and your early experiences leading as the superintendent?

Interview Questions
IQ1: Tell me about your personal vision for public education in your reorganized district. What do you value most or prioritize? How does this come into play as you build a balanced budget? How do you balance your vision with that of your newly organized district?

IQ2: Describe your professional code of ethics when it comes to making funding decisions? How does your professional code of ethics align with your personal code of ethics? How and when do you apply your code of ethics when you make funding decisions? How do you adhere to this code when building a budget for your district? Tell me about a time when your fiscal decision did not feel ethical, or came into conflict with your own personal code?

IQ3: Please tell me about the budget development and approval process in your newly organized school district? Who is involved, what do they do in the process (or what is their responsibility in the process) and what level?

IQ4: Tell me about a time when you had to make a complex decision related to school budgeting. What were the factors that were most important in that decision-making process? What did you need to consider?

IQ5: What were the challenges you faced when making decisions about (time described above)?

IQ6: Tell me about the stakeholder groups/audiences you have to consider when making budgetary decisions. How do you consider their values? How do you know their values?

IQ7: What does equity in budgetary decision-making mean to you? When you make decisions, where and how does your definition of equity fit? To what extent does equity constrain your decision-making as it relates to budgeting in your school district? How does equity influence the decision-making in your reorganized school district as it relates to the development of your final budget? Do you consider vertical or horizontal measures, and do you keep track of equity along these lines?

IQ8: Can you please describe, how you obtain the necessary information you need in order to build a final school budget document? Are there any tools, mechanisms, or processes that you use Is one tool or process more helpful than another? Can you give me an example of information gathering before making budgetary decisions?

IQ9: Tell me about a time where you had to make a budgetary decision and did not have all the information. When did you find out the missing information? How did that change your decision? Would your decision have been different had you known what you know now? How would it have been different? If it would not have been different, why not?

IQ10: How has the experience of making decisions without full information changed how you approach decision-making now?

IQ11: Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion that we have not covered?
Appendix B: Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Graduate School of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Afi Wiggins; Student Researcher, Kristin Hubert

Title of Project: The Intersecting Variables Impacting Superintendents’ School Budget Development

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are currently a practicing Vermont school superintendent.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of the decision-making process and considerations of superintendents, crafting a budget for their organization during challenging fiscal times. The research will potentially offer suggestions for new superintendents entering the field, or those hoping to defend or explain their budgetary decisions.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview will consist of broad and open-ended questions around budgeting and decision-making, and the second interview will consist of follow-up questions and provide an opportunity for reflection. Interviews will be recorded to ensure accuracy of responses and themes. You will be asked to review the interview transcript and subsequent analysis for accuracy.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. Each interview will take about one hour. After the interview is transcribed and analysis completed, you will be asked to review the information to ensure accuracy and reliability.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

This study will invite minimal risks and there will be no direct benefits to study participants. Two potential risks include the possibility of disclosure of confidential data, as well as loss of time for Vermont superintendents. To protect the confidentiality of individual participants, once signed consent is given, each superintendent and their district will be given pseudonyms to be used in perpetuity throughout each stage of the research and final report.

The estimated time involved for each participant in the study is less than three hours. This includes time for the phone conversation, the initial interview, and the subsequent follow-up interview. All measures will be taken to respect the needs and availability of study participants. As a result of each these steps to ensure confidentiality and the guard against extensive loss of professional time, it is believed that study participants will be sufficiently protected from possible harm. Additionally, you are reminded that you have the right to omit any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, and withdraw from participation at any point.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help the field and practicing superintendents in the future.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you or your district in any way, or any individual as being of this project.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, the researcher will use pseudonyms for participants in both interviews and comments. The names of each participant will be removed from all data, graphs, and study findings. Additionally, all data will be secured with password protection known only to the researcher. After a three-year period following the completion of the study and dissertation defense, all data will be destroyed in a timely manner according to IRB guidelines. Data destruction will include a full wipe of the hard drives used to store study related data and recorded interviews. Only pseudonyms and non-identifying data will be used in the final report.

Also, official oversight or monitoring may be done by Northeastern University. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No research-related injury or harm is suspected from this research. Therefore, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of participation in this research.
Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kristin Hubert, at Hubert.kr@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also Dr. Wiggins, the Principal Investigator, at a.wiggins@northeastern.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
Participants will not be compensated for their participation in this research.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There will not be any costs incurred by the participant for the study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be a licensed VT administrator currently serving an active Superintendent contract in the state of Vermont to participate in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
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Appendix C: Cross-Case Categorical Analysis of Emergent Themes

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<tr>
<th>Sup. #1</th>
<th>Sup. #2</th>
<th>Sup. #3</th>
<th>Sup. #4</th>
<th>Sup. #5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change the paradigm</td>
<td>Value priorities and collaboration</td>
<td>Positive process</td>
<td>Collaboratively – cohesive work</td>
<td>Collaboratively develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations at every level</td>
<td>Communicate – systems in place</td>
<td>Cohesive vision – leadership team all pulling in same direction</td>
<td>Communities – voices</td>
<td>Building of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does equity mean in terms of budgeting? Equity lens</td>
<td>Focus on equity throughout</td>
<td>Unified – easier to get work done</td>
<td>Year-long process – budget finances</td>
<td>Engaging students, staff, and the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students engagement</td>
<td>Philosophy over finances – don’t hurt kids or programs</td>
<td>Education is infrastructure for our country</td>
<td>priorities and vision</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working together to bring it all together</td>
<td>Increased efficiencies</td>
<td>Good ethical decisions – play the long game</td>
<td>Money into same pot – equity of opportunity for kids</td>
<td>Centralized and efficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a target – get a place to start from the board</td>
<td>Kids first and foremost - vision</td>
<td>Emotionally connected to the reality of it – relationships/people</td>
<td>Equity autonomy matrix – data – normalize the numbers</td>
<td>Multi-layered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build a vision that the budget is funding</td>
<td>Compiling data</td>
<td>Board sets parameters to start</td>
<td>Tough decisions</td>
<td>Students first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-long process</td>
<td>Leadership team</td>
<td>Conversations – collaboration</td>
<td>Leadership – support</td>
<td>Leadership team – their voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep connection among the community</td>
<td>Community – connected</td>
<td>Where do we go, vision and money wise?</td>
<td>Here for kids and fairness in each school</td>
<td>Board gives me parameters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People want to connect – voices</td>
<td>Picking at inequity</td>
<td>Decisions about equity – shared ownership for all students and the resources</td>
<td>Better way to do business</td>
<td>Assigning resources where they need to be – equity lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better as merged district – changing our culture and moving towards something better for all kids in each school</td>
<td>Best guess – work with information we have</td>
<td>Dollars where kids are</td>
<td>Kids first – principal lens</td>
<td>You’re selling not just a number, but also a model (vision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build ratios – where are we? Where does each school stand?</td>
<td>Year-long process</td>
<td>Logic/data behind decisions</td>
<td>Deploy resources differently</td>
<td>Better as a merged district – more equity and opportunities for students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different and better as merged district – can offer kids more Finances, debts, and assets</td>
<td>Better in a unified system – more efficient and less “emotional”</td>
<td>Separate resources based on our vision and what we want for our schools</td>
<td>Big change for community – what’s their magic sweet spot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forums – talk to a lot of people Behind the scenes work</td>
<td></td>
<td>Board makes goals around budgeting</td>
<td>Class sizes and supports for kids</td>
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