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School Superintendents and The Convergent Social and Political Crises of 2020 and 2021

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School Superintendents and The Convergent Social and Political Crises of 2020 and 2021

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Approvals

In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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DEDICATION

For School Superintendents
You had the courage to lead down an unfamiliar path, with no map to guide the way and no end in sight.

For my daughter, Gabbi
You are my greatest teacher. Always stay curious about the world and know that nothing is out of your reach.

For my grandmothers
You would be so very proud.

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so I could write with the sun on my face and my toes in the sand. I could not have done this without you, and I am so grateful you are my person.

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ABSTRACT

The health, social, political, and economic crises that had national and global impacts in 2020 and 2021 brought renewed attention to systemic inequalities in public education and challenged school superintendents to reconsider how they involve others in addressing those disparities. This narrative study explored how the convergent crises and tense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts school superintendents personally and professionally. Guiding questions inquired about how superintendents recounted their experiences during this period and their impact on their conception of their role and responsibilities and their identity as a leader. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select ten participants from varied K-12 districts throughout Massachusetts who were experienced in the role of superintendent Two remote, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant during the summer and fall of 2021. Thematic analysis of the narratives yielded eight findings. The findings portray experiences characterized by a climate of unfamiliar, uncertain, and divisive conditions that required adaptations to their sensemaking, decision-making, communication, and emotional intelligence skills and conditions that necessitated expanded collaboration and novel engagement with the community. The findings show that the experience occasioned changes in how they inhabit the political space of their role and in how they communicate with stakeholders, increasingly leading them to think of their role as relationally interactive, politically embedded, and focused on equity. Recommendations advise that superintendents (a) embrace relational and interactive leadership practices and make crisis management and strategies for communication, engagement, and collaboration priorities for their professional learning and (b) become proactive on issues of social justice and equity. The study also urges strengthened role affinity networks to support their work as superintendents and their own well-being.

Keywords: School Superintendents, Crisis Leadership, Health Pandemic, Sensemaking, Role Conception, Leadership Identity

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

CHAPTER ONE: **Introduction to the Study**

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I explore how ten Massachusetts school superintendents narrate their experience of leading during the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 and how that experience has affected them both personally and professionally. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of superintendents during this critical period and the impact of this experience on their conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent. Understanding how superintendents are making sense of this convergence may provide critical insight and learning that can benefit practitioners, researchers, and individuals involved in preparation programs for public and educational leadership.

The superintendents involved in this study are all experienced educational leaders in the state of Massachusetts who had begun their tenure as superintendents in or before 2018. In this chapter, I situate the study within the context of the health, political, racial, and social justice crises that converged within the period from January 2020 through the fall of 2021, sharing the rationale for the study and the research questions that guide it. Additionally, I define key terms used throughout this dissertation, provide an overview of the literature used to frame this study, and anticipate the potential contributions of this research to the fields of public administration and educational leadership. This chapter concludes with an outline of the chapters contained in this dissertation.

Background and Context

On January 1, 2020, as the world ushered in the second decade of the 21st century, the media used the familiar 20/20 visual acuity measurement to project the hopeful prediction that

the year ahead would bring clarity and vision (Adams-Wade, 2020). Oprah Winfrey even capitalized on this idea with an inspirational tour focused on opportunities and transformation (TODAY, 2020). While these news items offered playful takes on commonplace imagery and the practice of New Year resolutions, at that moment, it would have been hard to predict the intersection of events that would unfold in the coming year and their collective impact on the fabric of American society. Nor could anyone predict their potential to bring to the forefront many of the societal issues that have tended to exist beyond the peripheral view of many Americans.

History has previously presented us with critical moments in which the convergence of ideologies, critical decisions, and events has left our country forever changed. Often described as tipping points (Gladwell, 2002) or watershed moments (Watershed, 2020), during these periods, the specific intersection of events, coupled with pre-existing tension around political and social ideologies, has provided societal institutions the necessary push to propel us collectively toward new ways of thinking and being (Martínez-Fernández, 2020). For example, the year 1968 has been referred to as a watershed due to the convergence of critical events on multiple fronts of American society and the notable division of the American people (Walsh, 2018). During this momentous year, the intersection of global and national political and social unrest due to rising tensions around the Vietnam War involvement, ongoing Civil Rights protests, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and the rise of youth counterculture brought the turbulent decade of the 1960s to a head (McLaughlin, 2014, National Archives News, 2018, Walsh, 2017), paving a pathway for notable shifts in Americans values around racial and gender equality, peace, and environmental awareness leading into the 1970s (Rokeach, 1974).

Similarly, during the unprecedented years of 2020 and 2021, the American people were simultaneously confronted by (a) escalating warnings about the effects of climate change and issues of environmental sustainability; (b) a global health pandemic that forced the closure of school buildings and an abrupt shift to remote learning; (c) economic crisis, and historic unemployment as businesses reduced their workforce or closed amid stay-at-home restrictions; (d) massive protest movements for social justice and increased outcry over gun violence and police brutality; and (e) a deep political divide marked by presidential impeachment proceedings, and a bitterly contested presidential election. While historians might argue that we can only determine the pivotal nature of a moment in hindsight (Cuban, 2020a), a case could be made that this time period, while only recently behind us, has the potential for consideration in these terms.

As a school-based administrator, I grappled with how to respond to the convergence of these issues in the moment. Further, my personal experience of leading a school with grades 6-12 during this critical period tested my tolerance for uncertainty and capacity for flexible problem solving, caused me to reflect on who I am as an educator, consider the belief system that guides my leadership practice, and examine my own assumptions about schooling, the role of school leaders in facilitating learning and adaptation to changing context and the potential impact of this moment on the future of public education.

My desire to pursue doctoral study was prompted, in part, by my great curiosity about the conditions that either promote or inhibit organizational growth and change and the critical role of leadership in this dynamic process. That curiosity propelled a qualifying paper literature review in which I examined what the scholarship on school leadership reveals about the ways that responsibility for instructional leadership is distributed throughout school districts and how interactions among various formal and informal leaders can advance ongoing instructional

improvement to meet the increasingly complex and changing needs of 21st-century students. It was through the intersecting experiences of this investigation and my personal experience of leading a Massachusetts public secondary school during the complex and interconnected events of 2020 that I began to think more specifically about positional educational leaders and the critical nature of how school superintendents make sense of the complex circumstances to promote adaptive learning for their organizations, and its relevance to the events of the current era.

Statement of the Problem

The position of public school district superintendent was first established in some U.S. cities in the mid-19th century to oversee district management, interact with the school board, and provide instructional oversight (Kowalski & Bruner, 2011). By the turn of the century, factors such as the consolidation and regionalization of districts, the passage of compulsory attendance laws, and the demand for greater school accountability and efficiency resulted in the appointment of superintendents by most cities and rural, regional districts to manage the increased size and complexity of school districts (Kowalski, 2003, Kowalski and Bruner, 2011).

As increased industrialization and globalization of our economy intersecting with the social movements of the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century have changed what it means to educate students for participation in and contribution to American society, the role of school superintendent has become increasingly more complex and demanding than ever. Kowalski and Bruner (2011) argue that superintendents must not only function as teacher-scholars, managers, democratic leaders, applied social scientists, visionary planners, and community communicators, but they must also know when to assume each distinct role as well as nimbly shift their attention from one role to another. Further, as the bridge between the school

district and the broader community, superintendents face the challenge of navigating the local political landscape and establishing effective working partnerships with all community stakeholders (Keedy & Bjork, 2002; Kowalski & Bruner, 2011).

Our current era of rapid change has increased the pressure on organizations to keep pace and requires the artful use of flexible and adaptable leadership practices to meet external demands (Dess & Picken, 2000, Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). While industrial-era concepts of leadership have previously stressed rigid hierarchy and individual leaders as the source of problem-solving and direction, this conception of leadership is ill-suited for the complexities of collective learning required by the issues facing information-age organizations such as school districts.

Organization and leadership scholars have long stressed that understanding both organizational context and culture is critical to leading (Schon, 1970; Western, 2008). To that end, addressing complex problems requires leadership that can quickly gather relevant information, assess the organization's impact, and facilitate a problem-solving approach that considers all stakeholders (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Yukl & Mahsad, 2010). This responsibility becomes particularly challenging during highly intense, disorienting situations, such as those experienced during 2020 & 2021, where personal and collective sensemaking became critical to navigating immediate technical challenges and promoting long-range adaptive possibilities.

Mobilizing others in the face of adaptive challenges can be problematic for leaders and their organizations as these situations often (a) bring to light a gap between the spoken values and actual practice, (b) demonstrate competing commitments, (c) necessitate the discussion of matters previously treated as non-discussable. These challenges can explain why people avoid this kind of work (Heifetz et al., 2009; Jayan et al., 2016; Pak et al., 2020), opting to engage in

the more straightforward, technical aspects of an issue. For leaders, addressing these challenges means promoting and facilitating the reflective work necessary to address the human tendency to resist change and maintain the status quo (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

The interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises of 2020 and 2021 placed a heavy burden on schools and intensified the demand for superintendents to meet adaptive challenges within a rapidly changing and unfamiliar context. As the American public makes sense of this complex period and considers what it means for the future of our society, it stands to reason that public education, as a major societal institution, will be drawn deeply into that sensemaking. More specifically, school superintendents, as the bridge between external policy, societal influences, and local public school systems, are central figures in negotiating the local response to this critical convergence and facilitating the adaptive learning demanded by the tumultuous context that surrounded this period (Sawchuk, 2020b) have much to offer to this discussion.

Public education is at once a reflection of our society and the promise of the one we strive to be. As such, the messaging around schools is often about educating all students to reach their highest potential and future-focused toward nurturing tomorrow's global citizens and innovators. However, while mid-20th century legislation increased schools' diversity through court rulings demanding their desegregation, protection for special needs students, and equal opportunity for girls and reform movements and accountability measures of the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century have placed greater emphasis on increasingly high levels of academic performance for all students, the "grammar of schooling"[1] has remained largely unchanged for the last century.

[1] The phrase grammar of schooling can be understood as "the regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454).

The interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises experienced during the years 2020 and 2021 brought systemic inequities to the forefront and increased the urgency for schools to examine long-standing assumptions and practices related to instructional practice, student learning, and the structure of schools. This led many to questions regarding whether this potential crossroads in our society will result in a watershed moment of innovation and change for public education (Cuban, 2020a, Cuban, 2020b, Kohn, 2020). At the same time, it also amplified long-standing tensions around the purposes of public education, local vs. governmental oversight, and where the power lies to decide what comes next for schools. To this end, as superintendents organized the immediate technical response of their districts to the convergence of events presented in 2020 & 2021, they were simultaneously confronted with a convergence of questions regarding (a) the school's obligations related to public health; (b) the instructional organization of schools (Zhao, 2020); (c) the role of public education in addressing systemic inequalities and injustices and attending to the overall health and safety of children (Cipriano, Rappolt-Schlichtmann, & Brackett, 2020; The Society for Research in Child Development, 2020); (d) the development of media literacy in a global, digital society (Buchholz, DeHart, Moorman, 2020); and (e) the contribution of schools to civic engagement and response to the political divide. School superintendents, as leaders of school districts, are critical figures in creating and nurturing the "holding environment"[2] for the significant organizational sensemaking, reflection, and adaptive learning necessary to confront such issues and promote the necessary occurrence of change on a community level.

[2] While the term holding environment is associated with Heifetz and his writing on adaptive leadership, he acknowledges that the term can be attributed to Donald Winnicott (1965) and "originated in psychoanalysis to describe the relationship between therapist and patient", whereby "the therapist holds the patient in a process of developmental learning (1994, p. 104)." Subsequently, it was used in other writings in the field of psychoanalysis prior to Heifetz's use in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994).

To this end, leading in the midst of this convergence likely had a significant impact on superintendents. The nature of that impact- how superintendents make sense of this critical moment, how the experience influences their conceptions of the role and responsibilities, and their identity in the role of the superintendent- will have long-lasting consequences for the role and public education. Understanding that impact requires careful study.

Statement of Purpose and Guiding Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the convergent crises and tense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally.

This study sought to understand superintendents' experiences during this critical period and the impact of that experience on their conception of their role and identity as a superintendent. The questions that drive this study were:

1. What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?
2. How did the experience affect their conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions will help to ensure clarity of terms frequently used in this dissertation:

Adaptive Challenges: Challenges that are often more complex to understand than technical challenges and require an assessment of values, beliefs, and assumptions in order to generate learning on the part of individuals and the organization.

Adaptive Learning: Learning that requires a change in values, beliefs, or behaviors on the part of an individual or organization to meet the demands of changing conditions.

Crisis Events: any event or period that may lead to instability or danger impacting a group or all of society. A crisis can also be thought of as a testing time or an emergency.

Professional Identity: How we perceive ourselves within our occupational context based on our attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences.

School Superintendent: A public administrator whose job is to oversee school administration within a municipal or regional school district.

Sensemaking: The cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals (Evans, 2007, p. 161).

Social Movements: Broad alliances of people focused on a specific political or social issue advocating for or resisting social change.

Technical Challenges: Challenges that are readily understood and solved using current policy, skills, and know-how.

Significance of the Study

This study was grounded in the assertion that society is at a critical moment in history and that the experience of leading during the convergence of crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 has the potential to trigger changes in how superintendents conceive of the work of the superintendency and themselves as superintendents. Further, recognizing that the issues illuminated during this period of amplified complexity are not likely to diminish in the near future, the significance of this study rests in the timeliness of capturing

the experiences of superintendents within this context as they grasp and adapt to the current realities of their role.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 85) suggest that the purpose of narrative inquiry is to enhance both personal and social growth. Stories of experience are valuable and often underutilized sources of knowledge with respect to individual and collective leadership practice (Ospina and Dodge, 2005). Through this study, I was able to capture and explore the individual narratives of superintendents within the context of a collectively lived phenomenon. This exploration has the potential to strengthen the field by illuminating leadership sensemaking and experience in and across contexts during a collectively experienced period of crisis and provide insight into future conceptions of the superintendency.

Therefore, this study, its findings, and recommendations for leadership practice and the professional learning and ongoing support of superintendents have the potential to benefit four groups. They include (a) current and future superintendents; (b) program administrators that prepare future superintendents; (c) agencies that set policy and standards for superintendents; and (d) researchers in the fields of public administration, education, and change leadership.

Review of the Literature

Three areas of literature were reviewed to inform the interpretation of data and the discussion of the findings for this study. They include the existing scholarship that offers: (a) analyses and depictions of the superintendency; (b) crisis leadership and management; and (c) interactive perspectives on organizational leadership. This section provides an overview of the examination of the literature presented in Chapter 2.

Analysis and Depictions of the Superintendency

The role of the school superintendent has become increasingly more complex and demanding. Since the emergence of the role of public-school superintendent in the mid-19th century, its conception and responsibilities have matured from that of a school manager to that of a multi-dimensional, and situationally nuanced organizational and community leader and change agent (Callahan, 1966; Keedy & Bjork, 2002; Kowalski, 2001, 2003; Kowalski & Bruner, 2011; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Therefore, to build a foundation for exploring how the experience of leading during the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 has affected superintendents' conception of their role and responsibilities, literature that offers historical accounts of how the role has evolved and empirical studies of how superintendents function in the role and the challenges they face was reviewed.

Crisis Leadership and Management

The focal period for this study is defined by a convergence of crisis events, such as the COVID-19 global health pandemic, and events spurring a call for racial and social justice, such as the murder of George Floyd. Crises such as these often originate externally and are beyond the organization's control but must be confronted and responded to internally (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Crisis tends to span multiple phases (Grissom and Condon, 2021; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993; Wooten & James, 2008). As such, leading during times of crisis involves quickly gathering information and establishing lines of communication to support decision-making (Bishop et al., 2015; Boin et al., 2013) and enacting an organizational response, and utilizing leadership practices that promote engagement, transparency, and honest communication to build trust and support adaptive learning through each stage of response and recovery (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Further, it is noted that tending to such practices and systems in times of stability

supports responsiveness and adaptability in times of crisis (Cohen et al., 2017; Fairbanks et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 1999; Urick et al., 2021).

While much of the literature addressing crisis leadership is centered on mitigating and managing crises from a business perspective, increasingly research has also addressed crisis leadership specifically within the context of schools (Brock et al., 2001; Decker, 1997; Kibble, 1999; Lichtenstein et al., 1994; Lochmiller, 2021; Mutch, 2015; Smith and Riley, 2012). Therefore, literature pertaining to leadership and management through various stages of crisis events and scholarship identifying key leadership competencies such as sensemaking were explored as a means to understand, frame and discuss the experiences of superintendents were reviewed.

Interactive Perspectives on Organizational Leadership

While the focus of this study is on superintendents and their experiences as leaders, scholars argue that attending solely to the action of individuals from a strictly hierarchical perspective does not translate to the connected, complex, and rapidly changing society of our current Knowledge Era society (Balci, 2014; Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Drucker, 2012; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) and that modern era leadership practices must promote adaptive change and learning (Schreiber & Carley, 2006). For example, Complexity Leadership Theory (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001) acknowledges organizations as complex, adaptive systems where various forms of leadership intersect. Through this lens, leadership practice is framed as a collective, interdependent process that allows learning, innovation, and adaptability to occur during times of change, unpredictability, and uncertainty (Drath, 2001; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Therefore, given the dynamic complexity attributed to the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021, scholarship

theorizing about complex human interactions and organizational contextual conditions was reviewed. This literature informed the analysis and interpretation of the varied experiences described by superintendents.

Overview of Research Methodology

This study is built on the assertion that the interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises experienced during the years 2020 and 2021 have brought systemic inequities to the forefront of our society and increased the urgency for schools to examine long-standing assumptions and practices. This study explored the stories of school superintendents and how their experience leading during this period affected them personally and professionally. Employing a narrative approach, this research allowed for gathering participants' stories as a means to understand both their experiences and the impact of those experiences on their identity as a leader and their conception of the role of the superintendent.

Application was made to the Lesley University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to study Massachusetts superintendents using proper protocols for protecting human subjects. Once approved, participants were recruited for the study that met the criteria of (a) being a superintendent of Massachusetts public school systems serving grades PreK-12; (b) having served in their current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019- 2020 and 2020-2021 school years; and (c) having expressed an intent to continue working as superintendents for at least two more years.

Narrative studies often focus on a small number of participants, sampled on an opportunistic and network basis (Squire, 2008). Therefore, consistent with narrative research, purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify participants for this study through my professional contacts. This approach allowed an efficient method of connecting with

superintendents with a high potential to meet participation criteria through my professional contacts.

Ten superintendents were recruited to participate in two in-depth interview sessions using a responsive semi-structured approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2011) to solicit their individual stories yet keep consistency and structure in the interview process. Interview protocol questions were developed in alignment with the main research questions of this study but also allowed for probing questions to support deepening the narratives shared by participants and to help them reflect further on their experiences.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and condensed by salient ideas for critical focus through the creation of interview summaries. Finally, the data were analyzed for narrative experience and reported as findings for transferable understanding. While reproducing the full narratives of participants would have been too voluminous, much of the data, as evidenced from the superintendents' voices, were retained and presented in the findings.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One introduces the study. It includes background about the topic, a statement of the problem to be addressed by the study, the purpose of the study with guiding research questions, the definition of terms, a description of expected contributions to the field, a summary of the literature to be examined, an overview of the methodology employed and a chapter outline.

Chapter Two consists of a rationale for and review of relevant bodies of literature that informed the interpretation of data and the discussion of the study findings. The three areas of scholarship examined include (a) analyses and depictions of the role of the superintendent; (b) crisis leadership and management; and (c) interactive perspectives on organizational leadership.

Chapter Three presents the methods employed by this study. The chapter introduces the study's design, including a description of and rationale for using a narrative design approach. Information pertaining to the study setting and selection of participants is described, as well as the delimitations of the study. Explanations about the development of the interview protocol are included, as are descriptions of the data collection and data analysis procedures. The chapter also addresses measures taken to protect participant confidentiality, reduce biases held by the researcher, and increase the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Chapter Four presents and analyzes data that were collected from in-depth interviews. The guiding questions are used to organize and explain the findings and to present the narrative excerpts that illustrate and support the findings.

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation. It includes a summary of the study but concentrates on discussing the findings and their implications for scholarship, practice, and policy. This chapter also includes recommendations for practice and further research, as well as my own concluding reflections.

CHAPTER TWO: **Review of Literature**

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally through understanding superintendents' experiences during this critical period and the impact of that experience on their conception of their role and identity as a superintendent. Therefore, to lay a foundation for this exploration the literature review is organized into three major areas: (a) analyses and depictions of the superintendency; (b) crisis leadership and management; and (c) interactive perspectives on organizational leadership.

Analyses and Depictions of the Superintendency

The role of the school superintendent has become increasingly more complex and demanding. Since the emergence of the superintendent role within public education, its conception and responsibilities have matured from a mid-19th century manager to a 21st-century, multifaceted role of a teacher-scholar, democratic leader, applied social scientist, visionary planner, political analyst, and community communicator (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2001, 2003; Kowalski & Bruner, 2011; Tyack & Hansot, 1982;). Further, the dynamic complexity of our current era demands that superintendents know when and how to assume any combination of these roles (Kowalski & Bruner, 2011). Therefore, to build a foundation for exploring how the experience of leading during the convergent crises and tense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021 has affected superintendents' conception of their role and responsibilities, I reviewed literature that offers both historical accounts of how the role has evolved and empirical studies of how superintendents function in practice.

Historically, the role of the public-school superintendent has evolved through five broadly recognized conceptions tied to what was happening within the larger social, economic, and political context of American society (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Using a discursive analysis that relied heavily on rhetoric and writings from 1865 to 1965 (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002), historian Raymond Callahan (1962, 1966) concluded that four separate role conceptualizations of the school district superintendent emerged prior to 1970: (a) *scholarly educational leader*; (b) *organizational manager and business executive*; (c) *educational statesman*; and (d) *applied social scientist*.

In the years following Callahan's detailed account of the four conceptualizations, The United States transitioned from a manufacturing-based to an information-based society. Reflecting on this societal change, Druker (1999) claimed that all organizations had entered a new era referred to as the information age. Analyzing how districts and schools were affected by this transition, Kowalski (2001, 2005, 2006) contended that a fifth distinct role conceptualization, the superintendent as a *communicator,* had emerged Kowalski et al., 2011).

While each role conception, as articulated by Callahan (1966) and Kowalski (2001), is based on the prioritized expectations of a particular time, as the priorities shifted and new demands and expectations emerged, previous ones were not rendered irrelevant (Cuban, 1976). Consequently, the position of superintendent didn't just evolve, it became increasingly more demanding and complex over time, a pattern that persists today.

In the following subsections, I will describe the five recognized conceptualizations of the superintendent role, the historical context, and the shifts in discourse that delineate each and the current demands, expectations linked to each conceptualization.

Scholarly Educational Leader

The first conceptualization of the superintendent role, as identified by Callahan (1966), was the *Scholarly Educational Leader,* which was dominant from 1865 to 1910. Devoting much of their time to instructional supervision and curricular oversight, the first superintendents were considered "teachers of teachers" who had proven themselves to be effective "master teachers." (Callahan, 1962; Kowalski & Björk, 2005; Kowalski & Bruner, 2011; Spring 1994). To this end, the role of the superintendent as a teacher-leader was summarized in an 1890 report on urban superintendents:

> It must be made his [*sic*] recognized duty to train teachers and inspire them with high ideals; to revise the course of study when new light shows that improvement is possible; to see that pupils and teachers are supplied with needed appliances for the best possible work; to devise rational methods of promoting pupils. (Cuban, 1976, p. 16 in Kowalski and Bruner, 2011)

These early school leaders, particularly in larger city districts, were seen as schools' moral and intellectual leaders, often authoring professional journal articles about the philosophy and history of education (Cuban, 1988; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Firmly grounded in the teaching profession, there was little separation between teachers and administrators (Kowalski and Bruner, 2011), and their oversight and interactions were primarily internal to the school. Without formal administrative preparation, early superintendents were subordinate to school board members and other officials who retained authority over the business and political aspects of school governance, such as budgeting, accounting, and hiring personnel (Callahan, 1966).

By the early 1900s, the teacher-scholar conceptualization began to fall out of favor, but the emphasis on instructional leadership in the role of the superintendent has continued to

fluctuate throughout the history of public education. In particular, school reform movements focused on instructional outcomes and student achievement over the last few decades have resulted in a resurgent emphasis on this aspect of the work (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005).

Previous studies have shown that superintendents most often still begin their careers as classroom teachers (Kowalski et al., 2010). The most recent American Association of School Administrators (AASA) decennial study (Tienken, 2021) verifies this pattern, noting that 97% of superintendents begin their career path as a public-school classroom teacher and that 62% of participating superintendents spend between five and twelve years in the classroom before becoming building-based administrators. Current literature notes that superintendents that are successful in their work understand, model, and support evidence-based best practices in the areas of instruction, assessment, and classroom management (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The 2020 decennial study (Tienken, 2021) further confirms the increasing expectation that superintendents act as instructional leaders, noting that 58% of participants report that they were hired for this purpose as compared to 20% in the 2010 study (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021).

Organizational Manager and Business Executive

The second conception of the superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) is that of the *Organizational Manager and Business Executive.* Largely influenced by the tenets of the Industrial Revolution, this characterization emerged around 1910 and remained prominent throughout roughly 1930 (Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2010). As the country experienced unprecedented waves of immigration and industrialization brought about greater urbanization, city schools, like the communities they served, grew increasingly larger and more complex (Björk et al., 2014). With the rise of factories, methods of production and efficiency became

culturally important, bringing with it the need for a more scientific approach to management[3] (Brunner et al., 2002; Callahan, 1962; Kowalski, 1999). To this end, particularly in large, urban schools, the prevailing school of thought was that both factories and schools should be led by individuals who could improve operations by concentrating on time and efficiency (Kowalski, 2005; Norton et al.,1996; Tyack, 1972; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Contrasting with the previous conception of the role that prioritized supporting teachers and ensuring the instructional needs of schools, the managerial conceptualization of the superintendency was framed by a more task-oriented set of values and beliefs that placed superintendents in charge of budget oversight, standardizing operations, and managing the facilities and personnel (Kowalski, 2011; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Superintendents' communication during this era centered on the transmission of information (Hanson, 2003; Kowalski, 2005), and leadership culture leaned toward authoritative control (Kowalski, 2005; Schneider, 1994). As the expectation of the role moved toward the managerial aspects of the role and away from the classroom, universities began offering courses in school management, and there was a movement toward professionalizing the role of superintendent as administrator, distinguishing school leadership as separate from teaching (Thomas & Moran, 1992).

Criticism of the change from scholarly leader to business executive stemmed largely from concerns about shifts in the power, influence, and authority of superintendents from three distinct groups:

[3] *Principles of Scientific Management (Taylor, 1911/1998)*- Taylor suggested that the efficiency of production in factories could be greatly enhanced by close observation of individual workers and elimination of waste time and motion in their operation and had great influence on procedures related to mass production during the Industrial Revolution (Mee,1998). Advocates of improving the efficiency of public education believed that these same principals could improve schools.

1. Elected officials were concerned that the broadening of the power and influence of the superintendent came at their expense (Callahan 1962).
2. Prominent progressive scholars criticized the infusion of business values into schools, arguing that the values of classical theory and scientific management were misaligned with the core values of a democracy (Glass, 2002; VanTil, 1971).
3. Citizens pushed against what they viewed as an erosion of liberty related to schools, particularly in having influence over their local districts (Kowalski, 2003).

While these tensions about the organizational manager conception remained during the years of its prominence, after 1930, criticism increased as the impact of the stock market crash and subsequent economic depression called into question industrial management, and the birth of the human relations movement contributed to a new understanding of administrative and organizational behavior (Hanson, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2012; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). Despite this diminished support for the management conception of the role, educators and policymakers, having come to believe effective administration required competent managers (Kowalski, 1999), were hesitant to let go of this conception of the role. As such, while the demands on the superintendent began to shift, elements of the business executive role have endured.

As was the case with the *teacher-scholar* conception of the role, the most recent AASA decennial study (Tienken, 2021) confirms the continued relevance of the superintendent as Organizational Manager, noting challenges with financial issues, personnel management, facilities planning, and management as some of the most time-consuming issues that they face.

Similarly, 44.6% of participants believed their ability to manage financial resources was one of the reasons for their selection as superintendent.

Educational Statesman in Democratic Schools

The third conception of the superintendent role identified by Callahan (1966) is the *Educational Statesman in Democratic Schools* and is anchored in the political reality of schools within the context of a larger society and grounded in the principles of democratic administration (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Before this point, the superintendent was separated from the political landscape to the point that political involvement was considered inappropriate and unprofessional (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995). The Great Depression, however, heightened the competition for scarce economic resources between governmental agencies forcing superintendents to begin thinking as political strategists and functioning as educational lobbyists (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

At the same time, the push to restore democracy to schools, particularly in large city schools, required superintendents to embrace a shift toward greater parent involvement (Björk et al., 2014) and take on a more active role in the broader community (Kowalski, 2005). Callahan (1966) notes that Ernest Melby, dean of education at Northwestern University, became a spokesperson for democratic administration in schools, arguing that the public was education's greatest resource and that administrators should "release the creative capacities of individuals" and "mobilize the educational resources of communities" (Melby, 1955, p. 250). While previous conceptions of the role had centered the superintendent's work internally within the school district, this orientation positioned them to engage with the community to galvanize support for district initiatives from policymakers, employees, and other taxpayers, requiring a more outward-facing presence and considerable political acumen (Björk et al., 2014; Howlett, 1993).

By the mid-1950s, the conceptualization of superintendents as *democratic leaders* also began to fall out of favor for being overly idealistic and inattentive to the realities of the work of superintendents (Kowalski, 1999). Björk and Gurley (2005) argue that there was no question as to whether superintendents needed to be politicians but there was not a common understanding by those in the field about how to use political acuity to enhance their effectiveness as leaders.

While superintendents have long resisted attempts to be characterized as politicians (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995), Tienken (2021) asserts that due to the growing partisan divide (Laloggia, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2017), and the prominence of social justice issues such as climate change, institutional racism, economic and educational inequity and the human rights of all individuals in the larger societal context, "superintendents must attend to the current realities of national and local political discourse" (p. 134) and engage with their communities around these issues.

Applied Social Scientist

The fourth conceptualization of the superintendency as an *Applied Social Scientist* (Callahan, 1966) emerged in the mid-1950s and persisted for about 20 years. Callahan (1966) cites four societal conditions that spurred this evolution and the resulting shift in expectations for and preparation of public-school administrators.

1. There was growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership after WWII due to the impression that it was impractical and overly idealistic.
2. There was a rapid development of the social sciences in the late 1940s and early 1950s and enthusiasm for its application to public administration.
3. There were increased school enrollments, a resurgence of criticism over student performance, and a demand for expanded educational services.

4. Social science research was conducted by school administration professors at eight major universities due to $7 million in grant funding provided by the Kellogg Foundation.

The increased demand that superintendents address societal issues, combined with advancements in social science research as applicable to schools, shifted the preparation for school leaders and intensified efforts to make school administration an academic discipline equal to business administration. (Culbertson, 1981). Further, research around systems theory brought greater recognition that the internal operation and productivity of schools were impacted by the external legal, political, social, and economic systems in which schools operate (Getzels, 1977) and an acknowledgment that administrators needed to understand these external systems if they were to provide essential leadership and management (Kowalski & Björk, 2005; Weick, 1976). These combined factors provided the context to further define the role of the superintendent as an expert administrator. Citing a clear dividing line regarding the professional preparation of superintendents, Kowalski & Björk (2005) cite the work of Getzel (1977), noting that textbooks in school administration written prior to 1950 never mention social science theories, whereas virtually none written after 1950 have ever omitted it.

From a historical perspective, superintendents of the 1950s and 60s, as applied social scientists, were expected to have greater sensitivity to large social problems such as changing demographics, poverty, racism, drugs, and violence (Sergiovanni et al., 1999) and apply scientific inquiry and predictability (Cooper & Boyd, 1987; Kowalski et al. 2011) to their problems of practice and decision-making. Superintendents during this time were notably contending with social unrest and increased governmental involvement in schools due to such as issues the desegregation of schools and the Civil Rights Movement, the space race and the push for increased instruction in math and the sciences, and the United States' entrance into the

Vietnam War. As such, these issues are reflected in the data collected through the 1971 decennial study (Knezevich, 1971) conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which identified the top issues and challenges facing superintendents as (a) financing schools to meet increasing current expenditures; (b) demand for new ways of teaching or operating the educational program; (c) greater visibility of the superintendent; (d) changes in values and behavioral norms; (e) school staff relations, strikes, sanctions, or other forms of teacher militancy; and (f) growing federal involvement in education.

The Applied Social Scientist characterization of the role is noted as having high compatibility with helping schools address societal problems (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Johnson & Fusarelli, 2003; Kowalski, 2011; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 1991), and therefore still has application in our current society. To this end, the 2020 decennial study (Tienken, 2021) highlights tension in this area, noting that while 89% of participating superintendents reported that conversations about race within their community were an *extremely important* or *important* factor in ensuring student success, most also felt underprepared to lead these discussions.

Communicator

The fifth conception of the superintendent role as a *communicator* is noted in the literature by Kowalski (2001), who suggests it emerged during the 1970s in conjunction with the United States' transition from a manufacturing-based society to an information-based society. This conception persists today, necessitated by both the reform era of the late 20th and 21st century and the positioning of schools in a globally connected society with increasing demand for information and stakeholder engagement.

Kowalski (2005) asserts that while communication is a skill that has been present in prior conceptions of the superintendent role, the reform agenda of the last fifty years, especially efforts to restructure schools and improve school culture, implies that communication at the core of the superintendent's work as a change agent for schools. In the mid-1980s, a protracted era of educational reform and high-stakes accountability began, and while previous school culture largely emphasized communication to keep the public at bay, and teachers and administrators working in isolation, the demands of educational reform and restructuring emphasized collaboration, organizational restructuring and distributing leadership, thereby necessitating superintendents to engage with and facilitate communication across multiple stakeholders (Björk et al., 2014).

According to Conrad (1994), "Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another" (p. 27). Björk et al. (2014) argue that in the current era of educational reform, the role of superintendents as communicators is influenced by two primary factors. Firstly, they are expected to lead the restructuring of schools (Björk, 2001; Murphy, 1994), which requires them to communicate effectively with various stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and community members. Secondly, the restructuring process necessitates a change in school culture, which requires superintendents to communicate to support this change (Heckman, 1993; Kowalski, 2000). Additionally, Björk et al. (2014) also highlight the importance of accessing and using information from various sources in a timely manner to identify and solve problems and assist in decision-making.

While Brunner et al., 2002 note that the discourse surrounding the superintendent centered on their ability to communicate with the public began with the more public-facing conception of their role as educational statesman, they specifically identify three distinct shifts in the discourse surrounding the superintendent influencing the role conception of the superintendent as a *communicator* from the 1970s to the present, with each discursive stage recognizing the sociopolitical shifts in reform era demands on schools and therefore superintendents: (a) superintendent as accountable: living with conflict; (b) superintendent as a political strategist: focused on excellence; and c) superintendent as a collaborator.

The Superintendent is Accountable to the Public and Living with Conflict: 1970-1980

During this discursive stage, on the heels of many of the social movements of the 1960s, a major concern was providing equal opportunity for all individuals in American society. Additionally, with growing criticism of public education, Brunner et al. (2002) note that superintendents were under great pressure to respond to various types of organizations and interest groups and adhere to mandates from state legislators. As such, the superintendency discourse reflected political conflict and the ongoing issue of who had control over education.

The Superintendent is a Political Strategist, Focused on Excellence: 1980-1990

This discursive stage continued to place superintendents in a vulnerable position amidst criticism over the state of public education. However, while discourse in the 1970s was focused more on providing greater equitable access to education for students, public outcry as a result of the release of the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* further politicized public education as politicians shifted to focus on large-scale educational programs aimed at excellence in schools and making students globally competitive (Brunner et al., 2002; Wirt & Kirst, 1997). The focus of these efforts leaned heavily on raising standards; strengthening curriculum, increasing

emphasis on homework; increasing rigor of testing, grading, and student discipline (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

The first wave of educational reform during this period focused on educational accountability through performance standards. These demands underscored the importance of superintendents' formal knowledge of administrative work and their ability to manage the improvement schools. The second wave of reform created new expectations for superintendents regarding student learning management, teacher professionalism, distributing leadership, and garnering community support for schools and demanded greater focus on the instructional leadership for school improvement and political acumen to negotiate these increased demands (Brunner et al., 2002).

This shift further solidified the superintendents' position as a communicative bridge between the larger community's demands and pressures and the school district's inner functioning. These conditions and concerns are reflected in the 1992 AASA superintendent's study (Glass, 1992), with 75.9% of respondents reporting that to be effective in their role as superintendent, it was essential for them to build strong local, state, and national support for education, particularly around their primary challenges which were reported as: (a) financing schools; (b) assessment and testing; (c) changing priorities in the curriculum; (d) changing societal values; and (e) administrator/board relations. Aligned with these concerns, respondents reported that (a) skills in human relations; (b) knowledge of finance and budget; (c) general management; (d) community relations; (e) instructional leadership and development were the primary expectations school boards had for superintendents.

The Superintendent is a Collaborator: 1990 and Beyond

The next wave of reform again shifted the discourse around schools and school leaders and placed emphasis on accommodating all students and promoted restructuring education with a focus on schools as professional hubs of integrated service systems embedded in communities (Björk, 1996; Brunner et al., 2002; Murphy, 1990). In this discursive stage, with state and national mandates regarding reform, yet local responsibility and control for implementation, superintendents were expected to know and articulate to the broader community why reforms are needed and use their position to change school structures, practices, and relations with the broad community (Brunner et al., 2002).

This shift in the discourse emphasized collaboration, cooperation, and relationship-building and encouraged superintendents to work with others and share leadership to restructure schools. Bruner et al. (2002) note that scholars and practitioners of the earlier 21st century began to view superintendents' leadership "from the perspective of working with and through others rather than commanding others (p. 226)" specifically citing Owens and Ovando (2000) who make the case for superintendents engaging the broader community in schools by soliciting community input; extending the school into the community; focusing the community on the benefits of a strong educational system; inviting community members into the school; opening school facilities for community use; and initiating programs for the community.

From a contemporary perspective, conceptualizing the superintendent as a communicator who is intricately enmeshed and collaboratively engaged in the community endures. To this end, as part of the 2020 decennial study, Hutchins and Brown (2021), in their introduction to the data related to the current work of superintendents, assert that increasingly, superintendents "must be

a communicator, a facilitator of adult and student learning, a collaborator and a change agent (p. 72).

In our current era, superintendents report that communicative activities such as conflict management (37%), school board relations (35%), and community relations (30%) are time-intensive issues (Tienken, 2021) all requiring strong, active listening and communication skills for superintendents to be effective in their work with stakeholders (Durlak et al., 2011; Fullan, 2005; Senge et al., 2012). Further, in reporting the reasons for their selection in their current position, 51.5% of respondents felt that their communication skills were important, and 59.3% reported that their ability to communicate with stakeholders greatly impacted their selection (Tienken, 2021).

The increasing use of digital technology has brought about a shift in the expectations for and scrutiny of communication from superintendents (Kowalski & Björk, 2005; Kowalski & Keedy, 2005). As such, the addition of new questions to the 2020 decennial study of the American superintendent (Tienken, 2021) regarding the use of social media as a communication tool for superintendents and their subsequent response to those questions is in line with various studies that indicate that the use of technology is changing the work of the superintendent, particularly as it pertains to communication and engagement (Richardson & Sterrett, 2018; Tienken, 2021). More than 52% posted or responded to something on social media at least a few times per week as part of their work, and 76% of respondents reported that they encouraged the community to use social media to engage with the district. Additionally, 66.42% of superintendents who were surveyed reported that they had someone in their district responsible for monitoring social media activity, further punctuating the increasing importance of social media as a tool for the communicative act of promoting the district.

Significance of the ASAA Decennial Superintendent Report

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), founded in 1865, is a nationwide professional organization for chief executive officers and senior-level public school administrators. Their mission is to "support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children" (*Home | AASA, the School Superintendents Association*, n.d.).

Given for the first time in 1923, and subsequently, almost every ten years, the AASA's decennial study provides a longitudinal understanding of the role of the superintendent in five key areas: (a) demographic trends; (b) changing roles and responsibilities of the superintendent; (c) career pathways; (d) professional preparation; and (e) relationship to the larger community (Tienken, 2021). Additionally, the results of these studies are often used to inform lobbying efforts and policy decisions at the local, state, and national levels, although Tienken (2021) caution that "sweeping decisions or conclusions should not be made from the results of this report alone," and that "readers should interpret the findings in the context of previous studies and recent literature" (p. 42).

The AASA's most recent *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* is an "extension of 10-year national surveys that began under AASA management in 1923" (Tienken, 2021). Conducted between April 21, 2019, and June 1, 2019, the findings of this study are based on survey answers from 1,218 superintendents across the country, consisting of seventy-six questions spanning five distinct categories related to the current state of the superintendency: (a) district and personal demographics, (b) career pathways, (c) professional learning, (d) current work, and (e) community relations. On a voluntary basis, follow-up phone interviews were also conducted. Unique to the 2020 survey were questions regarding social media use, issues around

equity and race, and the use of executive coaching (Tienken, 2021).

While this study adds to our longitudinal understanding of how superintendents both understand, enact, and experience the challenges they face in their work, the *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* is of particular significance for its proximity to the start of the COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic and the historic nationwide closing of schools in March 2020 shortly after its release. As such, in the following sections, I will highlight additional relevant observations from the 2020 study that provide context to the experience of superintendents who participated in my research.

Recognition of Changing Student Demographics

Overall, the survey responses showed an increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of schools. Districts categorized as serving 5% or under racial/ethnic minority students fell from 47% in the 2010 study to 39% in the 2020 data, there was an increase in districts serving between 6% and 50% racial/ethnic minority students to 52% as compared to 39% of districts in the 2010 study. Tienken (2021), citing Frey (2018), asserts that these demographic shifts mirror the overall demographic trends in the U.S. and the prediction that by the year 2045, more than 50% of the U.S. population will be non-white. Similarly, the study notes the United States' growing emergent bilingual population and the increasing need for school leaders to "provide an education that includes and responds to diverse cultures and familial backgrounds" (Tienken, 2021, p. 50). Further, about half of the superintendents in the study noted that the largest racial/ethnic minority group in their districts have concerns that differ from the racial/ethnic majority in their districts.

These data and trends, taken alongside demographic information about superintendents and participant responses to questions regarding issues concerning equity and race, may provide

guidance for superintendent preparation and professional growth. The 2020 study notes that while the pool of individuals serving in the superintendency has become more diverse in terms of gender and racial and ethnic diversity, it is still a position held by mostly white men. Additionally, while 90% of superintendents felt it was important or very important to lead conversations about race, and 77% reported that they were the ones to lead conversations about equity for their districts, only 20% of white superintendents felt that they were very well prepared to do so.

Issues Consuming Superintendents' Time and the Problems They Face

It is widely accepted that the role of the school superintendent is complex and demanding. To that end, questions on the 2020 survey probed both the issues that consume their time and the greatest problems superintendents face in their work. In considering the most demanding aspects of the job, superintendents in the 2020 study report that issues related to finance (45%), personnel management (41%), conflict management (37%), and superintendent/board relations (35%) consumed most of their time.

Job-related stress was the most widely reported problem for superintendents (61%), with 55% reporting that they felt *very great* or *considerable* stress in their positions. This was followed by excessive time requirements (51%) and social media issues. Tienken (2021) cautions that in the context of their work, the level of stress felt by superintendents should be of concern, citing research that suggests that stress without balance puts superintendents at risk for higher rates of medical issues and potential challenges in their personal relationships (Gailer & Dunlap, 2018). Citing Harvey et al. (2013), Tienken (2021) also suggests that in addition to finding avenues for balance, to be effective in their role as superintendent, they should "take advantage of advice, executive coaching, and support from fellow superintendents" (p. 82).

Sources That Inform Their Decision-Making and Leadership Practice

Superintendents looked to various sources, individuals, and groups to inform their decision-making and practice as leaders. One source that informs superintendents' leadership and decision-making is professional literature. Superintendents (92%) reported that they read research *occasionally* or *frequently*; however, most superintendents (76%) indicated that "they were more likely to read education-related articles written with practitioners in mind compared to just 8% who indicated they were more likely to read original research reports (Tienken, 2020, pg.14)." Given the many demands on superintendents' time, this would suggest that there is a desire to ensure that their professional reading is easily accessible and readily applicable to the work.

Superintendents surveyed in the 2020 study also reported that a number of first-hand sources inform their decision-making, indicating that they perceive their (a) previous professional experience (60%); (b) district's administrative team (47%); (c) fellow superintendents (37%); (d) school board (28%) as influencing their decision-making process. Upon reviewing this data, it becomes apparent that while superintendents experience isolation due to the singular nature of their position, when making decisions, there is a growing emphasis on the interpersonal aspect of their work and highlights the practical expectation that superintendents must act as communicators and collaborators (Kowalski, 2001; Brunner et al., 2002).

Connecting the Conception of the Role to Leadership Identity

Our identities are continually influenced by our interactions within our social, cultural, and organizational contexts (Rodríguez et al., 2021), shaping the lens through which view and experience the world (Takacs, 2003). Like our personal identities, our professional identity is

influenced and can change by encountering unexpected challenges, engaging in professional learning, and reflecting on oneself as a professional (Robertson, 2017 in Rodríguez et al., 2021).

James Gee (2000) suggests that "when any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain 'kind of person' or even as several different 'kinds' at once (p. 99)." Therefore, leadership identity, expressly, can be understood as the meaning a person attaches to their role as a leader on the personal, relational, and collective levels (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) based on how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them.

Scholarship further suggests that, for superintendents, their leadership identity may influence "the clarity of their mission, the way they see themselves as educational leaders, and the acceptance of their authority by their followers" (Crow and Scribner, 2014; Day et al., 2009; Popper, 2004; Scribner and Crow, 2012 in Turbin, 2017, p. 790). Further, as leadership identity is specific to the individual (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), negotiating and understanding one's leadership identity involves reconciling their identity as a leader with their social identity and their role identity in relation to that of others (Turbin, 2017). This suggests that the general conception of and expectations placed on the role of the school superintendent, combined with the expectations that are placed on leaders by their local context and their own layered experiences, both personally and professionally, all influence superintendents' sense of leadership identity and the kind of person they both perceive themselves or aspire to be as a leader.

Summary

The evolution of the role of the public-school superintendent has developed through five broadly recognized conceptions tied to what was happening within the larger social, economic,

and political context of American society. Further, the dynamic complexity of our current era demands that superintendents know when and how to assume any combination of these roles making their job increasingly more complex, multifaceted, and stressful than ever before. Appendix A provides a summary of the sociopolitical context, discourse, and expectations associated with the historical conceptions of the school superintendency and the evolution of this role.

Currently, within a climate of increased political division, changing demographics, demands for school reform, and heightened awareness regarding issues of social justice, the superintendent, as a human hub between the broader community and the school district, must increasingly function as a communicator, collaborator, conflict manager, and change agent. As such, current scholarship promotes leadership practices that emphasize collaboration, cooperation, and relationship-building and encouraged superintendents to utilize organizational frameworks that encourage collective and inclusive leadership structures and practices. That said, to further understand the expectation for leadership practice as it pertains to crisis events, such as those experienced during the years 2020 and 2021, the next section will explore scholarship relevant to crisis leadership and management.

Crisis Leadership and Management

When examining the experiences of superintendents during the convergent crises of 2020-2021, it is important to consider theories that describe leadership during times of crisis. While much of the literature addressing crisis leadership is centered on mitigating and managing crises from a business perspective, increasingly research has also addressed crisis leadership specifically within the context of schools (Brock et al., 2001; Decker, 1997; Kibble, 1999; Lichtenstein et al., 1994; Lochmiller, 2021; Mutch, 2015; Smith and Riley, 2012).

The Lifecycle of Managing Crisis

Sudden crises, such as natural disasters or the COVID-19 school closures, are largely unanticipated, low-probability, high-consequence events characterized by ambiguity and emotional strain (DuBrin, 2013; Pearson & Clair, 1998, Wooten & James, 2008). These crises often originate externally and are beyond the organization's control but must be confronted and responded to internally (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Research in business and education identifies that managing crises typically spans multiple phases across the pre-crisis period, the crisis itself, and the post-crisis periods (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993; Wooten & James, 2008).

When a crisis occurs, the onset is marked by a precipitating event that demands leaders quickly make sense of what is happening and take action to minimize the impact on their organization. During this time, leaders are often sorting through and synthesizing fragmented and conflicting information to make sense of what is happening as they work to mitigate stakeholders' confusion and effectively determine an appropriate course of action (Weick, 1993).

Moving into the response phase of the crisis requires ongoing assessment and monitoring of the organization's internal and external conditions to inform decision-making and determine an appropriate response plan that considers both the short- and long-term consequences for the organization (Bishop et al., 2015). This requires high-functioning systems of communication that allow leaders to gather data and feedback from stakeholders efficiently (Boin et al., 2013) and effectively communicate information and the rationale for decision-making back, in turn, allowing leaders to shape the narrative about the crisis, its causes, and its coming resolution in a way that both clarifies and encourages (Kitamura, 2019). As the human hub between the school district and the larger community, transparently communicating about the crisis, its potential

consequences, and the district's response builds trust and promotes community engagement (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), setting the stage for recovery and learning.

Key Competencies for Leaders During Crises

Confronting organizational crises often requires leaders to develop knowledge and employ skills that are beyond those typically required in their daily work (Lochmiller, 2021). Further, managing crises depends on leadership behaviors and competencies that encourage stakeholders to actively acquire knowledge and formulate strategies to resolve them (Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Wooten & James, 2008). Despite the recognition that crisis events impact school settings, it is noted that educational leaders, most often, do not come to the job with formal preparation in crisis management (Kitamura, 2019; Lichtenstein et al., 1994), nor is it a topic specifically called out in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (Grissom & Condon, 2021) leaving school leaders limited opportunity to develop crisis leadership skills or their own experiences to draw upon as crises occur (Wooten & James, 2008).

Various researchers identify competencies and behaviors necessary for effective leadership, management, and decision-making during crisis situations (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; Goswick et al., 2018; Kahn & Sachs, 2018; McBath, 2018; Kapucu & Ustun, 2018; Wooten & James, 2008). Consistently emphasized in this work are the importance of sensemaking, communication and engagement, and emotional intelligence.

Sensemaking

Whenever a gap exists between what we expect and what we encounter, we are driven to make sense of a situation (Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005). The shock of this disconnect, at its most powerful, can cause us to see things differently as we look for ways to interpret and find meaning in the new information we encounter (Weick, 1995). At the same time, if the gap is too wide and

the information too overwhelming, it can also inhibit us from fully processing the new situation, allowing us to hyperfocus on some details and ignore others. As sensemaking depends upon understanding context, this can be problematic because it may not allow us to see the full picture, missing critical information around the edges as we hyperfocus on the center (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is a natural human undertaking that humans go through to varying degrees when confronted with situations that seem out of sync with past experiences. However, when considering sensemaking in organizations, leaders must manage this process, managing both the "context and group dynamics such that sensemaking can occur" (Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005).

During all stages of a crisis, leaders must continuously gather information, analyze and make sense of it to inform organization strategies for mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery (Grisson & Condon, 2021). When confronted with the sudden onset of a crisis, leaders are flooded with what is often incomplete or inaccurate information that they must quickly process and evaluate under the pressure of time constraints and public scrutiny and amid conflicting values to determine their crisis response (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Grissom & Condon, 2021; Mumford et al., 2007; Weick, 1993). While successfully navigating the unfamiliar and rapidly evolving conditions of crisis often requires collective and dynamic leadership that capitalizes on the problem-solving abilities of all levels of the organization, particularly at the onset, the perceptive and sensemaking skills of organizational leaders are critical for determining appropriate courses of action (Walsh, 1995; Weick, 1988; Wooten & James, 2008).

Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) advise that "sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action (p. 409)." Therefore, they further suggest that the sensemaking process must answer three foundational questions: How did this come to be? What does this mean? and

What should I do? Following this advice, leaders must possess the ability to answer these questions for themselves while at the same time synthesizing and organizing this process in such a way that leads to meaning-making and action on the part of the organization (Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005; Weick, 2005; Weick et al., 2005; Wooten & James, 2008). Further, it should be noted that the process of sensemaking is an iterative process that occurs throughout the response and recovery process of negotiating crisis events. Therefore, these questions need to be repeatedly asked and answered, as managing a crisis involves not only sensemaking for individual discrete events but, more often, making sense of a series or convergence of events that may seem unrelated but have an impact on the organization wholistically (Wooten & James, 2008).

Communication, Engagement, and Collaboration

Communication is fundamental to crisis management and leadership (DuBrin, 2013; Liu et al., 2020; Urick et al., 2021). Leadership during a crisis necessitates timely and honest communication with stakeholders (Goswick et al., 2018; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Neptune, 2019; Sutherland, 2017) to mitigate misinformation, establish a vision (Goswick et al., 2018; Kahn & Sachs, 2018; McBath, 2018), engage stakeholders and gather necessary input for collaborative decision-making (Kahn & Sachs, 2018; Sutherland, 2017).

Leaders navigating crisis events must project clarity in an environment defined by uncertainty and provide critical support for stakeholders' sensemaking about the impact of the crisis on their organization (Hackman & Johnson, 2013; Hesloot & Groenendaal, 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Lochmiller, 2021). As such, in crisis, the systems of communication that an organization establishes and the content of what is communicated to stakeholders, matter. Communication systems must be established before a crisis event and employ a combination of

strategies to reach various stakeholders, especially during a crisis's response and recovery phases (Gainey, 2009).

According to relevant scholarship on communication and crisis management, in crisis situations, it is critical to provide information to stakeholders as well as gather necessary information and feedback for them to inform decision-making. Therefore, well-constructed communication systems utilize mechanisms to disseminate outgoing information and allow for two-way communication to gather input (Howat et al., 2012). While communication is essential during a crisis, it should be noted that leaders who regularly practice open and transparent two-way communication in times of stability are more prepared to navigate the uncertain conditions of crisis situations (Cohen et al., 2017; Fairbanks et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 1999; Urick et al., 2021).

Leaders must communicate with stakeholders often enough to reinforce information, promote engagement with stakeholders, and establish a clear vision for navigating the crisis. While messages must often be tailored to make them meaningful to various stakeholder groups such as teachers, parents, students, or the community as a whole, it is important that the central messaging is consistent across all groups to reduce confusion and misinformation (Urick et al., 2021; Wooten & James, 2008). Consistent and unified messaging has become increasingly important in the current era of decentralized media, where information can be widely and rapidly circulated (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Hart et al., 2001). Further, analysts have maintained that leaders should create regular opportunities for feedback from community members and stakeholders to promote engagement and investment. Attending to both organizational systems related to communication and the development of their own communication skills and routines provides leaders with increased capacity to gauge how stakeholders perceive and understand the

crisis, assess community needs, and engage in sound decision-making (Boin et al., 2013; Lucero et al., 2009; Urick et al., 2021).

Crisis leadership depends heavily on a leader's ability to develop relationships within their organization and collaborate and coordinate across connected organizations (Liu et al., 2020; Lochmiller, 2021; Urick et al., 2021). In the case of crises impacting schools, this may mean coordinating with other municipal boards or health and safety leaders within their local or neighboring communities to provide a coordinated response, allocate resources and engage support. To this end, over the last two decades, case study research of crisis events, such as school shootings or natural disasters, demonstrates that collaboration with other local organizations is often a critical component of an effective response to and recovery from a crisis event (Coopman & Young, 2009; Garran, 2013; Howitt & Leonard, 2006; Low, 2008; Weist et al., 2002 in Grissom & Condon, 2021).

Emotional Intelligence

Simply defined, "emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others, understand the causes and effects of emotions, and manage emotions effectively to suit a goal or situation" (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). Two models for emotional intelligence are prevalent in the literature. The first model, proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997), is an ability model that outlines four primary skill sets: perception, facilitation, understanding, and managing. This model is distinct for its ability to use emotional concepts and the use of emotions to support and facilitate decision-making (Pellitteri, 2022). The second model, proposed by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), further organizes Emotional Intelligence capacities across two dimensions. These include the capacities of emotion recognition & regulation and the application of these capacities toward self and others (Pellitteri,

2022). Table 1 displays a combined view of these two models alongside each other to demonstrate how the skills of perception, understanding, facilitation, and management that are emphasized in Mayer and Salovey's model of emotional intelligence align with the capacities proposed by Golman, Botyatzis, and McKee and their application across the two domains of emotional intelligence as they related to self and others.

Table 1

Combined Models of Emotional Intelligence

Skills	Capacities	Domains of Application	
		Self	Others
Perception Understanding	Recognition	Self-awareness	Social-awareness
Facilitation Management	Regulation	Self-management	Relationship Management
Mayer & Salovey, 1997	*Goleman et al., 2002*		

Schools are dynamic, complex systems of human interaction. In times of rapid change, an organization's long-term success depends on leaders' ability to foster strong community relationships within the school and with external community members as they work toward common goals (Fullan, 2007). Developing collaborative partnerships requires leaders to understand and respond to varying individual perspectives to inform problem-solving and decision-making. Perspective-taking is an important component of recognizing and understanding the emotions of others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and is considered a key to social functioning (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Wooten & James, 2008), particularly when

confronted with conflicting information and competing demands, as is often the case in school settings (Medelson & Stabile, 2019, Patti et al., 2018).

Leaders can work to develop this skill through efforts to listen actively, accept criticism, and engage authentically with stakeholders (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Pelletteri, 2021). Further, to promote a climate of adaptability and resilience needed to collectively solve complex problems and foster a culture of mutual respect and civility that is necessary to engage in productive disagreement, leaders must model the critical thinking, intra-, and interpersonal skills they expect (Elliott & Taylor, 2006; Mendelson & Stabile, 2019).

Wooten & James (2008) argue that a core responsibility of leaders during a crisis is to ensure the well-being of those affected**.** As such, in addition to the ability to make sense of unfamiliar circumstances and conflicting or ambiguous information and communicate with clarity and transparency, leading during a crisis requires emotional intelligence on the part of organizational leaders to navigate these choppy waters and withstand the emotional toll that crisis takes on them personally and on others who need their support (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Further, promoting an atmosphere grounded in community relationships and mutual respect where emotions can be recognized and understood as information allows leaders to utilize this foundation for engagement and problem-solving in the face of high-stress, high-profile events (Mendelson & Stabile, 2019).

In a crisis, emotions are elevated, and community members and leaders are at increased risk of experiencing stress and trauma. As stress impairs judgment and decision-making, to make effective decisions and appropriately direct support to stakeholders, leaders must be aware of and in control of their own stress and emotions while simultaneously recognizing community stress and needs (Boin et al., 2013, Weist et al., 2002; Zenere, 2013). While school administrators

cannot completely remove emotions from decision-making, being aware of and intentional with how their emotions and those of others factor into their decision-making allows them to mitigate the negative impact of emotions on these processes and act in the best interest of stakeholders (Gray, 2009; Mendelson & Stabile, 2019; Wooten & James, 2008).

Summary

Confronting organizational crises often requires leaders to develop knowledge and employ skills that are beyond those typically required in their daily work. Leaders in crisis situations are often confronted with conditions fraught with incomplete and conflicting information, intense emotions, and a broad range of stakeholder needs, priorities, and opinions as they make decisions and set the stage for organizational learning and recovery. Scholars note that sensemaking, communication, engagement and collaboration, and emotional intelligence are key competencies for superintendents during times of crisis. Further, they stress that consciously developing and utilizing such competencies can lay a foundation for stakeholder relationship-building and engagement in problem-solving in the face of high-stress, uncertain events such as those encountered during a crisis.

Interactive Perspectives on Organizational Leadership

Traditional, Western models of leadership are rooted in an Industrial Era philosophy (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) whereby successful leadership is defined by an individual leader's ability to act decisively and influence and motivate others toward attaining production-based goals (Baltachi & Balci, 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). However, current leadership scholars recognize that attending solely to the action of individuals from a strictly hierarchical perspective does not translate to the connected, complex, and rapidly changing society of the Knowledge Era (Balci, 2014; Baltaci &

Balci, 2017; Drucker, 2012; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) and argue that addressing the issues faced by information-age organizations requires a more holistic understanding of leadership as a dynamic, interdependent, and collective practice of organizations (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Grenada & Hackmann, 2014; Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2005; Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2009; Spillane, 2006;).

Scholars stress that understanding the organizational environment and culture is crucial to effective leadership (Schon, 1970; Western, 2008). Further, the literature on crisis leadership notes that understanding leadership in the context of crisis events requires leadership that can act quickly to gather pertinent data, evaluate the impact on the organization, and facilitate a problem-solving approach that considers and involves all stakeholders (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Yukl & Mahsad, 2010). This suggests that understanding leadership during crisis must attend to the relational dynamics between leaders and others that foster group engagement, foster trust, and foster resilience. Therefore, in this section, I will consider the literature related to (a) Complexity Leadership Theory, (b) Adaptive Leadership Theory, (c) Relational Leadership Theory, and (d) Authentic Leadership Theory to understand perspectives on leadership practice that position leaders in relationship with stakeholders to support the adaptive learning necessary to negotiate complex, dynamic environments such as those presented in crisis.

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on organizations as complex, adaptive systems where various forms of leadership intersect to support innovation and learning when confronted with an uncertain future. While linear systems can be complicated, their components are static, and their outcomes are predictable. By contrast, complex systems are nonlinear, made of interconnected relationships that are dynamic and changing yet bonded in a common purpose

(Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). The entirety of complex systems cannot be understood by simply analyzing their parts, and even minor changes can cascade into larger consequences within or across systems (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Therefore, *Complex Adaptive Systems* (CAS) are networks of heterogeneous components that interact and affect each other, thereby producing new outcomes (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In the following sections, I will discuss two tenets of Complexity Leadership Theory applicable to this study: the notion of (a) organizations as dynamically complex systems and the concept of (b) leadership as a collective practice.

Organizations as Dynamically Complex Systems

Complexity Theory concerns the study of these complex, networked, and dynamically interacting systems and inquires about how creativity, learning, or adaptability arise from these interactions (Marion, 2008; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). By extension, then, "Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) is the study of the interactive dynamics of complex systems (CAS) embedded within contexts of larger organizing systems" (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009, p. 2). Complexity Leadership distinguishes between *leaders* and *leadership practice* (Baltaci & Balci, 2017), framing the latter as a collective, interdependent process that allows learning, innovation, and adaptability to occur during times of change, unpredictability, and uncertainty (Drath, 2001; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Leadership as Collective Practice

The essential focus of Complexity Leadership Theory is to identify and explore the strategies, structures, and behaviors that foster creativity, learning, and adaptability within hierarchical contexts by enabling complex adaptive system dynamics (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). As such, Complexity Leadership does not disfavor the designation of formal leaders but rather understands leadership practice as the interdependent result of (a) *administrative leadership*, (b)

adaptive leadership, and (c) *enabling leadership* occurring in a network throughout the organization (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Morrison, 2010; Smits & Bowen, 2015; Taneja et al., 2013). Through these collective actions, leadership occurs and emerges in the "spaces between" interdependent groups and individuals (Lichtenstein et al., 2006).

Administrative Leadership. Administrative leadership is based on position and authority and is represented by the hierarchical and bureaucratic functions of organizations (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This form of leadership dominated product-driven organizations of the Industrial Era. Even in complex environments, there is a need for individuals or working groups with authority to make decisions, plan, align, and coordinate organizational activities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This can be thought of as managerial leadership for coordination and structuring that helps the organization run. From the perspective of complexity leadership theory, administrative leadership can either work to support an organization's creativity and adaptability by working in conjunction with adaptive leadership or work to suppress it.

Adaptive Leadership. Within complexity leadership, adaptive leadership is understood to be the proximal source of change in organizations (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Adaptive leadership emerges from the interactions that occur within and across complex adaptive systems as they negotiate the tensions necessary for learning and innovation to occur within the organization's social system (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The actions of individuals or groups do not define adaptive leadership. Instead, it is understood as a dynamic process of the CAS that allows adaptive behaviors to emerge in an unpredictable environment through negotiating conflicting needs, ideas, and values (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). From this

perspective, adaptive leadership can emerge and is encouraged throughout the organization and is not a function of position or authority (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

Enabling Leadership. Enabling leadership works to catalyze complex adaptive systems and establish the conditions for them to thrive while managing the entanglement of administrative and adaptive leadership (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In this case, *entanglement* is defined as the dynamic relationship between formal administrative functions and informal adaptive forces of organizations as social systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). As such, enabling leadership tends to the context and conditions necessary for the relationship between formal and informal forms of leadership so that adaptive work can occur.

While *enabling leadership* can occur anywhere within the organization, "the nature of this role will vary by hierarchical level and position" (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007, p. 305). Due to the dynamic nature of organizations and the process of change, a critical challenge of complexity leadership is to manage the entanglement between the administrative and adaptive structures and behaviors to ensure optimum organizational flexibility and effectiveness in times of uncertainty.

Applications for Educational Leadership Practice

While schools and school systems are largely controlled and managed locally, they exist in and are influenced by a larger, complex, and interconnected global society. School leaders, as bridges between the external policy and societal influences and the internal school environment, must be able to connect with and help their organizations flexibly respond to external demands (Morrison, 2010). Therefore, to meet the demands of a changing society, schools, as complex, adaptive systems, must engage with external stakeholders and build the capacity to generate knowledge and collectively problem-solve (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) while also attending to the bureaucratic aspects of their organizations such as the confines of budgets,

accountability schedules, and traditional expectations within which schools operate. The tension between competing demands can place school leaders in a difficult position represented by the familiar analogy of rebuilding their planes while keeping them in the air.

Managing the entanglement of the formal and informal leadership functions is a key challenge for positional school leaders who must engage in administrative actions while also fostering their organizations' adaptive and collective capacity and encouraging others' leadership. Through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory, positional leaders must pay greater attention to understanding the patterns of complexity, enable the conditions for organizational learning, and encourage the context for adaptive leadership (Morrison, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2007). That being the case, their role shifts from managing outcomes "to a focus on enabling adaptive space and leveraging pressure" (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016, p. 25).

Adaptive Leadership Theory

Adaptive Leadership Theory focuses on leading through change and uncertainty and requires that leaders develop the skills to engage their organizations in an iterative process of collective problem-solving that includes (a) observation, (b) interpretation, and (c) invention (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020; Wolfe, 2015). Further, while formal leaders are positioned to nurture conditions for collective problem-solving, adaptive leadership is not investigated or understood as the actions of individual positional leaders but rather as a dynamic, collective process of problem-solving and growth engaged in by interdependent stakeholders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Therefore, equal value is placed on examining the actions and attitudes of both leaders and followers, the flexible nature of these distinctions, and how they contribute to leadership in practice. Understood from this vantage point, leadership practice is seen as an attribute of the organization rather than the individual. With these understandings in the

following sections I will discuss three foundational concepts that underpin Adaptive Leadership Theory: the importance of (a) distinguishing between technical and adaptive challenges; the value of (b) collective problem-solving for growth and learning; and developing a culture that allows for (c) flexible leaders and followers.

Distinguishing Between Technical and Adaptive Challenges

When confronting uncertainty or change, organizations face two distinct types of problems. *Technical challenges* have known solutions, and the approach to problem-solving already lies within the organization's skill set and know-how (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Jayan, Bing, & Musa, 2016). By contrast, *adaptive challenges* are more complex because the "necessary knowledge to solve the problem must be created in the act of working on it" (Wagner & Kegan, 2015, p. 18). As such, they cannot be solved by formal leaders alone and require the collective and coordinated efforts of an organization and demand the generation of questions, problem-solving, and solutions that require an assessment of values and new learning on the part of individuals and the organization in order to grow in new directions (Jayan, M., Bing, K. W., & Musa, K., 2016).

A parallel to this concept can also be found in the literature on *organizational learning*. Peter Senge (1990) suggests that the complexity of the modern world calls for a systems approach to learning in organizations. Further, he distinguishes between the type of complexity involved in any given situation. Senge asserts that while *detail complexity* requires the consideration of many variables, it involves linear thinking such that the outcomes are more predictable. By contrast, in situations involving *dynamic complexity,* the interconnectedness, and impact of variables upon each other are nonlinear, more subtle, and not as easily predicted (p. 71). In dynamically complex situations, decision-making and problem-solving in one part of the

system can have unintended and unforeseen consequences elsewhere in the system. As such, they require organization-wide engagement and consideration to ensure the most successful outcomes.

Adaptive learning opportunities present three key challenges for leaders and organizations. They (a) bring to light a gap between the spoken values and actual practice; (b) demonstrate competing commitments; and (c) force members of the organization to discuss the non-discussable. These challenges can explain why people have difficulty confronting and tend to avoid adaptive issues (Heifetz et al., 2009; Jayan et al., 2016; Pak et al., 2020). Complicating matters further, largely adaptive issues will have technical aspects that must be addressed (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz et al., 2009; Jayan et al., 2016). At times, this can lull leaders into oversimplifying matters by only focusing on technical aspects of the issue, missing the opportunity for growth and change (Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020).

Collective Problem-Solving for Growth and Learning

Identifying problems, carefully defining their scope, and finding appropriate solutions are central to leadership practice. Historically, the assumption has been that responsibility for these actions fell squarely on the shoulders of positional leaders. However, the complexity and ambiguity of 21st-century issues require a more inclusive and collaborative approach that moves beyond traditional models of leadership that have understood positional leaders as the sole source of problem-solving and innovation (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Khan, 2017; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Pak et al. 2020; Yukl & Musad, 2010).

Ronald Heifetz (1994, p. 22) asserts that “the hardest and most valuable task of leadership may be advancing goals and designing strategies to promote adaptive work.” Adaptive work at any level requires changing values, beliefs, or behaviors. Therefore, when

confronting complex problems, the process of uncovering the gap between espoused values and the reality of the situation is critical. In this context, the leadership goal is to generate, create the space for, and engage in the difficult conversations necessary for this to occur (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020).

From an adaptive perspective, the purpose of leadership is growth and learning. Subsequently, conflict is seen as a necessary part of finding solutions and generating growth within the organization. Positional leaders and stakeholders communicate and collaborate throughout this process so that ownership of solutions and learning is shared (Heifetz et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020). With that, leadership from this perspective emerges out of interactions and events that lead to changes in perception and understanding versus the discrete actions or influence of any individual.

Flexible Leaders and Followers

The Adaptive Leadership perspective takes a holistic view of leadership, attending to both internal leader-follower relationships and the impact of external forces on the environment in which they operate (Glover, Rainwater, Jones, & Friedman, 2002; Khan, 2017). Even though this framework allows for the roles of leaders and followers in understanding leadership practice, this does not mean simply getting followers to carry out leader objectives, nor are these distinctions based on formal authority or title. Instead, as a perspective grounded in organizational learning and growth in the face of complex, emergent problems, leadership occurs when stakeholders generate adaptive outcomes through their interactions (Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Nelson & Squires, 2017). Likewise, through an adaptive lens, leadership status is based more on the authority and trust that others give an individual relative to a specific issue rather than their formal position.

While positional leaders are often responsible for identifying issues and creating and nurturing the "holding environment"[4] for collective problem-solving to occur, leadership can emerge from anywhere within the organization (Heifetz et al., 2009; Khan, 2017). How others take on the role of the leader then becomes dependent upon the problem at hand (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Heifetz, Kania, and Kramer (2004, p. 30) advise that "many different people and groups may hold keys to the solutions of complex adaptive problems." Accordingly, from this perspective, positional leaders can also assume the role of the follower as they learn from others and participate in the change process (Pak et al., 2020).

Relational Leadership Theory

A relational leadership perspective emphasizes the co-constructive process between leaders and stakeholders that facilitates and produces leadership and provides a way of envisioning leadership as a process of mutual social influence through which organizational coordination and change emerge (Uhl-Bien 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012). Like *adaptive leadership*, within the context of *relational leadership*, the lines between who is leading and who is following are fluid and emerging in relation to one another (Day and Drath, 2012). As such, similarly, there is a focus on building collective capacity, and the development of leadership is encouraged across the organization (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Pertinent to this study, I will discuss three key elements of Relational Leadership Theory: (a) moral responsibility; (b) communication; and c) the influence of culture and context on relationship development.

[4] While the term *holding environment* is associated with Heifetz and his writing on adaptive leadership, he acknowledges that the term can be attributed to Donald Winnicott (1965) and "originated in psychoanalysis to describe the relationship between therapist and patient", whereby "the therapist holds the patient in a process of developmental learning" (1994, p. 104). Subsequently, it was used in other writings in the field of psychoanalysis prior to Heifetz's use in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994).

Moral Responsibility and an Ethics of Care

Relational leadership emphasizes the importance of relational integrity and responsibility, which involves being responsive, responsible, and accountable to others in everyday interactions (Smit, 2018). This includes a moral responsibility to recognize and work through differences, learn from each other, and encourage growth (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). The notion of an *ethics of care*, which Regan and Brooks (1995) define as "the development of an affinity for the world and the people in it, translating moral commitment to action on behalf of others (p. 27)" is also closely aligned with this perspective. This moral stance of caring relationships and moral responsibility is embedded within relational integrity, which refers to the consistent alignment between one's values, intentions, and actions in relation to others (Smit & Mabusela, 2019). A leader with relational integrity demonstrates consistency and authenticity in their words and actions, building trust and respect with their followers. This alignment between values, intentions, and actions also contributes to building and maintaining positive relationships and effective communication within the organization.

The Role of Communication

Relational leadership emphasizes the importance of leaders building strong relationships with followers to foster trust and collaboration. Cutliffe and Erikson (2011) assert that this requires focused attention to the relational dialogue and the co-construction of meaning between leaders and others in the organization and that relational leaders do not see communication "as an expression of something preconceived, but as emerging and open, as a way of working out what is meaningful and possible (p. 1434)." From this perspective, communication becomes a means for *talking with* stakeholders versus *talking to* them. This maintains the position of the

leader in relation to others and values engagement with multiple viewpoints to co-negotiate meaning (Cutliffe & Erikson, 2011; Drath, 2001).

The Influence of Culture and Context

A relational perspective on leadership is not only about building relationships but also about understanding how leadership and relationships are constructed in particular contexts (Hallinger and Truong, 2016). This involves considering the cultural values and norms that shape the meaning, establishment, and maintenance of productive relationships (Hallinger, 2018). Cultural values and norms can influence how leaders and followers interact, communicate, and build trust, as well as the expectations and responsibilities they have toward each other. Therefore, discerning the cultural context is important for leaders to effectively build and maintain positive relationships with stakeholders. Additionally, as the population of schools becomes increasingly more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (Frey, 2018; Tienken, 2021), it also highlights the importance of cultural competence for leaders to be able to navigate different cultural contexts and build effective relationships with diverse groups of people.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Scholars (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Seligman, 2002) and practitioners (George, 2003) recognize that in turbulent times, organizations benefit from leadership grounded in ethical behavior and the development of authentic and trusting relationships with stakeholders. As such, theories of authentic leadership have emerged from the intersection of scholarship in the fields of leadership, ethics, and positive organizational behavior (Avolio et al., 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Cooper & Nelson, 2006; Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) focusing attention on the ethical dimensions of the relationship between leader and stakeholders and describe leadership behaviors that result in a trusting relationship (Towler, 2019).

Perspectives of Authentic Leadership

The concept of authenticity is central to Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) and is defined as owning one's personal experiences and behaving in accordance with one's true self. To this end, Northouse (2016) identified three (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and developmental) perspectives on authentic leadership, acknowledging that understanding authentic leadership requires considering a leader's internal processes of reflection and self-understanding, their interactions with others and their process of continuous growth and development toward authenticity.

The intrapersonal perspective draws attention to what goes on within the leader and strongly emphasizes leaders' life experiences and the meanings the leader attaches to those experiences, the leader's self-knowledge, self-regulation, self-concept, and leading from personal inner convictions (Onyalla, 2018). *The interpersonal perspective* on authentic leadership pays attention to the meaningful interactions between authentic leaders and followers (Northouse, 2016; Onyalla, 2018) *The developmental perspective* recognizes that authentic leadership is a gradual lifetime process that is grounded in a leader's psychological qualities and strong ethics (Walumbwa et al., 2008) and can be affected by either positive or negative major life events like severe illness or a new career (Northouse, 2016).

Developmental Dimensions of Authentic Leadership

From the developmental perspective, Walumbwa et al. (2008) explored four dimensions of authentic leadership: (a) self-awareness; (b) internalized moral perspectives; (c) balanced processing; and (d) relational transparency.

Self-awareness is an essential component of authentic leadership and involves a leader's ability to reflect on and understand their personal values, emotions, motives, strengths, and

weaknesses (Guenter et al., 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This self-awareness allows leaders to recognize their own biases and limitations, which can help them make better decisions and lead more effectively. Leaders with a strong self-awareness dimension are more likely to stay true to their values and remain authentic, even in challenging situations or when facing external pressures (Soderlund et al., 2021). By understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, they can make conscious decisions that align with their values and goals while also leveraging the strengths of their team members to achieve shared objectives.

Internalized moral perspectives, such as integrity, honor, courage, and transparency (Assaf, 2021), relate to a leader's ability to internalize and integrate their moral principles and values into their behavior, decisions, and actions (Horner, 2016; Northouse, 2016). This self-regulation process allows leaders to act in accordance with their beliefs and values, even in the face of external pressures or conflicting situations. Leaders with strong internalized moral perspectives are often perceived by stakeholders as authentic, consistent, and trustworthy because they prioritize their values over external pressures or personal gain. This can enhance their credibility and influence as leaders as they inspire others to follow their example and align their actions with their values.

Balanced processing refers to a leader's ability to remain objective and unbiased when considering different perspectives and viewpoints (Northouse, 2016). Leaders who demonstrate balanced processing acknowledge their own ideas and opinions, but they also actively seek out and consider the viewpoints of others before making decisions (Horner, 2016). By remaining open-minded and receptive to different ideas, authentic leaders can make decisions that consider the perspectives of all stakeholders involved and foster more inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes.

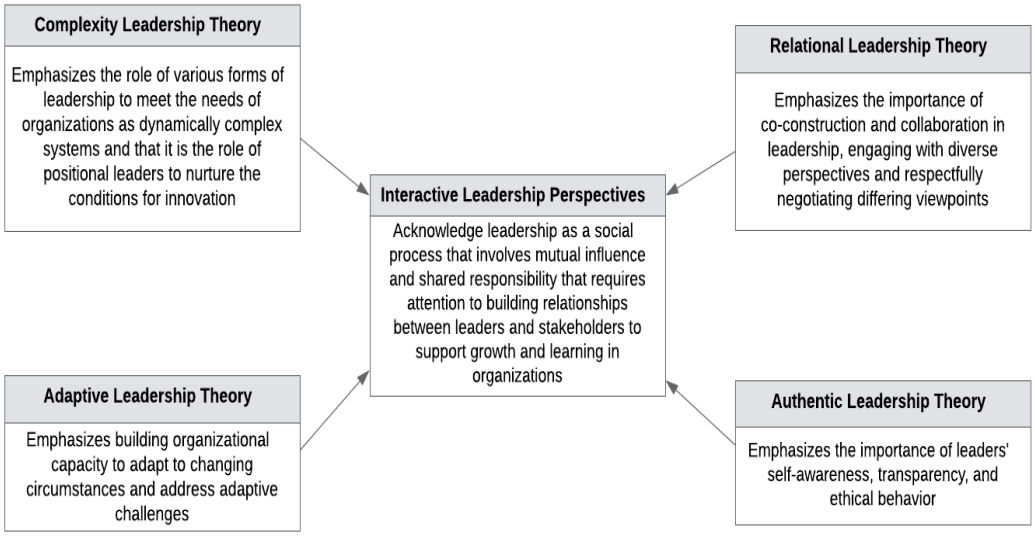
Relational transparency refers to a leader's willingness to be open, honest, and authentic in their relationships with others (Northouse, 2016). Leaders who exhibit relational transparency are not afraid to show their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and they are willing to share their experiences with others as a means of building trust, strengthening relationships, and building a culture of mutual respect (Gatling et al., 2017; Horner, 2016; Northouse, 2016).

Summary

This section reviewed four interconnected yet distinct perspectives on leadership practice with the purpose of understanding the current scholarship around organizational leadership in dynamically complex systems and the leadership stances that position leaders in relationship with others and promote adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and support and organizational learning during uncertain times. Figure 1 presents the major distinctive points of emphasis for each of the four perspectives of inclusive leadership and their major points of connection.

Figure 1

Interactive Leadership Perspectives: Points of Emphasis and Integrating Ideas



Chapter Summary

This chapter offered an overview of the scholarship that informed the interpretation and discussion of the study findings. The first section reviewed literature that offers historical accounts of how the role has evolved and empirical studies of how superintendents function in the role and the challenges they face. This was followed by a section exploring scholarship related to crisis leadership and management through various stages of crisis events and scholarship identifying key leadership competencies such as sensemaking were explored as a means to understand, frame, and discuss the experiences of superintendents. This chapter concluded with a review of the scholarship related to interactive perspectives on organizational leadership to frame an analysis of how superintendents function in context in relationship to others.

Chapter Three presents the methods employed by this study, including the design and rationale for a narrative approach, information pertaining to the study setting and selection of participants, the development of instruments, and descriptions of data collection and analysis procedures. The chapter will conclude by addressing measures taken to protect participant confidentiality, reduce biases held by the researcher, and increase the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: **Design and Method**

Introduction

This study is built on the assertion that the interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises experienced during the years 2020 and 2021 brought systemic inequities within schools to the forefront and increased the urgency to examine long-standing assumptions and practices. Moreover, it presupposes that leading amid this convergence will likely have a major impact on superintendents. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally.

The questions that drove this research were (a) What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?; and (b) How did this experience affect superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent? This study aimed to answer these guiding research questions by analyzing participants' narrative accounts.

This chapter presents the methods employed by this study. The first section introduces the study's orientation and rationale, including a description of the conceptual framework, an explanation of qualitative research design, the rationale for using a narrative design approach, and the role of the researcher in narrative inquiry. The second section provides information about the delimitations of the study in terms of setting and the criteria for participant selection. This is followed by a section explaining the sampling procedures used in this study and the selection of participants. The following section describes data collection and management procedures, including the development and pilot of the interview protocol (Appendix F), the efforts taken to address researcher bias and reactivity, and descriptions of the data collection and management

procedures used in this study. Lastly, the chapter concludes with three distinct sections outlining the methods of data analysis used by this student, explanations of measures taken to ensure the ethical treatment and protection of participants, and the steps taken to increase the trustworthiness of both the collected data and data analysis.

Orientation and Rationale for the Study

This study explored the stories of school superintendents about how their experiences during the convergent crises and tense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected them personally and professionally. Employing a narrative approach, this research allowed for gathering participants' stories as a means to understand both their experience and the impact of that experience on their identity as a leader and their conception of the role of the superintendent.

The following section describes the conceptual framework which grounded this study, provides a rationale for employing the narrative research design used in the study, and describes the role of the researcher in the narrative tradition.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership theories that emphasize the collective, interactive, and dynamic nature of leadership practice in context were used to frame the experience and leadership identities of superintendents. For example, Complexity Leadership Theory acknowledges organizations as complex, adaptive systems where various forms of leadership intersect to support innovation and learning when confronted with an uncertain future (Drath, 2001; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Leadership from this perspective is socially constructed in context and calls attention to the critical importance of positional leaders, enabling conditions and opportunities for leadership to emerge from the spaces between stakeholders and context for the purpose of learning and growth. As such, inquiring about leadership from this perspective

moved the research focus away from explaining individual leaders' attributes to exploring leadership's experience and how positional leaders understand themselves relative to others in context.

Theories of identity development were used to frame how superintendents conceive of their leadership role and understand themselves within that role. Identities are socially constructed through interactions within our social, cultural, and organizational contexts (Rodriguez et al., 2021) and shape the lens through which we view and experience the world (Takacs, 2003). Leadership identity can be understood as the meaning a person attaches to their leadership role on the personal, relational, and collective levels (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Further, for the individual, negotiating leadership identity involves reconciling one's identity as a leader with one's social identity and role identity in relation to others (Turbin, 2017). Leadership identity is therefore considered specific to the individual (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Using Gee's (2000) simplified definition of identity as being recognized or recognizing yourself as "a certain kind of person (p. 99)," as I engage with participants and analyze their narratives, I will use identity as a lens to understand how they perceive themselves and feel they are perceived by others in their role as superintendent.

Additionally, this study used theories of sensemaking to frame how superintendents interpret and communicate their experience during the complexity of the 2020-2021 period and the impact of that experience, both personally and professionally. When people are confronted with ambiguous, chaotic, or simply unexpected situations, such as those presented by the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021, they have to make sense of their environment (Kalkman, 2020; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a process of making meaning of new and unexpected information and events (Weick, 1995). How this new input is interpreted depends on the embedded values, beliefs, and assumptions of the context individuals

inhabit, as well as their own beliefs, expectations, and interpretations. When considering sensemaking in organizations, leaders must simultaneously be attuned to their own sensemaking efforts and take on the management of this process for others, managing both the "context and group dynamics such that sensemaking can occur (Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005, p.87)". To this end, Weick (1995) asserts that sensemaking, both individually and in organizations, is socially constructed, context-specific, and value-laden. Therefore, alongside theories that placed superintendents acting in relationship to others, and considering their identity as a leader both in those moments and moving forward, sensemaking theory, as part of the conceptual framework for the study, helped to shaped the lens through which I interpreted and analyzed how participants, through their narratives, made sense of the both their experiences during this period and the impact of those experiences on them as leaders.

Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative approach to research design is applied when we need to explore and develop a complex understanding of an issue that requires the study of a group whose voices and stories need to be heard and has variables that are not easily quantified (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The qualitative researcher studies "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3 in Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 7)."

Since this study sought to explore the experiences of school superintendents during the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 and the impact of those experiences on their leadership identity and how they conceive of their role and responsibility as superintendents, the study was interpretive and descriptive by nature. As such, a qualitative research design was appropriate for this study.

The Rationale for Narrative Study

This study explored how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally. This goal spoke to the need for an exploratory methodology that could shed light on the experiences of individuals within the context of a shared social phenomenon. Narrative inquiry "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 67)" to shed light on some aspect of their identity or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Ospina and Dodge (2005) assert that narratives:

> Not only help to explore issues such as personal identity, life-course development, and the cultural and historical worlds of narrators, but they also help to explore specific phenomena, such as leadership and organizational change, and how they are experienced by social actors. (p. 143)

Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy (2005) argue that "social phenomena are not universal, that people in different contexts construct the world in different ways (p.151)." To this end, while the experience of leading during this critical period was collectively experienced by superintendents and therefore shared common themes because leadership is considered to be both socially constructed and intertwined with context, there was also great variability within the personal accounts of participants.

Reissman (2007) asserts that "narrative constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past (p. 8). Further, stories can be used to help us think and know, and therefore hold knowledge and help us generate and communicate meaning (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Accordingly, it can be argued that the practical knowledge of fields responsible for problem-solving, such as public administration, can be enriched by the knowledge generated through the stories told by those that inhabit those roles (Dodge et al.,

2005) This understanding made experience-focused narrative methodology and analysis an appropriate choice for exploring the specific experiences of school superintendents in context, and how those experiences have affected their professional identity and the conception of their role and responsibilities.

Role of the Researcher

Narrative research situates the stories of individuals within personal experiences, culture, and context that are often brought to life through interactive conversation between the participant and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Riessman (2008) further emphasizes this collaborative process between participant and researcher, stressing researcher participation in creating narratives through the facilitation of storytelling, the production of texts through transcription, and the co-analysis of the story with participants. Borrowing from the hermeneutic tradition, “the teller and the audience both inform and influence the narratives in cycles (Nigar, 2019, p. 13). Further, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert “narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation (p. 189).” As such, the researcher becomes both the audience for participants' stories and ultimately frames those stories for others through their analysis and interpretation. While I am not a school superintendent, because of my experience as a public-school building-based administrator during this period, it was important for me to confront potential bias while working through the data collection and analysis processes, and the development of my findings. These efforts will be addressed further in this chapter's Data Collection and Management and Data Analysis sections.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations can be defined as “limitations actively put in place by the research to control for factors that might affect results or focus more specifically on a problem (Terrell, 2015, p. 20)”. This study was delimited according to the setting and participants. These

delimitations served to (a) narrow the setting in which the study was conducted while still encouraging contextual diversity within the potential participant pool; (b) ensure that all participants had some experience in their current role prior to encountering the complexities presented by the convergence of crisis events and social movements presented by the 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 school years, and (c) draw only upon the experiences of individuals who intend to remain superintendents for the foreseeable future. What follows is a discussion of steps taken to delimit the study according to the participants and the setting.

Setting

All participants in this study were superintendents of a Massachusetts public school system serving grades PreK-12. Therefore, it did not include public charter or private school leaders, superintendents outside of Massachusetts, or Massachusetts superintendents of systems that do not include all grades PreK-12, such as superintendents of vocational schools or districts that only serve elementary students. While many other factors such as socioeconomics, student population, geographic location, and regionalization status contribute to the contextual setting in which the superintendent operates, these were not delimited at the onset of the study to encourage and allow for as much diversity as possible in the potential pool of participants.

Participants

Special consideration was also given to the experience of participants. Therefore, experience in their current position and anticipated continuation in the superintendent role further delimited the study. From the pool of potential participants serving as Massachusetts public school superintendents serving PreK-12 districts, all participants have served in their current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 school years and expressed intent to continue working as superintendents for at least two more years. This excluded from the potential participant pool superintendents that were new to their current positions during the

2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, those that left their positions at the close of the 2019-2020 school year, or are planning to retire or leave the superintendent role at the end of the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 school years. The exclusion of superintendents anticipating retirement was intended to capture the sensemaking around future conceptions of their role, responsibilities, and leadership identity as society moves beyond the complex present.

Sampling and Participation

This study was designed to place the school superintendent at the center of the research as the primary subject and engaged the participation of superintendents of Massachusetts public school systems serving grades PreK-12. At the time of data collection, all study participants had served in their current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019- 2020 & 2020-2021 school years and expressed intent to continue working as superintendents for at least two more years. What follows is an explanation of and justification for the sampling techniques used in this study, including gaining access to and recruiting participants and a description of the participants and setting for the study.

Gaining Access to Potential Participants

Application was made to the Lesley University Institutional Review Board for permission to study Massachusetts superintendents using proper protocols for protecting human subjects. Once approved, the process began for recruiting superintendents who met the following criteria of (a) being a superintendent of Massachusetts public school systems serving grades PreK-12; (b) having served in their current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019- 2020 & 2020-2021 school years; and (c) having expressed an intent to continue working as superintendents for at least two more years.

Narrative studies often focus on a small number of participants, sampled on an opportunistic and network basis (Squire, 2008). Therefore, consistent with narrative research, a purposeful sampling technique was used to identify participants for this study with a high likelihood of meeting the participation criteria through my professional network. Creswell and Poth (2016) refer to such contacts as "gatekeepers" or "key informants" because they allow the researcher access to others on-site or within a culture-sharing group (p. 93). This approach allowed an efficient method of connecting with superintendents with a high potential to meet participation criteria through my professional contacts.

Recruitment of Potential Participants

Names and contact information for 23 prospective participants were provided by my professional contacts. Once prospective participants were identified, participants for the study were recruited via email (see Appendix B). This recruitment email introduced me as the researcher, identified the professional contact that recommended them for the study, explained the study and participation criteria, and requested that interested superintendents complete an electronic form[5] to provide basic information to confirm their eligibility for the study and establish their preferred method of future contact.

Description of Participants and Setting

The target sample size for this study was 8-12 participants. Participants were selected based on meeting the study criteria and diversifying the pool of participants to the extent possible. Twelve Massachusetts superintendents expressed interest in participating and responded with contact information to this email. Follow-up contact with prospective participants was made via their preferred contact method as reported on their initial interest

[5] The electronic form used to collect initial information from prospective participants was constructed and managed using the Microsoft Office 365 Platform.

survey (see Appendix C) to answer any additional questions regarding the purpose, methods, or confidentiality measures of the study, to review the Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix D) and to establish a time for an initial interview.

Eleven of the twelve interested superintendents met the study criteria, scheduled interviews, and completed the consent form. Before the initial interview, one participant withdrew from the study and did not complete the initial interview. Ten individuals ultimately participated in this study, representing an even balance of regional and single municipality districts, serving a range of economic needs and a variety of rural, suburban, and urban locations throughout the state of Massachusetts. Table 2 shows the demographic distribution of participants and their districts at the time of the interviews.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant Gender	District Type	Regional Status	District Student Population	% White	% Economically Disadvantaged
Female: 4	Urban: 1	Regional: 5	Less than 2,000: 4	50-75%: 4	Less than 25%: 5
Male: 6	Suburban: 6	Municipal: 5	2,000-5,000: 4	75-90%: 4	25-50%: 4
	Rural: 3		5,000-10,000: 2	Greater than 90%: 2	Greater than 50%: 1

Data Collection and Management

This section describes the development of the instruments and data collection, and management procedures used to conduct the study. This includes a detailed description of the development of the interview protocol (Appendix F), the process used in piloting the protocol in advance of the initial interviews to increase the instrument's clarity and reliability, the data collection process, and the methods of managing the study's data.

Instrumentation

This qualitative study utilized a responsive semi-structured interview approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2011) to solicit personal narrative accounts yet keep consistency and a common structure throughout the interview process. To solicit narratives of superintendents' experience and sensemaking, the initial interview guide consisted of broad, open-ended primary questions that are aligned with the guiding research questions of the study. Complementary probing questions (Elliot, 2005) were also developed to gain additional information focused on how the participant experienced the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 "inward, outward, backward, and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50)". *Inward* refers to how individuals cognitively experience a situation, including their feelings and reactions. *Outward* describes how individuals experience their environment or the world around them. *Backward* and *forward* acknowledges the impact of past, present, and future experiences within the narrative account.

Toward this aim, interview protocol questions were developed in alignment with the main research questions of this study (Appendix F). The protocol was divided into broader questions related to the purposes of (a) opening the interview and building trust; (b) addressing the research questions of the study; (c) transitioning between topics, and (d) closing the interview. In addition to these broader questions, potential follow-up and probing questions were outlined to support deepening the narrative shared by the participant, to help them reflect further on their experiences, and to elicit other relevant accounts that the protocol did not directly solicit.

Participants were interviewed individually during two separate interview sessions using the Zoom web conferencing platform. The average length of the twenty interviews was 43

minutes and 45 seconds, and the average total time spent with each participant was 87 minutes and 30 seconds over the course of the two sessions.

Interviewing participants more than once provided flexibility and an opportunity to reflect upon the first interview and to clarify, build upon and explore the participants' responses in the second interview. This approach also enabled participants to reflect upon the content, recall experiences, and express their perspectives. As such, while the second interview continued to use the protocol as a general guide, an abbreviated individualized guide was also developed for each participant based on the review of their initial interview transcript.

Piloting the Interview Protocol

The interview protocol (Appendix F) was piloted with two experienced school district leaders. A pilot test is an important part of interview preparation. Piloting the instrument provided the opportunity to test the pacing of the initial interview and gain feedback regarding the clarity and effectiveness of the questions toward eliciting stories relevant to the guiding questions of the study. The pilot interview process also allowed me to gather participant feedback about their experience being interviewed and reflect on how I functioned in my role as the researcher in eliciting participants' stories.

Two individuals were contacted to participate in an interview, simulating identical conditions as outlined in the study method design. The first pilot participant met all criteria for the study but was known to me before their participation and, therefore, could not be considered for full participation in the study. The second pilot participant met the study criteria in terms of length of time in their position and leading through the convergence of crises; however, they held the role of Assistant Superintendent and were also known to me prior to their participation in the piloting of the instrument. After the pilot interview, both participants were invited to give verbal

feedback on the questions that were asked and the experience of being interviewed. The feedback received from the pilot interview participants informed protocol revisions before interviewing actual study participants.

Addressing Researcher Bias and Reactivity

Researchers subconsciously bring their own experiences and stories to the research. Narrative researchers do not just record other people's stories; they are also involved by making meaning of those stories through the research process. As such, they become a part of the experience being examined (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researcher bias emerges when the inquirer's existing preconceptions, values, and beliefs influence their behaviors, decisions, and interpretations of findings within a study (Maxwell, 2013). Subjectivity cannot be completely removed from the study, so it is important that a researcher understand how their perceptual lens may influence their research and take measures to reduce bias (Maxwell, 2013).

Maxwell (2013) refers to the researcher's influence on the setting or individuals studied as *reactivity* (p. 124). Within narrative methodology, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advise that "the way an interviewer acts, questions and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience" (p. 110). Therefore, carefully considering the conditions and framework of the interview and the balance of control between myself and the participants were critical to the content of what was told, how it was communicated, and the meaning ascribed to it as influenced by the relationship of these factors. The video recordings of the interviews were reviewed to reflect upon my presence, body language, tone, and pacing as an interviewer and consider how these factors affected the conditions and outcomes of the interview.

While this reflection occurred during the pilot of the interviews in preparation for the

beginning of data collection, it continued throughout all phases of communication with participants and following each interview for the study. Additionally, as recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), writing journal entries and memos following both the pilot and study interviews regarding "relational circumstances of the situation represented in field texts[6] (p. 95)" was used as a way to gain clarity around this dynamic.

Collecting Interview Data

The primary form of data collection in this narrative study was in-depth interviews of the participants. In-person accessibility and safety concerns relating to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that interviews were conducted and recorded with participant permission via the Zoom web conferencing platform.

Eleven of the twelve respondents who indicated their interest in participating in this study and completed the Demographic and Interest Survey (see Appendix C) satisfied the criteria for this study and were contacted via email or phone, dependent upon their indicated preference to establish a mutually agreed upon date and time for the initial interview.

Once a date and time for the initial interview were mutually established, an electronic calendar invitation, including a Zoom link for the interview and a link to the Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix D), was sent to participants by email. Participants signed the letter acknowledging their understanding of the study and agreement to participate through DigiSigner, an encrypted and password-protected eSignature service. A timeline of events from March 2020-June 2021 (Appendix E) was also included in this email as a background reference to provide context for framing the interview when discussing the convergence of events during that time

[6] A term used by D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly to describe data. The term derives from their belief that field texts "are created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 92)

period. Initial interviews did not take place until this consent was been received. Follow-up interviews were scheduled at the conclusion of the first interview, and an electronic calendar invitation was sent, which included the Zoom link for the interview.

Confidentiality and informed consent were reviewed, and participants were reminded that they have the right to withdraw consent at any time (see Appendix D) at the beginning of both the initial and follow-up interviews. The interview protocol (see Appendix F) described in the previous section served as an interview guide and provided consistency and structure while also allowing me to be responsive to participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2011) and follow them "down *their* trail" (Reissman, 2007, p. 24). This use of the protocol was extended into the second interview; however, an abbreviated individualized guide for each participant's second interview was based on the review of their initial interview transcript.

Interviews were audio and video recorded using the record feature of the Zoom web conferencing platform, with minimal notes taken during the interview to allow me to be fully present for the conversation and attentive to the participant. These recordings were saved directly to my password-protected computer. The interview recordings were reviewed to create additional field notes, transcribed using the Sonix web-based transcription service, and the transcripts were then used for data analysis.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the importance of field texts to "fill in the richness, nuance, and intricacy of the lived stories and the landscape (p. 80)." Therefore, artifacts such as news articles, communications from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary Secondary Education (DESE), and materials retrieved indirectly from participating school districts or DESE websites or other related publicly accessible contextual artifacts were also collected.

Managing the Interview Data

Video and audio documentation of participant interviews were recorded through Zoom and saved to a password-protected laptop. Video and audio recordings were then uploaded and transcribed using the Sonix transcription service. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and downloaded as Microsoft Word documents for easy sharing with study participants and compatibility with Atlas.ti software for coding.

Interview transcripts were shared with study participants through email as a form of respondent validation referred to as member checking (Bryman, 1988; Lincoln & Gruba, 1985 in Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). Providing the opportunity for participants to review the transcript and make corrections and notes was a means of "ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants [said] and [did] (Maxwell, 2013, p.126)." To allow ample opportunity for participants to give feedback and engage in the co-construction of the narrative while also setting time boundaries, participants were given roughly a week to review the transcript and add any notes or clarification they felt necessary. Understanding the demands placed on superintendents' schedules, a reminder email was also sent to participants encouraging them to reach out if they desired more time to review their transcripts and give input.

As initial interview transcripts were reviewed and returned by study participants, summaries of each interview were created to begin to get a general sense of the data and identify ideas and areas of focus for the second interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). After the follow-up interview transcript was returned, those data were added to each participant's summary. Additionally, participant interview summaries were uploaded to Atlas.ti to assist in the process of identifying common themes across their stories.

Data Analysis

After completing the transcription of the two interviews for each participant and compiling a summary for each participant to further familiarize me with the content of their interviews, a decision needed to be made regarding the framework for data analysis that would be used. Polkinghorne (1995) notes that two forms are traditionally used for the analysis of narrative, explaining "*analysis of narratives* moves from stories to common elements, and *narrative analysis* moves from common elements to stories" (p. 12). Given the goal of moving from the participants' stories to the common themes among them, an *analysis of narratives* framework was used to review the data. A naturalist stance was also taken to analyzing the data, focusing on the "rich descriptions of the content of people's stories" (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35), with efforts made to ensure that the participant's voice was not lost in my interpretation of their story.

Before I began my analysis of the interview transcripts, I prepared the documents to focus my efforts. First, I removed the researcher portions of the text from the transcripts. This allowed me to focus my analysis solely on the words of the participants. Next, I combined both transcripts for each participant into a single document to make working with the narratives easier. Having a single document for each participant helped to focus the coding and keep track of the stories that participants shared in interviews. These combined transcripts were then uploaded into Atlas.ti for the purpose of coding and analysis. These complete transcripts were read and re-read multiple times through each round of the coding and analysis processes to allow for immersion and familiarization with their narratives.

There were four major steps to the coding and analysis process for this study: (1) review and initial coding of the interview summaries for each participant; (2) initial coding and review of the individual participants' complete interview transcripts; (3) identifying the emerging and major themes across the participants' narratives; (4) and finally, making meaning of those themes and identifying the findings of the study.

As I began the coding process, I found it challenging and somewhat overwhelming to jump straight to coding the participants' full transcripts. Therefore, to ground myself in the broad range of topics discussed by the participants, I read and re-read the interview summaries that I created for each participant. This was followed by a round of open coding of the summaries to establish general codes to analyze the full interview transcripts.

This preliminary overview was followed by multiple rounds of coding of the individual participants' complete interview transcripts. In the first round of coding, I used a hybrid approach that consisted of applying the general codes that I had identified by reviewing the summaries of the participant's interviews and additional open coding. The purpose of coding the summaries and the first round of coding the complete transcripts was to begin identifying and classifying the content of the interviews in the broadest sense.

The codes were then reviewed for content. Similar content and ideas were re-coded together, and other codes were broken up that did not quite fit together. The purpose of this was to make sure that codes were used consistently. Resultingly, eighty-two codes were identified and applied during this round.

Codes were organized on a spreadsheet, using participants' assigned numbers as column headings and listing all of the codes identified in their interviews beneath. A color-coding system that assigned a color to similar codes was added to the spreadsheet as a visual organizing method. With such a large amount of data, the purpose of this step was to provide a way to visualize all of the codes on one plain and to organize it in a way that would allow me to begin the process of narrowing in on overarching themes in the data. Therefore, as an additional intermediary step to prepare for the next round of coding, this information was then resorted by aligning color-coded boxes to visually understand the frequency of codes.

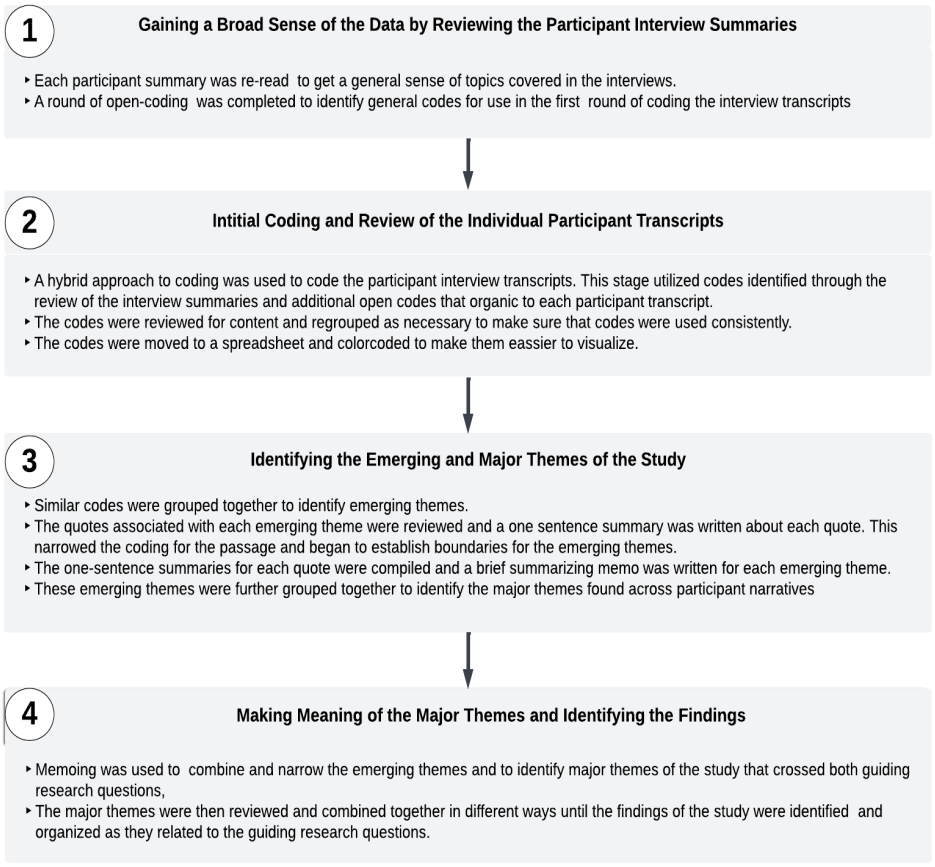
The purpose of the second round of coding was to identify themes within the participants' narratives (Merriam, 2009). Using this visual representation, I began grouping together similar codes to begin identifying emerging themes within and across the participants' narratives. During this step, thirty potential emerging themes were identified.

I then moved from the spreadsheet back into Atlas.ti, to group the first-round codes into these emerging themes. Next, using Atlas.ti, I went theme by theme and reviewed the quotes associated with each theme, and wrote a one-sentence summary about each quote. As some quotes had been associated with more than one code in the initial round of coding, reviewing each one individually and writing the one-sentence summaries allowed me to narrow the coding of the passage, begin the process of finding boundaries between my data, and understand the base themes more deeply. To prepare for the next phase of analysis, I then compile these brief summaries into documents associated with each theme and wrote a summary of each.

The purpose of the final phase of coding was to identify major themes across the participants' narratives. To do this, I used summary documents created in the previous round and a process of memoing to combine and narrow the emerging themes, identifying twelve major themes that bridged both the experiences of superintendents during this period and the impact of that experience on their conception of their role. These major themes were sorted and combined in different ways until the eight findings of this study were identified relative to the two guiding questions of this study. Figure 2 provides a summary and visual representation of the four phases of data analysis used in this study.

Figure 2

Phases of Data Analysis



Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations guided efforts to inform and protect the participants of this study, and permission was granted by the Lesley University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission prior to beginning this study. Due to the relational nature of narrative research, ongoing discussions of confidentiality were important throughout the research process to establish and maintain informed consent and to build a trusting relationship between myself and the participants. Participants were given multiple opportunities to ask questions throughout the

study, and safeguards were in place to ensure the anonymity of participating superintendents and their school districts.

The initial recruitment email (Appendix B) contained the researcher's contact information, the university's contact information, the study purpose and participation criteria, the voluntary nature of participation, the time required to participate, and confidentiality and privacy practices. Consent to participate was received before the initial interview (Appendix D). These safeguards were reviewed at the beginning of each interview session participants were reminded of their right to withdraw consent to participate at any time during the study without penalty. Upon conclusion of the second interview, all participants agreed to be available for follow-up contact if questions arose or if additional information was needed.

Maxwell (2013) discusses the importance of maintaining working research partnerships with participants during qualitative research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further stress the relational nature of narrative research and the tension and negotiation between research involvement and distance. During the interview process, open-ended interview questions were used to allow the participants to share their stories with minimal interference, and throughout interviews and other communications, I was mindful of tone, body language, and other factors that could interfere with this process. In this process, I also gave particular attention to the vulnerability of participants as they recalled stressful events and the emotional response and distress that they might experience as a result of sharing their stories, allowing them to pause if needed and being responsive to their body language, tone, and emotion responses to individual questions and the interview experience as a whole. Additionally, reflective researcher field notes, as recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), were kept to help maintain objectivity through the data collection and analysis processes.

To protect the participant's confidentiality, all names and possible identifying information were redacted or changed, and all data was stored to ensure confidentiality by using password protection for electronic data and locked cabinet storage for hard-copy data. Numbers and pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their anonymity and that of their school districts in all interview transcriptions, field notes[7], interim texts[8], and published findings[9]. Additionally, video and audio recordings of interviews conducted over Zoom were saved to the password-protected computer of the researcher.

Trustworthiness of Data Analysis

Measures were also taken to enhance the validity and dependability of this study. Qualitative validity is described as "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122).

During the analysis process, efforts were made to check for accuracy in the interpretation of the data and reduce researcher bias through *member-checking* (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell and Poth, 2016), a process that can be described as seeking participant feedback so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account. Transcripts were shared with participants electronically for review to help ensure accuracy in data collection and interpretation of the meaning of participant responses as part of the study results. Participants were invited to make any revisions or additional comments or provide points of clarification and return these edits prior to beginning data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016). After the analysis stage, each participant's profile and the findings of the study were also

[7] Any data collected in the field. These can include notes taken by the researcher, transcribed interviews, or additional artifacts that help to establish context.
[8] Notes developed from field notes. They are meant to bridge field texts and research texts. They can also be shared and negotiated with participants as a way to validate the analysis and findings of a study.
[9] Any publication written by the researcher including the proposed dissertation research or any subsequent writings based on the outcomes of the study.

shared with participants for feedback. Often used as a strategy for validating data and analysis in qualitative studies, these efforts were used to ensure the accuracy of how participants reported the narratives of their experiences and their intended meaning.

While In-depth interviews are the primary data source for this narrative study, additional artifacts such as news articles, communications from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, or other related contextual artifacts were used as a method for triangulating data and to assist in providing a thick description of participants' experiences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the qualitative research method employed by this study. It opened with a brief introduction followed by an explanation of the study's design, including the conceptual framework used to frame the study, a description of and rationale for using a narrative design approach in this study. Following that section, I described the research methods used in this study. Within this section, I outlined the decisions regarding the delimitations of the study and sampling, data collection, and analysis processes. This was followed by a section outlining the measures taken throughout the study to ensure the ethical treatment of participants and to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. The chapter concludes by describing the efforts taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Chapter Four presents and analyzes data that were collected from in-depth interviews as they relate to the guiding research questions. The guiding questions are used to organize and explain the findings and to present the narrative excerpts that illustrate and support the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: **Analysis and Findings**

Introduction

This study is built on the frequently expressed contention that the interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises experienced during the years 2020 and 2021 presented school superintendents with extraordinary challenges. Moreover, these crises brought systemic inequities to the forefront, underscoring the need for schools to examine long-standing assumptions and practices. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally.

The questions that drove this research were:

1. What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?
2. How did this experience affect participating superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?

This study aimed to answer these guiding research questions through an analysis of participants' narrative accounts.

This chapter presents the major relevant findings of this study. The first section introduces the participants of this study. The second section provides the major findings identified across participant interviews, delineated by the guiding research question. Each finding is derived from an analysis of the participants' own accounts to ensure that the findings are conveyed through their voices. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the chapter and a preview of Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

The following section provides a description of each participant in this study. It gives a brief overview of their experience as educational leaders and the relevant themes that were featured in their stories. All participants were interviewed via Zoom during the summer of 2021 and again during the fall of the same year. During the interview process, as they discussed their experiences and considered the impact on their leadership practice, participants tended to adopt a reflective stance, at times expressing strong emotions or pausing to consider their responses carefully.

Given the reflective nature of the stories that participants shared, in presenting the findings of this study, it was important to protect their anonymity while also maintaining the humanistic element present during the interview process. Therefore, to protect the identity of participants and the districts they represent, all participants are identified by pseudonyms, and references to the districts they represent, or other identifying factors have been removed from their profiles and quoted portions of their narratives used throughout this study.

Helen Larsen

Helen was entering her fifth year as the superintendent of a suburban district when I spoke with Helen in early July 2021 and again in early October 2021. A career educator, prior to becoming a superintendent, she had held leadership positions as both a principal and assistant superintendent. Describing the superintendent role as “by far the hardest job [she has] ever had,” throughout our conversations, she reflected on the intensity of leading during the convergent crises sharing that “we were reinventing everything” and “cleaning up mess after mess.” As Helen and I spoke, themes around communication, engagement, trust-building with stakeholders, and the challenges of the role were featured prominently in her story.

Larry Jacobs

Larry was entering his seventh year as the superintendent of a predominantly white, suburban district when we spoke in July 2021 and in early October 2021. With a background in finance, prior to becoming a superintendent, he held school positions as a director of finance and an assistant superintendent. While he describes these previous district roles as giving him experience with the operation of the district as a whole, he credits his experiences through his doctoral work with motivating him toward the superintendency and being ready to "take that next step." While he talked about the many challenges of the role, he also talked about how much he loves his job and how important it is to be in the role for the "right reasons." Larry described the experience of leading during this time as "a little crazy," a "very difficult time," and one that "none of us were prepared" for. As we spoke, themes around the intense focus on health and safety, collaboration with other superintendents, and the divisive atmosphere of the time period featured prominently in his story.

Susan Miller

Susan was entering her fourth year as superintendent of a rural district when I spoke with her in mid-July 2021 and again in October 2021. Susan entered the field of education after time spent working in business and began her teaching career as a math teacher at the secondary level. With a passion for curriculum development, she began to take on various leadership roles at both the school and district levels as a curriculum specialist, eventually holding the position of assistant superintendent before assuming the role of superintendent. Woven throughout her narrative were frequent remarks about the value she places on being the lead learner for her district. As we spoke, she shared that "she lost sleep" and "didn't take care of [herself]" during this time, describing it all as a "delicate balance." As she described her experience of leading

through the convergence, themes of collaboration with various groups, honest communication, and gaining confidence as a decision-maker were evident in her narrative.

Ellen Russo

Ellen was in her fifth year as the superintendent of a small rural district when we spoke first in late July and then again in early October. Before working in education, Ellen worked in finance, first stepping into the world of public education as a school business official. Ellen shared that she never anticipated becoming a superintendent but was motivated to take on new roles that gave her a platform to improve things for students. Ellen described the experience of leading during this time as "completely overwhelming sometimes" and that there was a sense that "people were coming at [her] from every angle." As she relayed her experience, she placed emphasis on communication and engagement, the pressure she felt to meet the intensified needs of stakeholders, and collaboration both within her district and with other leaders.

Arlene Fredericks

Arlene was in her fifth year as the superintendent of a rural district when we spoke in July and October of 2021. With a strong commitment to supporting underserved students, prior to becoming a superintendent she began her career as a teacher before becoming an assistant principal. Her motivation for taking on new roles as a principal, assistant superintendent, and eventually superintendent has always been to have a greater voice to advocate for the needs of students and to have the ability to impact change on a broader scale. A self-described "pretty positive person," she also stated that she was "fighting to stay that way. As we spoke, Arlene noted the demanding pace and intensity of leading during this time was "getting to be too much," and stated that she felt "exhausted." As she narrated her experience, she concentrated on stories related to collaborative problem-solving to meet the increased needs of stakeholders, building

systems and capacity within her district, communicating clearly, and navigating the political conflicts and turbulence she encountered.

Michael Grant

Michael was in his eighth year as the superintendent of a suburban district when we spoke in July of 2021 and again in mid-September. He began his career in education as a teacher before becoming a school-based administrator, as both an assistant principal and then a principal, before eventually taking on his current role as superintendent. Michael loved being a teacher but pursued leadership opportunities as an avenue to impact positive change in schools. According to Michael, leading during this period was "taking a toll" on superintendents, and the challenging decisions related to both health and safety and the work around equity in his district were "humbling" and "put things into perspective" for him as a leader. Themes that were evident within his narrative included leading while learning, the politicization of issues and decision-making, and the increased demands around community engagement.

Frank Mitchell

Frank was in his sixth year as the superintendent of a suburban district when we spoke in early August of 2021 and again in late September. Beginning his career as a coach and teacher, he made the transition to school-based leadership as an assistant principal, quickly moving to a principalship before taking the role of assistant superintendent and eventually moving to the superintendency. Frank aspired to be a high school principal when he started his career. However, as opportunities presented themselves, the chance to impact change on a larger scale appealed to him, and his focus shifted. Very proud of his long-standing commitment to his community and strong relationships with stakeholders, he also described feeling "beaten down" by the events of this time period and "trying to get through" it. These feelings, he explained,

often stemmed from the immediacy of people's needs, the increasing divisiveness around health and safety issues, and increased demands around engagement and communication with the community.

Tim Richards

Tim was in his fifth year as the superintendent of an urban district when we spoke in late August of 2021 and again in October. A career educator, Tim began his career as a teacher but quickly shifted his focus to administration, hoping to have a greater impact on making rich experiences available to all students. Prior to becoming the superintendent of his current district, he also held the roles of assistant principal and principal and served as the superintendent in two other districts. Tim described the experience of being a superintendent during this time period as a "tremendous challenge" and like "swimming without a life preserver and just trying to stay above water." While Tim described the superintendent's job as typically an "around the clock" responsibility, he also shared that this period helped him recognize the importance of taking care of himself so that he can maintain the stamina needed to do the work. Throughout his narrative, themes around personal reflection, increased collaboration with stakeholders, making hard decisions, and the political nature of the role were noted.

Andrew Gillard

Andrew Gillard was in his fourth year as the superintendent of a suburban district when we spoke in late August of 2021 and again in late October. A career educator, Andrew worked in a number of educator roles before taking on the role of building principal, eventually moving to the superintendency. As Andrew described the experience of being a superintendent during this time, he noted the "weight and responsibility" placed on superintendents and shared that "stress levels [were] pretty high everywhere." Throughout our conversations, he talked urgently about

"level[ing the] playing field" for all students and discussed the disproportionate impact of this time period based on race and class. As we spoke, themes around the uncertainty and divisiveness of the time, the intensity of student needs, and increased demands around communication were prevalent in his narrative.

Bill Flanders

Bill Flanders was in his sixth year as superintendent when we spoke in mid-August of 2021 and again in October. A career educator, he began his working as a learning assistant before moving to roles as a classroom teacher, school-based administrator, and central office administrator before eventually stepping into the role of superintendent. Reflecting on his journey, he shared that he was motivated toward leadership because wanted to lead change and have the ability to "set the narrative" for the district. Bill portrayed this time period as a "political firestorm" and described the pace of work as "unsustainable," and throughout our conversations, themes around the intensity and volume of communication and engagement, the importance of relationship building, and the increased demand for collaboration were prominent in his narrative.

Presentation of the Findings

Delineation of Findings for Research Question #1

This study began with an interest in capturing and understanding the experiences of superintendents. Therefore, the first guiding question for this research was, "What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?". There were many common and distinct elements to their stories about the intensified challenges, especially those concerning the unusual complexity of

the issues they encountered. Expressing the same urgency and disorientation felt by others in this study, early in our first meeting, Tim Richards candidly shared:

> It was really just a tremendous challenge where I felt like [I was] just swimming without any life preserver, just trying to stay above water. And it was like everything was coming at us, as superintendents, having to make these decisions with no guidance, yet we were told the guidance would be coming, and everyone was like, everyone was left to themselves. And, and then on top of that, the unrest that you're seeing all in the world happening all around the same time. And you have demands from parents, who are divided about, you know, the President of the United States, divided about what's happening with schools...to mask, not mask; to vaccinate, not vaccinate. All these things… it was just this confluence of everything at the same time. It was just more than people could handle. And I started to see colleagues of mine were leaving [their] jobs. Just like, this is just too much because it became almost like every decision was going to make somebody unhappy. There was not a way to actually ever make a decision that would get people on your team. And so, it became very isolating, very lonely, and I just… my, my reflections on that are like, it was just hard. It was just hard emotionally.

Tim's depiction of navigating uncharted territory and negotiating numerous instances of thorny problems and difficult-to-manage situations provides the context for five distinct findings relevant to their experience. In this section, I will discuss each finding, connecting the participants' shared experiences to one another while keeping their narratives largely intact to ensure their voices are heard.

Finding #1: Superintendents in this study reported that uncertain and unfamiliar conditions combined with inconsistent state-level guidance, a lack of local consensus, an escalating political climate, and the physical and emotional strain on themselves and others hampered their sensemaking and decision-making.

This finding was informed by the following themes relating to how they experienced and made sense of unfolding events: (a) uncertain, evolving, and unfamiliar conditions; (b) state-level indecision and sparse guidance; (c) unobtainable local consensus; (d) a climate of escalating political division and strong emotions, (e) competing demands and interests.

Contending with Uncertain, Evolving, and Unfamiliar Conditions. The theme of making sense of and navigating uncertain, evolving, and unfamiliar conditions was prominent throughout the stories of all participating superintendents. As they recalled key memories, many noted the closing of schools in March 2020, the murder of George Floyd, the re-opening of schools in September 2020, and the conflicts around masking in schools as they prepared for the 2021-2022 school year as pivotal moments that often provided benchmarks for discussing their experience and epitomized the ever-changing conditions of the time period. That said, when discussing their experiences and the challenges they faced as leaders, the immediacy of managing the health pandemic response and their feelings of unpreparedness were constant through lines in their stories. Larry Jacobs expressed the sense of superintendents being caught unaware:

> I think none of us were prepared, or I'll speak for myself. But even my colleagues who have been doing this for years, I don't think any of us were prepared for a pandemic or what was going to take place.

Referencing her update to the school committee just days before the March 15 declaration to close all Massachusetts K-12 public and private schools for in-person instruction, Helen Larsen reflected on how quickly the situation shifted. In her reflection, she also expressed a sense of gratitude that at that time, she didn't have a sense of the enormity of what they were about to experience:

> I've actually watched…we had a school committee meeting [on] March 11th of 2020, and COVID is not even on the agenda. I…and it came back as I happened to see the video. Before the meeting, I said to the chairs, "I better give you a COVID [update]," because, of course, it's coming in around me, right? And I say to the chairs, "You better let me do an update about COVID before we get into the other stuff on the agenda." And I hear myself rattle off some of the ways it's starting to…travel…even the Asian stuff was starting then because it was about where you traveled to and stuff. And I thought. 'Thank goodness I had no idea what was going on. Thank goodness, thank goodness.' So sometimes it's good… I'm such a planner, and that's made me wonder sometimes if it's good we don't always know. We don't know. We don't know. We don't know. If any of us had known it was going to go on that long, like, we would never have been able to believe we could have lived it that long. And just not knowing, in a way, was a good thing. So, I guess I'll leave it at that.

Contending With a Lack of Information and State-Level Guidance and Indecision. Coping with the state education department's hesitation and insufficient guidance was a recurring theme in the narratives of participants. This was consequential because they were unfamiliar with managing a health pandemic and unaccustomed to making local decisions on

issues of health and physical safety. Larry Jacobs shared the challenge this created for superintendents, sharing:

> I think the bigger issue we had as a community was just a lack of information or coordination of information from the governor's office and DESE with regard to what would actually be required to be done [and] what was going to have local control. And that, I think that's where we had our biggest hang-ups.

Andrew Gillard shared how uncertainty, created by a lack of clear and timely guidance on the part of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), created confusion and an added level of challenge for his community:

> There's been a lot of uncertainty, so it's like, "We're going to do this, but no, we're not, but maybe we will. But here are the rules. I'm changing them next week, and this is embargoed for the next 20 minutes until I announce it. But I just called you. And then we meet with principals, and they want to know definitively black and white. What are the rules? What are the like? Oh, we're going to do this, but I'm not sure." So, I think the only thing worse than knowing something is not knowing. So, I think the uncertainty that's probably been the biggest challenge for administrators.

Michael Grant shared the impact that the lack of clear guidance had on superintendents and his feelings of resentment, explaining:

> I think, really, I was resentful that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education…DESE did not take a lead on what to do about the pandemic. And I felt that superintendents really took action and forced DESE to say, "OK, we all need to go remote." And I felt like it came down to individual school communities, individual school committees, [and] individual superintendents to make the unprecedented decision

> to close schools. And that weighed heavily on me. I felt that…it was absolutely something that we should do. I felt that there was no real leadership from the state on what we should do on that. They were mostly silent.

Contending With a Lack of Local Consensus. Participants receiving partial or unhelpful direction from state-level agencies concluded that many decisions about the conditions of schooling were pushed to the local level. This required superintendents to gather input on short notice from stakeholders and work closely with their school committees in a climate of diverging opinions about the safety of schools and how best to educate students. Andrew Gillard described the division in his community as a reflection of what was happening across the country, stating:

> Well, the convergence of the issues, I mean, I think it's ongoing, whether we're talking about equity for all students or we're talking about COVID-19, and you've seen a pretty strong split, I think, from the beginning, that's probably representative of where America is politically, where people end up in voting by state or in presidential elections. And basically, it's, you know, it's 50/50. It's you have this split…So, you had these splits. Every decision we made; folks were split on.

Even as superintendents surveyed their communities to consider the physical opening of schools and shifts regarding the conditions of schools, it was still challenging to find a clear path to inform decision-making. Bill Flanders discussed that even with high participation rates, the division in his community was apparent, explaining:

> Every time we surveyed families, staff, gone are the days with a nice, smooth 60/40 majority. I mean, we were literally getting like 50.5 to 49.5 as a percentage and getting 78% of our families to respond. So, I mean, it's huge response rates and so polarizing.

Frank Mitchell described how this division extended to his school committee and the tension that was created around decision-making, stating:

> And it's been, it's been...it was 4-3 when we had to make those tough calls. You know, it used to be...I think [in] my first 5 years, every vote was a 7-0 vote. And we spent the bulk of last year going 4-3 on votes.

Michael Grant further echoed Frank's sense of school committee divide as compared to times of non-crisis sharing, "Even my school committee was very divided. They're usually a very united, like-minded group, but they were very divided on what to do around, around the pandemic."

Negotiating A Climate of Escalating Political Division and Strong Emotions. Along with the uncertainty, superintendents were also contending with intense levels of conflict and pushback concerning volatile issues with an increasingly political character. As such, they were left vulnerable to attack, and it became necessary for them to navigate the institutional and community terrain amidst an increased fragility and volatility of other people's emotions.

Escalating Political Division. The sense of increasing divisiveness and the politicization of the health crisis and equity work was raised by multiple superintendents. Throughout their narratives, masking in schools, particularly the masking policy to be used for the return to in-person school in the fall of 2021, became a polarizing and politically charged issue for schools. Arlene Fredericks commented on the impact of politics and the issue of masking in schools, stating:

> And the other piece of it is just the political side of getting people to understand why masking is important now seems to be much more difficult than it was before. Before, people just took us at our word, and we did it, and we moved on. Now there's this whole

> political side that you have to constantly be paying attention to, and responding to, that wasn't necessarily there when we first initiated COVID [precautions and policies].

During his September interview, Frank Mitchell spoke about the time-consuming impact of the political side of health issues while also trying to focus the efforts of his district around issues of equity sharing:

> You know this year is horrible. It's worse than last year. I think we did some great work this summer talking about coming into school with an equity mindset, really focusing on teaching and learning. But the political reality is… the political nature in this community is [that] the anti-maskers are exhausting, and they're wearing everyone out. And our administrators can't do anything beyond dealing with a coordinated anti-mask parental effort. It's exhausting, and all the other stuff falls by the wayside.

Michael Grant echoed this experience also in September while also noting increasingly aggressive tactics on the part of the anti-masking campaign, stating:

> I've gotten two FOIAs[10] for my emails from parents who think that I'm getting kickbacks from mask companies. Right? I've been served twice by parents and their phony subpoenas that the lawyer laughed at. I think there is a concerted effort just to make things miserable. And so, I guess my time constraints are no worse, but I think the amount of time I spend on unproductive and negative issues has increased. One thing that really jumps out in my mind, also, in addition to kind of the small but vocal opposition to safety protocols, is that we're seeing our infection rates really go upward, and I feel helpless to do anything about it.

[10] Freedom of Information Act Requests

Increasing Opposition, Fatigue, and Personal Attacks. The participants' stories included their efforts to manage and negotiate the increasing division and opposition in their communities and superintendents and their school committees were forced to contend with backlash often fueled by the frustration, exhaustion, and fear of others. Ellen Russo shared how the sustained focus on health and safety combined with politically charged issues impacted both the faculty and the community sharing:

> I think the [new COVID] variant and the fact that this is continuing to go on even longer has increased the fear in the public and has just put a ton of fatigue on faculty and staff, and superintendents, for sure. And everybody has a lot less tolerance or patience for things going on. So, I think the political challenges have even become greater.

She went on to say:

> I'm finding people being very... out of fear, I believe, and fatigue and just being overwhelmed with everything... being very accusatory, lacking trust in the work that we've done, even though, you know, we haven't really had huge increases in COVID cases in schools. Right? They're coming from outside, but they're not really...the spread isn't an in-house outward type of thing. But there's just a lot of challenges around ensuring that we're providing the best education and that teachers have...people are staying in it. There are staffing shortages. There's just a general kind of depression of people's morale. You know, they're just down, down and out and tired of all of it. So, it's challenging. It's challenging to move things forward. And it's getting it's hard to stay motivated and positive, and there's just a lot on the plate for people without a lot of bandwidth. The overwhelmed and drained population is definitely your faculty and staff,

> but the political pressure and the general lack of patience and tolerance is coming from the families and the parent community.

Bill Flanders also noticed the connection between the increased politicization of issues and the freedom to express strong emotions and opinions, stating:

> I think the pandemic has brought out such strong emotions, opinions, and beliefs that I have no doubt we're not already there. I don't think the pandemic caused people to change political sides or political ideologies or beliefs, but I believe [due to] the change in politics nationally and at the state level and locally, there is a new license to share your opinion and demand that your opinion be heard and accommodated in a way that I think never existed before.

Frank Mitchell discussed that as tensions mounted and issues became more politicized, he received personal attacks in public forums:

> The public comment time in our meeting...it's brutal. It's embarrassing. It's embarrassing more than anything else. You know, I had a parent sit there, you know, essentially attacked me, called me quote-unquote "ball-less" at a meeting. And I'm like, where are we? What are we doing here? This is insane, you know, all for following the mask mandate. So. So yeah, it's worrisome. It's troubling thinking about what's on the horizon. Yeah.

Arlene Fredericks also reported that she had received personal attacks and been the target of racial slurs in public forums. However, in contrast to the example shared by Frank Mitchell, for her, it was not isolated to the intensity of this time period sharing:

> What I would say to you personally, however, I've been through the...what's the word I want to use...through the gamut. I spend more time justifying decisions I've made

> probably than most superintendents do because I'm a woman of color. I have had letters written that are completely inaccurate and lies. I've been called "nigger" on a Google Meet session. I have had three school committee members, who are now on the school committee, run for school committee to get rid of me because I had made a decision on a case of equity…Whether it's gotten more intense since George Floyd. I really can't say because there's been a lot I've had to work through and deal with; Everything from a petition that was put on what is known as a racist website asking for me to be fired to Facebook commentary that has just been ugly is the word that I would use. Just, just making statements that aren't true, so forth, and so on. So, it's been an interesting journey, but I can't necessarily say it was because of the George Floyd incident. I think being a superintendent of color in general, this is what you face.

Negotiating Tension Between Competing Demands and Interests. Throughout their narratives, superintendents reflected on the tension between the immediate pressures they felt related to the health pandemic and the long-term concerns about how to lead their systems through the work of heightening awareness and action needed to address inequities and issues of social justice. Discussing this tension, superintendents expressed a sense of being unable to focus on it all at once and being confronted with the dilemma of which issue to attend to at any given time. Often this was presented as an “either-or” challenge of attending to health or attending to issues of racial and social justice with the COVID-19 Pandemic and the immediacy of its impact on student health and learning taking precedence. Bill Flanders discussed understanding the bandwidth of people and his decision to pause in a number of places, including equity work, stating:

> I haven't found anyone, specifically the teachers' union. Right? I mean, they were definitely in the "OK, we're just surviving mode." So, they were happy. We had an MOU that kind of relaxed some of the observations and evaluations, and so everyone was OK with that "let's just pause" approach. And I think. I did a good job of keeping things that needed to at least stay on radars by just, kind of, saying, "Hey, just FYI, we're going to get back to this next year, but..." But I would say that'd be the area where I feel like I would love to have found a way to keep a few more balls in the air. But as I'm saying those words, I'm not quite sure how it physically could have happened.

Michael Grant discussed the in-the-moment dilemma he faced when considering how to respond to the murder of George Floyd, sharing:

> So, when...when George Floyd was murdered last spring, we were in full remote, if I remember correctly. So, everyone was working from home. And so, the stress of the pandemic, just being at home, transitioning to remote learning, and then the conversation around policing and systemic racism. Um. Made me…forced me to really consider what we were going to do as a district to tackle both, and at that time, and I regret this...At that time, I felt that the issues of racial justice within our community would have to take a backseat to surviving the pandemic. And let's just get through this whole crazy Zoom thing, focus on teaching and learning, and we'll tackle this other issue later.

Finding #2: Superintendents in this study reported that the complex and unfamiliar conditions of the health pandemic demanded they intensify their focus on the management and operations of their districts and supporting the needs of stakeholders ahead of their role as instructional leaders.

Featuring strongly in the stories of superintendents, the health pandemic placed amplified demand on superintendents to acknowledge and respond to the physical and emotional stressors in people's lives. To this end, they found it necessary to pay greater attention to managing the environmental conditions of schools and supporting the well-being of others as ongoing issues of health and safety pulled them further from their work as instructional leaders. The themes that informed this area of challenge were a recognition of (a) prioritizing management and operations; (b) supporting students and their families; and (c) addressing and alleviating the stress on staff and attending to their well-being. supporting the well-being of staff.

Intensified Focus on Management and Operations. The tension between managing the physical conditions of schools and ensuring smooth procedural operations, while also fulfilling the role as instructional leader is always a demanding aspect of the superintendency. However, the novel conditions and evolving nature of the COVID-19 virus, coupled with widespread feelings of fear and a lack of clear guidance from state-level leaders, resulted in superintendents becoming intensely focused on managing the environmental conditions of schools and deeply mired in developing local policies and procedures to support returning students to school and keeping them safe in their buildings.

In his second interview, when discussing what was on his mind as he was beginning the 2021-2022 school year and the challenges he was facing, Frank Mitchell expressed frustration about this narrow focus and how it pulled leaders away from the work of moving their

organizations forward proclaiming, “our educational leaders aren't leading. They don't have the opportunity to lead. They’re managers right now, and it's all about structures and operations right now.” Similarly citing the intense focus on the technical aspects of managing the pandemic, Michael Grant mourned the loss of being pulled away from the instructional leadership and more direct work with building leaders around teaching and learning, sharing:

> And guess what I did last year? Budget…Board of Health…I know more about our HVAC system than I ever, ever desired to know. And that was necessary, but that's, that's not the job I signed up for. It's not the job any of us signed up for. I'm not, I'm not trying to complain, but I'm saying I drifted away from what my core values around this position should be…I temporarily went to a dark place when it came to my job that was disconnected from teaching and learning. It was, it was more management. I was managing the pandemic.

Increased Need to Support Students and Their Families. Beyond managing the physical conditions of schools, superintendents described intensified efforts to dedicate resources to help students and families in various ways, both while they were learning remotely and as they returned to school. As they shared their experiences, many discussed the critical role schools play within the community, and the importance of understanding community needs as they considered both their initial and ongoing efforts to support families. While all superintendents discussed the sense that the schools were central to supporting their communities during the various stages of the health pandemic, particularly in communities where the economic needs were greater, superintendents discussed the efforts that they needed to make to assess the basic needs of families alongside and at times before they could fully attend to the educational and learning needs of students.

Michael Grant discussed the central role that public schools play in supporting families, sharing:

> And I think that people really look to the schools to help out, help families; Look to the schools to make sure that the kiddos were OK. Obviously, in that, we were connecting families with resources. And I see that a lot with, with just with many issues that...that school is, kind of, like a one-stop shop for connecting families with resources and supporting them. And so, I'm not surprised that maybe, maybe, society would lean on schools to help navigate some of these issues.

He went on to share, more specifically, some of the efforts of his community to support students and their families:

> There are two things that I'm very, very proud of that the schools did. And I give a huge...there's a lot of credit to go around. We were not a 1:1 district with technology before the pandemic. We very quickly became 1:1, and the service and support we provided the families in navigating the technology challenges that they had and just outfitting them with what they needed, providing them with, with Wi-Fi hotspots if they didn't have it. And then we provided free lunch to every, every person, you know, school-aged person in town. Every day of the week, you could come and get a bag lunch and drive through, and we're still, we're still doing that. I felt really good that people looked to the schools when they weren't able to support their own kids the way they wanted to. And I, I, I'm proud that I'm able to do that in [this community], where we have... it's very much a “have and have not community,” and the people who “have not” really have not…And I really felt like the school, the school has served and can serve as partners with families to make sure their kids do okay.

Similar to the efforts taken by Michael's district to ensure students' physical needs were met and that they had access to the tools they needed to engage in learning, Arlene Fredericks also discussed the importance of understanding the challenges faced by her community in managing the district's response to school closings:

> I've always said this, and I'll say this till the day I die, you know, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is first. And you have to feel safe, and you have to have the basics: food, clothing, and shelter. And so, when we shut down school, right away, we realized our kids are going to struggle because 60 to 70% of our kids are on free and reduced lunch, which means their families do not have enough funds to be able to feed them every single day. And...and so our crisis really began with "How in the world are we going to get these kids the opportunity to have those things?" And so, I just began by bussing food to families. So, we use the bus stops as a way to get the families the food. And then the next thing obviously was, "What is our mission as a district?" Our mission as a district is to educate. "How are we going to educate our kids?" And the problem was, being in a regional area, excuse me, a rural area, one of the biggest dilemmas is, in some parts of our communities, there's no internet. And a lot of our families didn't have computers. So, how are we going to educate our kids? So, we started with this process of phone calling every, every day so parents could be connected with teachers, along with posting stuff on the Web and passing out work through the delivery of breakfast, so parents could pick up the work and drop it back off for the kids.

Increased Need to Address and Alleviate the Stress on Staff and Attend to Their Well-Being. Alongside the ways that superintendents described meeting the physical needs of families, they also shared stories about the increased need to focus attention on the emotional

needs of their school communities. In these efforts, there was a recognition of the distinct need to address and alleviate the stress adults were experiencing and place greater emphasis on attending to the well-being of adults so they, in turn, could focus their attention on caring for students.

Referring specifically to the social-emotional needs of others, Andrew Gillard summed up the emotional needs of adults, sharing:

> I mean, it was all influenced by people's needs, and everyone was needy. So, from a superintendent's perspective, we were trying to meet the needs of everyone. So, you know, principals had a lot of needs. The central office team had a lot of needs. The district leadership team had a lot of needs. The teachers had a lot of needs. The parents had a lot of needs. The group that was the most resilient was the kids.

Arlene Fredericks described the challenge of learning to support others through crisis, sharing,

> I'm spending a lot more time on books around leadership and crisis, whereas before, it was just general leadership skills. Now it's leadership in crisis and trying to get a better understanding of how I support people through this.

Susan Miller also discussed this increasing challenge of supporting staff, stating,

> Supporting staff has also intensified...There's a lot more time and attention focused on what our staff members need to feel good about coming to work and feel productive and feel effective in their roles, given that there are so many unknowns in the role. So, there's a lot more problem-solving around that and a lot more differentiation, I think, in that realm, than there ever has been before.

Acts of caretaking for staff and attending to their emotional needs and sense of well-being in schools were expressed in a variety of ways throughout superintendents' narrative as they specifically acknowledged the fear and hesitation that teachers had returning to school

buildings in the fall of 2020 and their worries about disease transmission. Helen Larsen reflected on how this experience has given her new insight into the critical connection between caring for the well-being of adults and our caretaking of students:

> I guess one big takeaway [is that] we took care of people's basic needs first. Safety, you know, classic Maslow, and such in a way we never had before, and that…I don't want to lose that because I think that was the key to everything. And in normal times, it probably still needs to be the key. We were trying to do that with kids, but I think I realized caretaking of adults is how they are able to caretake for kids in a way that I had not really put together before. So that's on my mind this summer. We thought we were doing it before, and now I see it a little differently and the depth of what that really means.

Finding #3: Superintendents in this study reported that the inordinate degree of communication, stakeholder engagement, and consultation associated with the convergent crises prompted them to reconsider and, in some cases, reinvent their routines around the communication and community engagement and input.

All superintendents in this study described experiencing a striking growth in the volume and intensity of communication, the demand for stakeholder engagement and consultation, and the need to establish new communication and community engagement routines. While it is always an expectation that superintendents utilize multiple forms of communication and ensure that communication is both culturally responsive and accessible to families, during this time period, superintendents described increased pressure to communicate information to families, consult with stakeholder groups and respond to their concerns with a greater frequency and at an intensified pace above and beyond the customary scope they knew.

Within the superintendents' stories, there was frequent mention of the staggering number of Zoom forums, newsletters, social media postings, increased regular email communication, and the use of data dashboards as various ways that they engaged with stakeholders. While some of these mediums for communication were already in use by superintendents, others were not, requiring them to learn new technologies for communication and engagement and devote more time to this to fulfilling this aspect of their job. In addition to adopting new means and patterns of communication to meet the demand for information and the rapid pace of both outgoing and incoming communications, they also described a shift in the nature of what they were communicating, specifically noting the need to communicate with understanding and accuracy information that was outside the typical realm of their expertise and oversight, particularly around matters of health and safety.

The themes around communication and engagement that informed this finding were (a) the immediacy of stakeholders' need for information; (b) the increased community engagement and demand for stakeholder consultation; and (c) intensified pace and staying ahead of misinformation.

Meeting Stakeholders' Need for Immediate Information. The universal impact of the pandemic and uncertain and rapidly changing understanding of the COVID-19 virus, coupled with local decision-making around the conditions for schooling, increased the volume of engagement from parents as they wanted both inputs into and information about the physical conditions of the school and educational approach to learning during this time. Further, this demand, when combined with an increased expectation to utilize technology and the level of direct access to leaders that it provided to stakeholders, required superintendents to reinvent the ways they connected with and engaged their communities and reconsider what constitutes a

timely response to the concerns of stakeholders. For superintendents, this meant a shift in what they communicated to their stakeholders, the frequency they were communicating, how they were communicating, and how they received and utilized input from their communities.

The Demand for Frequent Communication from the Superintendent. All participants discussed the sharp increase in the demand for outgoing communication from the superintendent and the responsibility of keeping their communities abreast of information specifically relating to the changing conditions of the health pandemic. Larry Jacobs discussed the shift toward more frequent centralized communication during this time:

> The biggest thing for me [was that] I had to be...I guess much more just out front with my messaging than I would have had to have been in the past. I typically allow the individual schools to produce their own weekly newsletter around what's happening within their buildings, but there was a lot of interest from the community to actually hear what I want[ed], what my opinion was on things, or what I was doing district-wide to assure that there was some continuity and consistency in programming and that people were healthy and safe. They didn't want to just hear it from the building principal. They wanted to know what the district was doing; what was the district's perspective on things. So, I actually ended up doing a weekly newsletter.

Andrew Gillard also described the increased demand for more frequent communication from the superintendent's office sharing:

> So typically, a superintendent sends out 10 newsletters a year, a few messages on some things that are happening. You know, there may be a big campaign if you're trying to get a building addition or something new. They call snow days. But the level of communication, the expectations to know everything, and to know it in real-time was a

> real challenge. And we had more communication than we've ever had to our public via written, verbal, video.

Similar to the reflections shared by Larry and Andrew, Michael Grant discussed the demands for frequent communication, additionally citing the need to bring his head nurse into communications regarding health information, sharing:

> So, I got feedback right away about needing to communicate very frequently about the pandemic and what we were going to do in response to it. Except for a small group of teachers at the beginning of this past school year, I did not hear from anyone about needing to communicate about issues of equity and racism. So that was, reflecting back, that was interesting that a majority, if not all, of my communications, were centered around keeping people safe during the pandemic and expectations for teaching remotely and all those things. And so, at the minimum, we had weekly emails out to the community. I have a listserv of everyone who has a child in the school district. And so, we sent those out, updating them. And those came from both me and also from our head nurse in the district because I think she has credibility around these things; Obviously, I don't have an R.N. after my name.

Susan Miller discussed the increased demand for communication at the district level, stating:

> We sent out lots and lots of written communication. We published our plan; obviously, every district had to, but we did a lot of...I would say at the beginning, probably almost weekly, I sent an email to parents with updates. "Here's what's happening. Here's what we know," Which I, again, I would communicate with parents…from the superintendent a few times a year. So that was very new.

Utilizing Various Tools and Mechanisms for Communication. In discussing communication, all superintendents shared a variety of tools and mechanisms that they were using to ensure that their communities had the most up-to-date information about changing conditions and expectations. To this end, Tim Richards described the variety of ways that he communicated with his community and created partnerships with other community leaders to ensure a coordinated and cohesive approach:

> So, we started to do a weekly update to families, and I included a dashboard on there (the weekly update) about the number of cases, what the targets were in the community, what it would take to get us back to school, what we were doing for cleaning protocols, all of those things were in the weekly communications. People just began to expect that. And then, I responded personally to every single email message. I would do webinars, and I would host various… along with the mayor and the Director, Public Health, we would host a community conversation just to provide updates to the families. So that communication was really key throughout the process.

Susan Miller discussed the various ways, in addition to email updates, that she communicated with her community and the variety of stakeholders that she communicated with:

> We had some face-to-face meetings when we were planning the school year, once we were allowed to come back into our offices…Communication with our community, everything that I sent to parents, went to town leaders, those types of things. A weekly communication with our health boards, which never happened [before]. I became really good friends with my nurse leader. I've known her for years, but I communicated several times a day with her. You know, we tried to publish things that parents could refer to on

> our website about our plans, every communication that we sent around the COVID crisis was posted on our website. We hadn't done those types of things in the past.

Similarly, Ellen Russo shared her efforts to communicate through a variety of platforms to ensure transparency and to meet the communities demand for information, sharing:

> And I will tell you, I do social media. I write for every single newspaper in the five towns. I do radio interviews. I do regular newspaper interviews. We're public with every meeting that we have. I do public forums, I do news and notes to staff, family, school committee.

Meeting the Increased Demands for Stakeholder Engagement and Consultation. Similar to the need to meet the demand for information from the central office, superintendents consistently described an increase in the volume of stakeholder engagement and the demand for community input and consultation, the pace of these efforts, and the need to stay ahead of and combat misinformation.

Increased Community Access and Engagement. When discussing the increased volume of stakeholder engagement, all superintendents noted the use of remote meeting technology and the accessibility it provided. Bill Flanders described the opportunity that Zoom presented for increasing the engagement with and access for parents:

> There has never been anything where we've had this level of sustained interest and angst. And I wonder how this would have changed if we were not meeting remotely. I think that level of access changed everything drastically…Where [previously] we would normally have no one, maybe one or two participants in the audience at a school committee meeting. Other than people who might have been recognized for being the, you know, the family of the student of the month, there was no one there. And now we have 100, 200,

> 300 participants. And, that changes [things] even though it's on a screen. Right? When you see the participant list is 300 strong, that changes the dynamic of the meeting. And so, I feel like that fueled the angst in a very different way than I've ever seen. I've never seen anything that's had this level of sustained interest.

Helen Larsen also discussed the evolving use of Zoom as a medium for increasing access and engagement sharing:

> When we closed, we started doing… we used Zoom every Friday afternoon for updates, my central office team and invited parents to come hear that. The buildings were doing theirs as well, but we had a central office level of just what we were working on and where our attention was focused. It was like half an hour every Friday, and five of us would get on and just talk, you know. They each talked on their corner of the world, and those…we would draw 200 people on Friday. It kind of became like, you know, I don't know which president that did the fireside chats? Again, not by design at all. We happened to have done two Friday afternoons in a row, and we got positive feedback, like, and I'm like, oh, and Fridays was just because by the end of the week, we'd have something new to say. Our weeks were moving at lightning speed. So, there's always something new to say.

Michael Grant echoed these points, also noting that while traditionally, school committee meetings are broadcast on local cable access, Zoom changed the dynamics of meetings due to the ability to see and interact with the community. He describes this change by stating:

> I think the biggest change was that we all became Zoom experts, and so Zoom replaced a lot of the face-to-face connections that I would have with people when we were remote or even when we came back in a hybrid model. We really relied on Zoom for quite a bit of

> conversation. When our school committee was remote, we had a Zoom link for people in the community along with the cable broadcast. So, people were Zooming in…, and we could see the community, and they had an opportunity to raise their hands and communicate. So, I want to say [that] nobody comes to our in-person school committee meetings. No one. With Zoom, it's much more convenient, and so we had a live audience that could interact with us. So, that really changed our practice because we got in-the-moment feedback from people about how things were going. And there's good and bad to that. Right? But it was…that really changed how we communicated directly to families because they had that access through Zoom.

Expanded Expectations for Gathering and Utilizing Stakeholder Input. In addition to increased interest and general engagement, superintendents also noted the demand for them to seek and utilize input from stakeholders, particularly around the policies and procedures related to the physical conditions of schooling, as they made plans to reopen schools in the fall of 2020, as conditions changed throughout that school year and again as they prepared to start the school year in the fall of 2021. Ellen Russo discussed the efforts of her district to be as inclusive as possible in planning for the reopening of schools and how that helps with community relations explaining:

> With the pandemic, I ended up having a 70-person reopening committee, and I let anybody and everybody from the community who wanted to be a part of it join that. And I think the inclusivity of that and letting people see the behind-the-scenes stuff and be part of surveys and the development of... They got to see what is really behind the scenes. And then some of that information let them talk to their friends who might have been

> saying something different about you on social media. And that has changed the whole dynamic.

Arlene Fredericks also noted that the evolution of her district's approach to gathering feedback from her community hinged on their access to technology:

> So, first of all, starting in March, when all this happened, I held weekly online meetings with my staff, all voluntary. If you just want to hear what's going on up to date, da, da, da, da...here's the date and time in which you can meet with me. I also did that with Zoom with parents. It wasn't every week, but it was probably a couple of times a month. Come on, ask your questions. Tell us what you think. We also did a lot of surveys of families through the use of X2 and sending out surveys… And once...the incredible thing that we found out is…once families had the tools, that being a computer, we got a lot more feedback…I mean, when we asked about COVID and what we should do, we got 450 responses back from families and what they thought the thought process was. So, we were very careful about making sure we kept asking questions and getting feedback using, using, kind of a Survey Monkey or what have you to do that.

Bill Flanders discussed the amplified level of engagement and the challenges it created for superintendents sharing:

> It's a much larger [volume], right? You always have the vocal minority. And you know, it's a group of ten. So, I can handle those ten. You know, I eat, sleep, and breathe ways to solve issues with those ten, but when it's a minority, and it's 48 percent, that's, I mean, there's just so many more people that want to share their opinions. And the majority, very respectfully. And I feel like…it's easy to deal with the parents who want to come in and say, "You're an f-in idiot," right? Like, "OK, I'm going to disagree with you on that. Can

> we talk?" You know, versus the person who says, "Hey, [Bill], I would love to come in and sit down and talk about this. I just want to understand what you're thinking". My gosh, I love that. But that takes an hour and a half of my time, you know? So that's what we want, and that's what we've been getting more of, but my gosh, that takes a lot of time. So, yeah, I feel like that's the most intense thing over the last 20 months is the engagement that I have always wanted, and I think I do well, but if that's taking up all of your daytime, then my gosh, what that inbox looks like with 550 emails when you finally get to it at 7 PM. Yeah, that makes for a crazy 24 hours.

Staying Ahead of Misinformation. In addition to the evolving expectations around how and what superintendents were communicating, the expectation for instantaneous information in a digital age combined with uncertainty and shifting guidance made the challenge of staying ahead of misinformation became particularly challenging for superintendents during this period. Andrew Gillard spoke to this tension and the additional pressure that social media placed on leaders sharing:

> I try to communicate and be honest with folks and just tell them the truth and the facts. But at the same time, … the role that social media plays in terms of misinformation, in terms of criticism, and in terms of pressure on the school committee or other folks or superintendents [is a challenge]. And, you know, people wanted answers or clarity on things that, for COVID, really weren't clear.

Larry Jacobs also shared this view, stating:

> I think if I didn't put [the information] out there and people either had to go get it on their own or it was a bad case of telephone and people [were] getting information from someone else...it would have been all convoluted. So, I think focusing and capturing the

> messaging was something that I haven't had to do in the past. But I think if I didn't do that last year, it [would] have been really difficult to work.

As Tim Richards discussed the tension between ensuring communication was accessible while also being aware of timeliness and the cultural expectation that everyone has information at their fingertips, stating:

> I mean, I think that you know, you always try to communicate well when you can. But in a pandemic, I found that communication; it was just... It's just been nonstop. But fortunately, I have a Media and Communications office with one person, but somebody who assists with that. One of the challenges we face in the larger urban districts of the demography we have is that you know, you can't turn it on a dime because you have to get things translated and you're trying to have simple language that's easily translatable. So, a message that you want to have in an hour might take six hours or so. You have to really be proactive with that, but…we're living in a social media culture too, where everybody wants to know everything all the time, you know, through Facebook and other social media chatter. So, I find that if you don't provide information, people create their own version of it, and then you're having to deal with that. So, there's that challenge to stay ahead.

Finding #4: Superintendents in this study reported that the experience of leading their school districts through the convergence of crises while also dealing with them on a personal level had a significant impact on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Throughout our conversations, the difficulty of leading during this time period and the impact that it had on superintendents personally intertwined with their narration of the functional aspects of their work as leaders and how they experienced the impact on their role. Themes that

informed this finding related to their personal experiences of (a) an all-consuming focus on simultaneous concerns; (b) feeling the heavy weight of responsibility; and (c) enduring the physical and emotional toll of the work.

Andrew Gillard described the personal toll that dealing with converging crises over an extended period of time had on superintendents stating:

> So, typically, I think of a crisis like a virus. You know, they run their course, and some are longer than others. But the 15 months for all administrators, but especially superintendents, I think it was pretty grueling. And it will be interesting to look at, you know, I'm the 9th superintendent in 15 years here, you look at superintendent turnover here in Massachusetts, you know, people are doing...they do two or three years, and they move on. So, I know [the] year I was hired, they hired 60 plus new superintendents, and 44 or 43 of us were first-time superintendents; never done the job before. So, I think the challenge is that it's taken a toll on folks' mental health. It's taken a toll on people's physical health. I think it's taken a toll on people's personal lives. And it's also taken a toll on, you know, just expending a lot of energy to take care of the people [that] you have the opportunity to lead and serve.

The All-Consuming Focus on Simultaneous Concerns. The participants in this study describe the onus of sustaining an all-consuming focus on simultaneous concerns and the stamina required to keep pace with the demands of their work. Bill Flanders discussed the personal impact of the non-stop pace, particularly highlighting the mental demands on superintendents:

> And it [was] just the amount of time that it took. By December, I was toast in a way that I've never experienced in my life, to the point where I turned to the [school] committee

> even and said, “When we come back from the break, something has got to change because I cannot do this.” And I consider myself [to have] a very invested and strong work ethic, and probably some might say, [I’m] a workaholic. But it's just… more than the physical, right? It wasn't the physical. You know, normally, being a superintendent, I like to be out and about, running around schools and all that. That's, that's the physical piece. It was the mental demands. So, if we weren't on a [Zoom] meeting, I was thinking about it. And if I wasn't thinking about it, I was pretending to sleep and think about it. So right, you sleep from 11:00 to 12:30, and then you wake up thinking, "Oh, what if we did this?" Think about that for an hour, sleep for 20 minutes, and think again. So, yeah, definitely, it was a breaking point by December.

While it is a common expectation that superintendents need to be available, particularly if there is an emergency, their recollections of this period commonly describe the feeling of not being able to step away from work and the need to answer phone calls and emails at all hours. When discussing the pressure to be available at all times, the responsibility they felt toward their communities and their colleagues and the idea that not responding may result in harm to others were often mentioned. Susan Miller discussed the intensified nature of this demand by stating:

> The 24-hour, 7-days-a-week nature of the position has intensified. So, I guess I've always felt like my responsibility was to be available 24/7, but I don't think that I've ever experienced the number of interruptions to what's typically not work time, if that makes sense. Occasionally someone would contact me on the weekend, or I would be reading emails and staying in touch and kind of taking care of those things over the weekend. But I also mostly felt like I had a choice whether to read my email on Saturday morning or not. I don't feel like, right now, in the past year since COVID, I've had that choice. It feels

> like I must [check my email] because I could miss something that could have an impact on somebody's health and safety. And so, I think that sort of never having a moment where you feel like you can truly disconnect has made it really...has been a change for me.

Further describing the pressure always to be available, Arlene Richards shared:

> I have less free time with my family. I mean, that's a big one. I'll give you an example of this weekend. I was at [an event] with my kids. I got four calls while I was there. ...So even though I'm with my family, I'm on all the time. There's no shut-off time. I'm getting emails until 10 o'clock at night, "This is going on. That's going on. What do I do about this?". So, shutting down doesn't seem to be an option right now. And that takes a toll after a while because you're exhausted, right? You can't just check out and say, “I'm going to take three days off and not worry about it,” you know, because you can't leave your colleagues hanging.

Helen Larsen punctuated the round-the-clock expectation and its personal impact stating, “My own personal well-being. You know, all the normal things sleep…any other life of any kind, period. We were contact tracing on Christmas! We were contact tracing, you know.”

The Heavy Weight of Responsibility. Navigating the constantly changing conditions and uncertainty of the eighteen-month period between March 2020 and Fall 2021 also brought with it a weight of responsibility and pace of demands that participants describe as taking a toll on their personal well-being. Helen Larsen shared:

> I've never worked as hard, under high-stakes decision-making [and] feeling so all alone as [I have] this past year. And [there were] definitely points of realizing it was going to be really hard to…we had those same moments other districts did where teachers want

> one thing and parents want another, and you realize how precarious this all is. And it feels like it's all on your shoulders. Big decisions over and over and over with no time to think…There were definite moments where I had to pick directions that I personally thought were the best bet, [but] there was no proven track to go so, just go with it and believe you were doing the right thing for kids and adults who you felt, you know, responsible for their safety. For me, I felt responsible; I still do feel responsible for about 4000 people. You know, the well-being of 4000 people is daunting.

Andrew Gillard echoed the weight of being responsible for the well-being of others and operating in a continual state of crisis, sharing:

> You know, I think that the weight and the responsibility of thinking about the safety of 5000 people plus on a daily basis [and] that I don't want anyone to get sick or die weighed heavily on me on a daily basis. And it's probably, you know, the most scrutiny all of us have faced as superintendents, the most pressure we've all faced as superintendents, and the most sustained work throughout a crisis that we've ever done. I mean, typically crises, you know, what used to be a crisis a month, last year [was] one or two a week or maybe more.

Susan Miller also described feeling the weight of the responsibility for the health and safety of others and a new understanding of the potential impact that she has as a decisionmaker:

> I think it's made me realize what a tremendous responsibility I have as a leader. And not that I didn't realize it, but I guess it never was as apparent to me how much a decision that I could make might cause someone to get sick or to die or something like that. Like, that was the biggest impact on me. Like, that's [what] I lost sleep over. To be honest, if a kid doesn't learn how to read, they'll eventually learn how to read. They'll learn how to read

> next year. That's my take on it. Right? But if somebody gets sick, really seriously sick, and dies, I couldn't live with myself if a decision that I made...if I felt like a decision that I made contributed to that. So that's what really weighed on me personally…was just feeling like I could be...I could be making a decision that would end somebody's life or have a horrible impact on their life.

The Physical and Emotional Toll of the Work. Across all interviews, superintendents discussed the pace of work and the physical and emotional toll that leading during this period took on them. Ellen Russo also expressed the overwhelming nature of the work and its emotional toll, stating:

> It's completely overwhelming sometimes. There are moments where I just, you know, I either need[ed] just to let myself cry because I [thought], you know, you're just so overwhelmed and you're so worried about doing the right thing and making sure everybody's safe that it's an overwhelming responsibility.

In discussing the disagreement around how to return to school in the fall of 2020 and the dilemma of how to negotiate the health and safety needs of both adults and students, Michael Grant shared how that stress impacted him physically, stating:

> Teachers were very, very strongly opposed to coming back in person. They felt like I was going to send them to their deaths if we came back in person. And so, there were many, many waking-up-with-chest pains-in-the-middle-of-the-night kinds of experiences…while as I was just trying to bring people, people back to school.

Larry Jacobs also described the physical impact of the stress he experienced during this time, sharing:

> It's been a little crazy, as I actually was hospitalized during the pandemic for about a week or so. It was early on in the whole pandemic. I think it was pandemic-related. In the end, they really couldn't find anything. So, they just chalked it up to stress and anxiety or whatnot. But we were actually on one of those 30 Admin Zoom calls, and we were doing our review. And this [was] in October, about what was happening for the year. And I actually started to fall ill during the meeting. I lost my speech [and was] having really tight chest feelings and had to sign out and actually go to the hospital in the ambulance. So, I think in hindsight, again, we were working so hard last summer and fall, I don't know that a lot of us really took time to think about ourselves or even take care of ourselves. Quite honestly, you know, physically, mentally, I mean, it is a huge challenge, but that stress and anxiety is a lot that you're putting on yourself, personally.

Susan Miller discussed the phenomenon of putting everyone else's needs first:

> It's funny, but I spent a lot of time worrying about...I think we all in our central office team spent a lot of time worrying about everybody else. Really worrying about: How are my principals doing? How are the teachers doing? How are the kids doing? How are the families doing? So, I think in some ways, we put our own emotions on hold because we felt so responsible for everyone else and trying to make things as OK as possible for everyone else that I think we almost didn't realize what we were going through until it was kind of over, to be honest.

Finding #5: Superintendents in this study reported that in the midst of this unfamiliar and demanding context, they grew more inclined to combat the isolation of their role and lean on and toward others for additional expertise, problem-solving, and support.

The escalating climate of unfamiliar and dynamically complex conditions and the amplified and expanding demands placed on superintendents left them contending with increased levels of stress and feelings of isolation and personal doubt. They narrated stories, therefore, that featured instances when they were compelled to connect with others, rely on their expertise, and utilize various avenues for professional collaboration and support both with other superintendents and internally within their communities was expressed throughout the narratives of all superintendents.

This finding is supported by the themes (a) feelings of isolation and personal doubt and (b) leaning on and toward the support of others.

Feelings of Isolation and Personal Doubt. Unlike teachers or building leaders, the nature of the superintendency is such that within their community, no one holds the same position, perspective, or set of responsibilities they do. While this is always their reality, in the context of the unprecedented convergence of unfamiliar crises and the need for decisions that were atypical to their role, feelings of isolation and doubt were present in the stories of the superintendents in this study. Describing the general isolation of the role, Helen Larsen shared:

> This is by far the hardest job I've had. There's no doubt about it. Just so many layers and so many people, so many audiences, to try to navigate something that works for everybody. And it's very, you know, you're the only one in the whole place that has that perspective because nobody else is crossing all those groups and trying to engage with so many different stakeholders.

Ellen Russo further described the initial feelings of isolation, anxiety, and doubt in navigating the health pandemic sharing:

> I don't know a superintendent who didn't feel completely alone and overwhelmed during the pandemic with not much guidance from the state, just relying on gut instinct…because everybody was in their own situation of just pure, "What?!". There's no training for what came out, and I just remember thinking, "Oh my God, how am I going to get this right?" Like, so some of that is just plain gut instinct.

Brian Flanders discussed the challenge of negotiating the climate of division and making decisions outside the typical realm of schools that he felt ill-equipped to make, professing:

> You know, I would say, and I said publicly, this should not be a decision we're making. Right? This is not, this is not what we're trained for. Right? We're professionals in response to learning and interventions and supporting the students in child development. I'm not an expert on whether masks stop the virus or whether vaccines are safe, or I don't know.

Leaning On and Toward Others for Problem-Solving and Support. To combat the sense of isolation and the need for collaboration, support, and additional professional expertise, superintendents discussed leaning on various leadership networks and others within their communities to support their leadership during this time. Subthemes that supported this theme were (a) utilizing external leadership networks for problem-solving and support and (b) utilizing internal expertise, leadership, and support.

Utilizing External Leadership Networks for Problem-Solving and Support. All participants reported their involvement with various superintendent networks throughout the time period of this study and discussed a need to connect with and lean on others for problem-solving

and support. While reference to the Superintendent Roundtables that operate regionally throughout Massachusetts dominated much of the conversation around collaboration with other superintendents, many also acknowledged the support they received through their affiliations with other formal professional networks and affinity groups. They also mentioned informal networks of neighboring districts, personal-professional relationships, and their affiliation with professional groups outside the field of education.

Frank Mitchell discussed the support and problem-solving that was provided by the roundtable in navigating the uncertainty and isolation of this time, stating:

> So, the most vivid memory for me is really that work with [my regional association], and the amount of time we spent collaborating as leaders and really just not having a lot of answers, and not really necessarily feeling that we had a lot of support either. I think that was...that was impactful. I think we felt like we were on an island. And, you know, we were trying to manage our school committees, we were trying to manage the community, trying to manage, you know, what M.A.S.S. expectations were and DESE expectations. And it was...it was rough. It was rough.

He went on to discuss the frequency of accessing smaller groups of superintendents and the critical support they offered for problem-solving:

> [In] my small group, we came together; we talked through every problem. It was, I guess, for lack of a better term, a Critical Friend Group, you know, someone who would give you an honest opinion. “You know, hey, I'm thinking of trying this. What are your thoughts?" And you trust the people who are in the same seat, who have the same lived experience, who are like, "Well, I did that, and these are the landmines, or I would never... I did that, and it was very successful, but here's why."

Michael Grant echoed the benefits of connecting with other superintendents and the support they offered each other, particularly around navigating the difficulties and, to a lesser extent, the work regarding equity in their districts:

> I'm in a great network of colleagues who are very generous to each other. And so, if any one of us has a resource, we immediately share it with the others or if anybody has a question. And that typically takes the form of a text message. So, we're all...We have a sort of like a text chain where all the superintendents…I want to say...there are probably 35 of us in [my region of] Massachusetts who have each other's cell phone [number], and we text each other constantly about everything. And so, when the pandemic came, we certainly were texting each other and sharing information that way.

Helen Larsen echoed the importance of these relationships in combating the isolation of the role, particularly during this time, sharing:

> I had always leaned into some individual relationships. COVID added the roundtable and the collective leaning pretty substantially. I mean, game-changing. And partly, they (the meetings) were more accessible, too, because we went to Zoom, and I could hop on them anywhere at any time and not have to travel. I also joined last year a group I pay to be a part of, a roundtable. And it's facilitated by Teachers21[11], and we meet monthly. So, it's just so critical. Nobody else gets it the way your colleagues do... you know, nobody else can understand outside of your colleagues…Yeah, and really, really important relationships to have. Nobody gets it. Nobody else can get it [in] quite the same way.

[11] And educational consulting organization, The William James College Center for Behavioral Health, Equity, and Leadership in Schools (BHELS), formerly known as Teachers21, provides school districts, leaders, and educators with programs, professional learning opportunities, and behavioral and mental health resources designed to foster healthy school climates through the creation of equitable, emotionally healthy, and safe learning and working environments (*Center for Behavioral Health, Equity, and Leadership In Schools (BHELS)*).

The professional support of affinity groups was also discussed by some leaders. While Arlene Fredericks described accessing the Superintendent Roundtables and other local superintendent groups, she also discussed the importance of connecting with other leaders of color as a sounding board:

> And I think the other piece is to surround myself with other people who might be going through the same struggle so that I can see it's not just me because I think it's very easy in any position of leadership in the schools to feel that way. I don't know if you realize, but I think it's 4 or 5% percent of people of color in superintendencies in Massachusetts. There aren't many of us, and I'll be honest with you, in my journey, there have been very few people who look like me, even that I've led. And so, I've had to rely on some networks of people that I've met and really process and talk through some of those things with them to say, "Hey, what's going on here? What should I be thinking about? How should I do that?" So that...that has also, I think, been helpful in helping me to survive the process.

Likewise, Tim Richards found great value in problem-solving with other urban superintendents who were facing some of the same issues that he encountered in his district. He described his preference for this group as compared to his regional roundtable, stating:

> I think in the urban space because it is more, more, you know, it's more matched. But when I find myself with the other superintendents of communities that aren't like [my city], I find that it's just, like, I don't have the same problem as you guys are having. I have different levels of problems. And so, I found those meetings, while they're helpful, they really weren't...they weren’t like a support session. You almost need group therapy, you know. But the urban superintendents were facing a lot of the same dilemmas, so those were helpful.

Beyond professional support and problem-solving provided by various groups, superintendents also discussed how their networks also shifted to provide mental and emotional support that superintendents needed to alleviate stress and isolation. Referencing the support of his superintendent roundtable, Michael Grant shared:

> And looking back, I think our communications were also kind of therapeutic because I'm the only superintendent in my district. And so, I don't, I don't know the experiences of other people. I can't commiserate or vent with anybody. And so, there was a therapeutic aspect of being able to reach out to my colleagues and just be vulnerable and share experiences and get affirmations or, at the very least, see that someone else was going through a similar experience. So that was very helpful there, too. And we also belonged to collaboratives, and we set up regular Friday meetings on Zoom. And so, every Friday morning, we would all get on Zoom and, kind of, interact that way and share resources and just, kind of, think out loud with each other. So, I would have to say that having access to my colleagues was one of the more important aspects of getting through the pandemic.

Susan Miller also described the personal support these groups were able to provide:

> So, I have a little superintendents' group that is facilitated by Teachers 21. It's five of us. And we used to meet one Friday a month, in person, in one of the districts. And [typically] we use, like, a consultancy protocol. "Here's a problem of practice; let's kind of unpack that problem of practice." What that meeting became for us during the pandemic was more of a support group where we could really talk about our emotions and how this was impacting our professional lives, but also our personal lives. So that became a very different type of meeting. [It] felt very supportive but very different.

> I was [also] in the New Superintendents Induction Program at the time. You may know that's a three-year program. I think that program also changed in a way to...it adjusted, let me put it that way, they adjusted, certainly the schedule, but they also adjusted, I think, the topics to allow people to have a safe place to...for moral support, emotional support, to be honest.

Ellen Russo described the perspective and emotional support that a network of peers outside of education could provide:

> I worked in private, and I'm still friends with the woman who was my boss and other coworkers from that. Just talking to people who are completely separate from what you do and sharing the stresses. Like, some of them wait for it like it's their next miniseries. You know, what's going on, they're like, "I can't believe that." But at the same time, it does give you some perspective around, "Yeah, that really is a lot. It really is a lot. And you shouldn't tamp that down. You should recognize that you are dealing with a lot". And that kind of helps you because these people have no skin in the game. Right? They're not competing with you. They're just listening and saying, "Jeez, that's really tough. I appreciate what you're doing, and it does make a difference". So, it's good to have that non-involved person as a support too.

Utilizing Internal Expertise, Leadership, and the Support. Particularly when discussing the management of the health pandemic, superintendents discussed collaboration with others to provide support and help them sift through and make decisions about medical information outside their expected knowledge. Tim Richards described how he coordinated with both citywide departments and his leadership team to coordinate information and actions related to the health pandemic, explaining:

> So, I would meet with the mayor and the division heads, police chief, fire chief, and Department of Public Health. We'd have updates every day. And what departments were facing with the hospital representation. The CEO was there so we'd know what the case count was. We had a lot of information on that. And then I would go right from that call into a call with my leadership team, which included all the directors, assistant superintendents, you know, the group I call the senior leadership team. We would meet after that, and then I would delegate various tasks to them.

Others also discussed daily meetings and updates to get a handle on the response to the COVID-19 spread, support communication with families, and ensure efforts to keep students in school. In particular, communication and collaboration with school nurses and nurse leaders became important points of connection for superintendents. To this end, Larry Jacobs discussed how this relationship supported the conditions of schooling and provided a consistent education experience for students sharing:

> You know, nurses typically come in and, kind of, do their thing, and they fly under the radar. But I've been having to attend a lot of sessions, and I speak with the nursing coordinator daily around health issues and cases in the district and contact tracing and how it's impacting families. But, you know, is it impacting education? Are we seeing COVID spread in classrooms, in schools, or is this, you know, familial contact and spread because a family member received COVID? I mean things I never would have had to have thought about in the past. I have to be immersed on a daily basis because we're making decisions that are really trying to keep the schools open and allow kids to be in-person and learning and have the very best experience they can during this crazy time.

Helen Larsen further discussed the critical role of the nurse leader in supporting her leadership of the district during this time, particularly in communicating with families and the community:

> I have this angelic public health nurse in [name of town] who made very clear last summer, as we were trying to talk about reopening that her priority would be the schools. And…she was at my beck and call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And early, early we didn't… you know, one COVID case was a big deal in the beginning. [She] held our hand through that. Then as we…we stayed open through the surge, and she held our hands through that; she would be the person to talk a parent off the ledge and reassure teachers. Like, she just was a phenomenal resource. I don't know if…what we would have done without her.

Superintendents also discussed the importance of their leadership teams and other key stakeholder groups as providing them support and contributing to the leadership of their districts. Ellen Russo described the critical role of her leadership team sharing:

> And from the second it happened, we met in our pajamas, like all night, all weekend, until we...you know, it didn't matter what time and nobody stopped. There wasn't a time that... I probably leaned on them more than anybody else. I didn't have to...you know...you weren't doing it alone. You didn't really have time to go anywhere else, so you had to just focus with the group that you had in front of you. And that was clutch.

Susan Miller also reflected on the support of various stakeholder groups within her community, explaining:

> I feel like I…as I reflect back on how traumatic this all was, I'm recognizing how thankful I am for the things that maybe I took for granted in terms of school committee support, good relationships with my union, with strong, trusting relationships with my

admin team, and mostly trusting relationships with, with all of my staff members. So, I think that's what helped me get through it personally because I knew I had a team that was going to help me make the right decision or the best decision that we could possibly make and help me carry it out. So that's, I guess, that's the thing that really resonates with me.

Delineation of Findings for Research Question #2

The second question that guided this study sought to understand how this experience affected participating superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent.

The analysis of the participants' narratives revealed three findings relevant to the second research question. As in the previous section, in this next section, I will present each finding by showing shared understandings across the narratives of multiple participants.

Finding #6: Superintendents in this study reported a renewed appreciation for the interpersonal nature of leadership and a heightened recognition of the foundational importance of trust and relationship-building to their work as leaders.

The critical importance of trust and building relationships was emphasized throughout all participants' stories. Further, in reflecting on this time of increased vulnerability and their need to lean into the uncertainty they felt as leaders, superintendents expressed a new appreciation of how honest and transparent communication and their own willingness to be vulnerable contributed to their ability to build trust with their stakeholders. Themes around (a) trust and relationships and (b) honesty, transparency, and vulnerability informed this finding.

Acknowledging the Foundational Importance of Trust and Relationship-Building. Throughout their narratives, superintendents emphasized the foundational aspect of trust and the importance of mindfully building relationships with others. There was also a consistent

recognition and acknowledgment that the existence of trust helped them weather crises, and trust was further built through their actions as leaders.

Helen Larsen shared how having prior trust impacted her ability to work with stakeholders during moments of crisis sharing:

> Yeah, trust is just enormous, and it takes a lot to build. And you know, you just can never not attend [to it]. You know? [And] you don't take it for granted once you feel like you get there. But yeah, if you don't have that, I don't know how you got through this. And I think [that in] the districts that have struggled, [trust] got broken somewhere, or they didn't have it to start with. My union leaders have said several times if we hadn't had a trusting relationship before COVID, COVID was not a place to build that. You needed it as an anchor.

Susan Miller emphasized the importance of reliability and the role that it plays in trust and building relationships with her stakeholders and their confidence in her as superintendent, stating:

> Well, I think that relationships are the key, in my opinion, to everything. And, again, being the kind of person that people can rely on and being the kind of person that people know, that when you say you're going to do something, you do it. Or if you can't do it, you say, I can't do it, and why. So, it's this, you know...and being approachable and being the kind of person that will listen and hear what people have to say, try to put yourself in their shoes. And that's all about building relationships and trusting relationships. And that's what I…that's what I've always tried to do. I think the crisis...crises have made that more...not more apparent...but more necessary, right, just to get through it.

Bill Flanders further emphasized the importance of building and nurturing relationships as a

critical component of working toward change, stating:

> [While] you have to have a core; you have to have a fire; You have to have a personal drive about what it is you want to impact [and]the change you want to have happen…But if you say, "I don't love the relationships and the politics," it's, "No, don't do it." You just… you would be miserable, right? Because that's the job. And so, whether it's my relationship with the business manager and helping him be stronger or SPED administrator and helping her be stronger or principals or teachers or parents, I think it's…You know, if anyone who would be moving towards this path, you have to be comfortable with going slow to go fast and having it be all about relationships. And having it all be all about relationships means you need to be honest.

Honesty, Transparency, and the Willingness to be Vulnerable. The terms honesty and vulnerability were consistently associated with superintendents' narratives of both their experience and as they were reflecting on their role. The ability to be upfront about not having the answers and atypically open about the challenges they were facing intertwined with their stories of building trust with their communities and leadership teams, and in many instances, there was a recognition that they revealed personal information and vulnerabilities more so than in their previous routine interactions with these groups.

Honest Communication and Building Trust with Stakeholders. The relationship between honesty and transparency and building trust with stakeholders was woven throughout the superintendents' narrative around communication. The idea of being open about challenges was also discussed by Frank Mitchell, who shared how personal vulnerability and acknowledging the shared experience of this time shifted his communication with his community, stating:

> People generally know me and who I am. But I'm not, I'm not, a touchy-feely kind of guy. You know, I'm kind of all business. And to show that humanistic side of me and the empathetic side was– because I was feeling it. I mean, my wife's a teacher in another town, as well. So, it's like, you know, this impacted our lives substantially. You know, my son came home from college, so, yeah, we felt it. And to show that we were in the boat with them, I think, was important.

He went on to share how stepping outside his typical communication and his choice to be open about his own challenges during this time helped build trust with his community recalling:

> So, I think it was probably the second week in March. I started doing a two-minute video and put it out on Twitter and social media and emailed [it] to all parents. And I just did a weekly update, and it just went out to the parents to kind of say, "Here's where we are. Here's what we're doing. Here are the expectations." And at that point, it was all new. It was talking about what remote learning is looking like. Not even hybrid. Hybrid wasn't on the table at this point. It was all, “How do we get through the pandemic? How do we manage this?” You know this is March of 2020. Schools will be closed for the next two weeks. And then the next three weeks. And then we're hoping to get kids back for graduation. And it was just...but I did those weekly messages just to, kind of, I did it twofold... I did it because I also delivered the message and said, “You know, as a dad, who has a junior experiencing all this, I get what you're dealing with at home." Because the parents were frustrated in terms of, you know, “My kids aren’t online eight hours a day, which they should be.” You know, that's their opinion. So, I wanted them to know that I was experiencing it, too, as a dad and a community member... Part of my hope was that they could hear the empathy in my voice and they could hear that, you know, I'm

> doing what I think is best for this community, as I've done for the past 24 years. And I think that benefited me. People seem to be receptive to and appreciated the weekly communication because it was not something I had done before. I wasn't a big, you know, weekly TV show guy. That wasn't me. That's not my nature. But I felt like [the] parents had to hear directly from me. There's something more personal, more personal than an email. So they can hear the inflection of your voice and see the empathy in your face and eyes as you talk to a camera. So, I think that was one of the strategies that really helped me.

Susan Miller further reflected on how open and honest communication and working through the fear of sharing challenges openly has contributed to relationship building with her staff and community:

> I feel like people, maybe at least in the district, parents, and staff, understand the challenges of leadership a little bit better because they sort of experienced that in my communication and my transparency about how difficult this was. So, I was pretty open with people, even in my meetings when I had three hundred staff members on the meetings. I was really honest about how challenging this was. And I think that helped me to have a better relationship with people, although, you know...there are a lot of people who didn't agree with my decisions. There's no question about that. But I think they understood them. So, in terms of my leadership, I think that what I realized was...what was reinforced for me was, sort of, this openness; the value in open, honest, transparent communication.

Tim Richards discussed how his willingness to be open about not having all of the answers, built credibility with his community explaining:

> And my approach to it [has] just been letting people in on the fact that you don't have the answers and accepting that [it's] OK that you don't have the answers. And that's been for me... it's being honest about it, I think, is how you gain some credibility for not trying to make it up as you go or be[ing] so confident that you have all the answers because we don't.

Helen Larsen described how honest and frequent communication built trust with stakeholders, and that experience has shifted her thoughts about the role that communication plays in moving challenging work forward in the future, sharing:

> So, at the beginning, when we closed school, of course, I had a lot to say. And I ended up there early in the closure. I ended up in a habit that I never intended to continue of a daily email, daily, to the stakeholder community. …But that pattern turned into a very, very regular set of communication. And, still today, I'm told that the communication was absolutely the glue that held this place together. …Really interesting impact. It built trust. It built community. It kept us glued together. It looked and felt like there was a plan or at least an honest acknowledgment when we…At least, even if there wasn't yet, there was an update that we were working on something. I will not…I'm now trying to feel what that looks like in more normal times because I can't; I can't go from what I was doing to pre-COVID. I can't go from COVID communication to what I was doing before, which is much more sporadic. So, we're trying to figure out what that looks like and now [and] understand what a benefit that could be on other normal things the district does. Certainly, on this cultural work and the race discussion because there's a lot of things ahead of us there, and how do we incorporate that in? The top of that list being critical race theory and some of the other real hotspots that are out there. So, I had no master

> com--I've always been an over communicator because it just keeps you safe. But I've never been *that* kind of communicator. And boy, it was very positive feedback and consistent feedback that– that was what kept us afloat.

The Critical Importance of Trust Within Leadership Teams. Beyond interactions with their community at large, superintendents also noted the importance of honest communication and the importance of a willingness to be vulnerable with their leadership teams. The importance of having trust in and building trust with their teams were both critically important to their work as superintendents. While many noted this aspect of trust-building was present in their work with their leadership teams prior to this time period, they shared stories of relying on its critical nature and how that foundation of trust and honesty benefitted their teams both in navigating the challenges presented by the immediacy of the health pandemic and moving forward as they considered their work around equity initiatives moving forward and the personal and collective reflection that it would require. Punctuating the importance of trust, during our second interview, Helen Larsen stated bluntly, "You can't operate if you don't trust your leadership team; that is just totally key."

Ellen Russo detailed the critical importance of building the right team advising, "I think one of your best skill sets as a superintendent needs to be hiring. You have...You have to have the right people around you." She went on to discuss the importance and challenge of having trust in others, stating:

> You have to rely on people. …It's a lonely job because trust is a hard thing to give at every level, and it's hard to let other people have pieces of it. But there's no way to do this effectively without delegating and relying on other people to step up. So, you have to trust that you've hired the right people in the right places and that they are going to come

> through. And there's going to be times when they don't know either, so we'll figure it out together. But you have to be able to rely on people because if you try to do too much on your own, that's also not effective.

Susan Miller shared her gratitude for the trust among her leadership team, stating:

> I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't rely on other people or if I didn't have a sounding board. I have a central office team, as I've mentioned, that I can, you know, I can get in that room and say, “Tell me what to do. Tell me what I need to hear.” They will do that, and I will do it to them. We have really strong, trusting relationships. I don't know what I would have done without that. I feel very thankful for that. And reflecting on that, I've always felt thankful for that. But I guess after going through a crisis situation, you realize how...how much...how important that is, even more so than you realize before.

The importance of honesty and the importance of building a safe environment to be vulnerable within his leadership team was discussed by Frank Mitchell, who also shared how important was for his team to have a flexible mindset around assuming leader and follower roles as needed:

> It sounds cliche, but you really have to trust your leadership team. You really have to have a good relationship with them. You know, this, this whole thing sucks, and it's OK for them to hear you say, ‘Hey, this sucks. Like, I had a terrible day, you know.’ And I want that human connection. I want them to know that I'm in it with them. I'm feeling it, too. And I got your back; do you have my back? And I think that's bigger than anything. I think we can lean on each other. If anyone was in isolation, if anyone was trying to go this alone, I think it's untenable. I don’t think it's possible. I think they need to know that I'll support [them] every step of the way. And there's going to be times when you're up

> here, and I'll listen to you. Sometimes when I'm up here, you've got to listen to me because that's the only way we're going to get through this together. So, you really have to trust and lean on your leadership team…But for me, I can't be all rah-rah. They're going to know that it's impacting me and that I'm in it with them and that, you know, we're side-by-side on it.

Similarly, Ellen also stressed the importance of knowing her team and nurturing a safe space for honest conversation, stating:

> The importance of really being able to know your team and know when certain members need a break, when to pick up where someone you know isn't going to get to, [and] where to push the conversations that need to be had, even if people aren't really comfortable. Reminding people that this is our family table and you're safe here to say whatever you think, and when we leave the room, it's a unified front. And it might only be consensus-building. Not everybody will agree, but your responsibility is to your family members around here.

Tim Richards discussed that while he has always had open and honest conversations with his leadership teams, the intense circumstances of working through the complexity of the converging crises provoked moments of vulnerability for individuals that have led to moments of reflection and consequently strengthened his team:

> We talked often in the planning, and I think we've had a lot of shared reflections, and I've become comfortable enough with my team to reflect on my own practice and where I can grow. So, I think we've always had a pretty open dialogue. So, I'm not sure how much is really this last year has changed in terms of that. I always feel like my team has been one that's been upfront and honest. We had some moments in the pandemic

> where, you know, at some point, I think everybody broke down. At some point, everybody either had a "walk-away-moment," turned off their camera, and just left the meeting out of frustration… about anything, about just dealing with the crisis, about just being overwhelmed or frustrated with somebody else. And I think we worked through a lot of that, and I think we've strengthened our leadership over the last year because of it. But doing that in a virtual world was really a challenge too. You didn't have that closeness of human interaction. So, I feel like we've had a lot of follow-up conversations this year in person about things that happened last year. And now, in that personal space, we've become more familiar with that again. We're trying to nurture those relationships once again. So, I think…people have realized what their strengths are and what their areas of challenge are in remarkable ways, too. Because everybody was really pushed to their professional limits. And so, I think there's been a lot of overall reflection as a district among leadership.

Michael Grant specifically discussed the lessons he learned about the role he plays in nurturing the culture of his team, candidly sharing:

> But one of the things I never expected... I expected that... I had the assumption that difficult situations would bring my leadership team together. And by leadership team, I include principals, assistant principals, pupil services, everybody, curriculum. And it did not bring us together. In fact, it really, it really revealed some fault lines that we had in our leadership team, which was...that was very upsetting for me because I thought, you know when you go through something difficult with somebody else, you have a bond with them and an ability to communicate that's unlike anything else. And now I have adults with advanced degrees in positions of leadership who can't talk to one another.

> And so that, that is something that I... that, that I blame myself for that; For not being able to see that, and support them and get them through this. So, in terms of [my] leadership role, I have forgotten how important it is for me to support other leaders in my district. I felt like, "Hey, we're all on the same team. Let's lead together." And I forgot about taking care of them sometimes. And that wasn't right.

Trust and Honest Communication Encourage Reflection. The ability to be vulnerable was not only narrated as being open about the challenges or the willingness to say, "I don't know." Superintendents also described the courage of others to tell them hard truths and their openness to reflect on how the honest pushback of others allowed them to reflect and gave them important new perspectives and the opportunity to change course. In the interactions shared by superintendents, the two-way nature of relationship-building was illuminated along with the impact that trust in their team and open and honest communication had on their actions. In the stories that follow, the willingness to hear and reflect on the critical feedback allowed them to move their districts toward better courses of action.

Helen Larsen reflected on the equity work in her district and how a frank comment from a member of her leadership team allowed her to gain a new perspective and commitment to the work. This moment and the impact that it had on her was brought up during both of our sessions as she candidly shared:

> And a lot of credit to my METCO[12] Director, now DEI[13] Director, in the course of the

[12] The Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) is a Massachusetts state-funded voluntary program intended to expand educational opportunities, increase diversity, and reduce racial isolation by permitting students in certain cities to attend public schools in other communities that have agreed to participate. Any Boston resident entering Kindergarten through 10th grade may apply to be enrolled in METCO, and participating districts select students with completed applications every year by lottery based on the number of slots available in each grade. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.; METCO, 2022)

[13] DEI refers to Diversity Equity and Inclusion

> leadership team trying to make decisions of what to do. You know, his one-liner to me that week as we…we met, we were talking, and we were very focused on the black students, of course, which makes sense. But he just, as the only black person in the room, felt safe enough to look at me and say, "This is a white person's problem. The white people need to talk about it. Black people live it every day. The white people need to understand that they're the problem." And not in an accusatory way, just in a factual way, like, "It's a white person's problem; racism."
>
> And ever since, I mean, it was pivotal for me as a leader. It really was. It made me realize that in this community, I probably had more… I had work that was just as important or maybe more important to do with a highly white demographic than if I had an urban, diverse community where I was supporting black students. That doesn't mean the black student work isn't incredibly important. Of course, it is. But there's just as much need for the white kids to understand how this evolves and what happens, and what–what needs to be different. I guess that made me a little braver, probably. And then, as I understood. I had school committee support and some other–; you've gotta be sure. If you have it, it's easier work. I've talked with my colleagues who don't have it and can't even imagine.
>
> And we brought in the METCO [families], we talked, we held METCO forums. Black students came to talk to us on Zoom that week, and we had probably the most powerful conversation with that set of families. That just was game-changing for us.

Similarly, Michael Grant received hard feedback from teachers that allowed him to rethink his decision to place equity work on pause. Like Helen, this was a critical moment of reflection that he brought up in both of our conversations, explaining:

> So, when...when George Floyd was murdered last spring, we were in full remote if I remember correctly. So, everyone was working from home. And so, the stress of the pandemic, just being at home, transitioning to remote learning, and then the conversation around policing and systemic racism. Um. Made me…forced me to really consider what we were going to do as a district to tackle both, and at that time, and I regret this--At that time, I felt that the issues of racial justice within our community would have to take a backseat to surviving the pandemic. And let's just get through this whole crazy Zoom thing, focus on teaching and learning, and we'll tackle this other issue later. And I heard from several teachers. They reached out to me, and they were very disappointed that I was silent in that moment around issues of social justice because they felt like because I did not speak up on behalf of our school community, I left people in the community to assume that maybe we did not take it seriously.
>
> And that was, that was a really reflective moment for me…but I think, I think I was of the mindset that I [could] only do one thing at a time. Right? I can do the pandemic, or I can do racial justice. And I regret that because I know that we could…we should have done both.

Finding #7: Superintendents in this study reported a revived understanding of inclusive leadership practices and reaffirmed the value of hearing a variety of stakeholder voices and a commitment to ensuring avenues for expanding stakeholder engagement.

As participating superintendents discussed both their experience and its impact on their understanding of who they are as leaders, the desire to expand stakeholder engagement and evolving understanding of what it means to be inclusive in their leadership practice wove throughout their stories and reflections. The themes that informed this finding were (a)

recognizing feedback, input, and stakeholders' perspectives as essential; (b) making a commitment to engagement and collaboration with stakeholders; and (c) expanding inclusive leadership structures.

Recognizing the Critical Importance of Feedback, Input, and Understanding Stakeholders' Perspectives. In considering their leadership moving forward and the advice they would give, many superintendents recognize the critical importance of encouraging feedback and gathering input from a variety of perspectives and the value of understanding opposing points of view and critical feedback.

Bill Flanders shared his thoughts about taking the time to gather as much information and hearing as many perspectives as possible, stating:

> I don't think it changes the advice. I think it, I would say, reinforces the advice, probably…Listen first, fully understand, walk away, and sleep before you make a decision. There's always a need to make a quick decision. Emergency. Safety. You make the right call. But when you have the opportunity to step away and think about it before you make a decision, listen to everyone. Right? Meet with the people who you don't want to meet with because they drive you crazy so that you can fully understand all perspectives and then make your decision fully informed. So that's always been my approach and always been my mantra and advice to anyone that would ask me. [However], I don't think I've ever understood that to be so powerfully needed and true prior to the last 18 months.

In her advice to new or aspiring superintendents, Arlene Fredericks echoed the importance of listening to as many different voices as possible to really understand issues before making decisions:

> And I think for new superintendents, the other thing is [to] listen more than you talk. You are not going to be able to get there if you're not really listening and hearing what people's concerns are and finding a way to address them. And so, you've got to be able to listen. You can't always come to the table with the answers. Sometimes you just got to come to the table listening and hearing...regurgitating back to people what you heard and then taking some time with a host of people, stakeholders from your community, to talk through those issues and try to come to some results.

Similarly, Ellen Russo punctuated the importance of understanding perspectives and sharing responsibility for problem-solving, sharing:

> You know, listening, you've got to really, really listen and really read your rooms and understand where you have to do some homework, who's not comfortable, who's not buying it at all, and see if you can work with those people or find out who would be the better person to address those issues and get at them.

Susan Miller also punctuated the critical importance of listening to a broad range of people, knowing when to reach out to others, and encouraging a more inclusive approach to problem-solving:

> I think, again, someone who really can listen, I think is important. and I've learned that that's really important over this last year. I think that's critical. Someone who is a problem solver, but at the same time isn't the kind of person who feels like they own or have to solve every problem. I think it's someone who knows who to tap and who to reach out to as a resource in a particular area, like I may have to for help with the medical decision. I don't have to be the end-all, be-all and make every single decision on my own, but I do think the skill set of a superintendent--needs to know when they need to reach out for

> help or when they need to reach out to speak with someone else to get a different perspective to make decisions. I think the processing is very important. Someone who can really take all different angles of a situation and get parent feedback and student feedback, and staff feedback and be able to process through a solution that, you know, is best for kids but amenable to as many of the different constituent groups as you possibly have.

Making a Commitment to Increasing Engagement and Collaboration with Stakeholders. Combined with a new appreciation for gathering input and hearing and understanding multiple perspectives throughout their narratives, superintendents reflected on how the experience of increased stakeholder engagement has led them to consider how they encourage and maintain that level of involvement moving forward and worry that it may not survive post-COVID.

Susan Miller expressed both her hope for continued authentic engagement and input from parents moving forward and the concern that as schools moved toward a return to more routine in-person school and work schedules, the daily demands on parents may once again make connecting with schools more challenging for some and get in the way of this partnership:

> I hope that the increased involvement and connections with parents will result in more parent involvement going forward. In our district, we're trying to continue those connections with the parents as much as possible and…try to shift the focus a little bit to more individual student connections with the parents. A lot of the interactions, I think, between teachers and parents last year were about supporting the learning challenges, whether it was with the remote students or students who are hybrid and on their remote. So, they were trying to support, in a lot of ways, just the technical aspects of what was

> going on. And what we're hoping for is more authentic interactions around the less technical and more authentic interactions around, "here's what we're working on as a school, as a district. We would like your help. We would like your input. We would like your involvement in whatever way you can be involved in your child's education". I worry a little bit that that's not going to be possible or maybe sustained because I feel a little bit like parents... not that they had more time on their hands, but in a way, I think they were more accessible because many of them were working from home. They sort of had to be there for their children on a day-in, day-out basis. And I think things in that world are returning a little bit more to more normalcy and parents are getting busier, and they may not have as much time for school…We're also trying to be thoughtful about how many demands we put on our parents and think about the most impactful way that we can use parent involvement to help our work in the school district.

Leveraging Technology to Increase Parent Access and Engagement. The use of technology and the access it provided parents to the inner workings of the school district featured heavily in superintendents' stories of their experiences during this time. All superintendents acknowledged the necessary use of video meetings during the health pandemic had the silver lining of providing families greater convenience and more equitable access to participate in school and district-level meetings. There was also a sense in superintendent stories that in a time of physical isolation, technology provided an avenue for connection and help bring their communities together in a way that they would like to continue to maintain.

Reflecting on this and thinking about what this may look like moving forward, Helen Larsen discussed how the increased access that Zoom provided to families could be an important

tool for maintaining access and engagement for parent involvement, particularly for families that may have not previously been able to attend in-person events and forums:

> The silver lining of that, speaking of convergence, is that you have more participation in forums, in these meetings, and such than we ever would have gotten in person. So that's going to stick, you know. There's always going to have to be that discussion of some things we may offer Zoom, some may be hybrid, but the level of engagement was never bigger than Zoom offered people. So that will stick. That's especially true of our Boston[14] families and their availability. It showed their interest was always there, right? So maybe our skepticism of, gosh, they never participate…now we're a good distance from the city, so, we always understood, but, then when we gave them the tool that made it so they could be anywhere and do it, and they literally are, you know, they're at work, they're in the car, they're anywhere, our engagement levels went up enormously. And these Boston families, I believe, feel more connected now than they did pre-pandemic. I do believe that really wholeheartedly.

Michael Grant also discussed how the use of platforms such as Zoom could provide greater access and engagement from families, stating:

> So, if I could do it again, I would continue doing everything that we can on Zoom, too, in addition to in person. So, leveraging technology to make it more convenient for people to stay engaged and sort of break down even simple barriers like, you know, "I can't come to the meeting because I've got to bring my three-year-old with me, and I'm going to have to get up and leave halfway through and yadda, yadda, yadda. I can just use Zoom. I'm right here in my living room, and it works."

[14] As a district participating in the METCO Program, she is referring to the families of students that are members of the school community but reside in Boston and not within the school district.

Expanding Community Outreach and Hearing Marginalized Voices. As in the examples above, throughout other narratives, there was a recognition of the need to engage a broader range of parents within the community and to ensure that their voices were heard, and their needs met. Tim Richards and Arlene Fredericks both discussed the intentionality of creating working groups within their districts to increase more authentic engagement with families, particularly those whose voices may not have been widely represented in the past.

Tim shared the approach his urban district is taking, stating,

> So, I put together a task force, what I kind of call a tabletop discussion around family and community engagement. And what I found was, instead of having just these conversations around that with the leadership team, we needed to get people who are in key roles in the district to the table. So, we have a welcome center here. So, the director of our student registration is part of this tabletop discussion around family engagement, and our Translation Interpretation director is part of that. And so, we talk about all the things we've learned in the pandemic that we can apply now. And how can we find new ways to really meaningfully engage the community? So, it's not just a one-way newsletter or video. Even if it's translated, it doesn't allow [for] two-way engagement, so that continues to be something where you learn and grow from.

In her rural district, Arlene has also been focused on making sure that more families have access to services and ensuring that their voices are heard in the community by opening a Family and Community Center explaining:

> So, what we've done here to make sure we continue to understand the context of the community, just last week, we formally opened up our Family and Community Center here in the district. So, I have put on five additional staff. I have one director, I have a

> person who's in charge of our food pantry and what I'm calling my dropout prevention intervention person, a family resource officer who happens to speak multiple languages, and now a parent liaison for each school because we're not stopping where we're at. We need to continue, and we need to have the voices of those families. So, what I'm trying to do is--build [trust] in each school so that we're not just hearing from the typical families. Because what tends to happen is there are a host of people who I believe in all school communities and in all communities, who are kind of established, and they tend to be the voice. But it doesn't mean that they're the voice of everyone, and it doesn't mean it's the voice of the majority. And so, getting those other families in tune and collected has been important.

Increasing Student Engagement and Hearing Their Voices. Superintendents also discussed the impact of student activism and how the demand for information and voice by older students has given them a different lens on student engagement and including students in the work of the district. Helen Larsen reflected on this shift, sharing:

> You know, certain things for sure, like relationships and connections, are the theme to everything. When I spoke at graduation... And that the graduating class became very activist and found their voice. And we…when we responded as best we could, sometimes they want things you just can't do. But we navigated that. And... I've realized now that's a way to do whatever the work is. I used to think like, giving students voice was an initiative. You were going to make a plan, and they were going to have voice. The truth is, whatever the work is, it's a means to the work, not a separate thing. So that'll stick for sure.

Tim Richards also shared his plan for expanding student involvement describing:

> I'm working with the high school administration right now on creating quarterly town meetings. And it's a multi-fold purpose, really. So, we'll offer multiple sessions in each of these quarters. They'll be moderated. Usually, topic focused. We're in the brainstorming stage right now. I would work with the social studies and history department to also build in a civics element so that students would understand town government, would understand democracy, a[nd] how to lift voices in a public venue without being argumentative but getting your point across. In some ways, it's civics training, but at the same time, it's an opportunity for students to raise issues that are at the front of their mind for them.

Expanding Inclusive Leadership Structures. The concept of increasing engagement and feedback and the value of a more inclusive approach to problem-solving and decision-making extended beyond family and student stakeholders to increase the participation of teachers, teacher leaders, and building-level administrators in the leadership of the district. Bill Flanders shared his perspective on leadership and the desire to expand this leadership team, stating:

> I have no interest in being the, you know, the captain on the bridge barking orders through the loudspeaker. I want to make change, but I want to do it in a way that people are invested in it…So, I'm not ever doing anything in isolation. I'm doing it collectively with the five of us, and even better, we just broadened the scope of our leadership team. And all decisions now will be with a group of nineteen, which includes all the principals, assistant principals and directors, and coordinators…I think everyone came out of last year realizing that more voices are better. Yeah, and it works. And I think even now watching...watching [principals] give teachers more leadership opportunities, right, so it

> really does trickle.

Tim Richards also shared the value of more inclusive leadership, specifically calling out the need for opposing points of view sharing:

> For me, I think of it as more like just setting the vision and then bringing people that you trust, but not bringing necessarily people to the table who subscribe to your thinking wholesale, but people who will push you and challenge you and raise questions about the validity of the idea itself or the practical application of the idea or the sustainability of the idea, really bringing those challenging discussions forward and then giving those away.

Arlene Fredericks reflected on the important role that having an inclusive leadership structure played in weathering the convergent crises and the recognition that one person cannot do it all explaining:

> As far as the district was concerned, we already had in place a structure that I think really worked. That being instructional leadership teams at each school. From that, those instructional leadership teams were part of a district instructional leadership team. And so, we used that as a vehicle in which to communicate and get information back and forth, along with working with our union. We probably met and talked with them at least every other week about what was going on. I think that was a huge help to us, having that leadership structure in place that was not just a structure of administrators but also teachers to try to understand what the issues were and try to work through those processes. So, I think that was huge in helping us to figure out and problem-solve.

She went on to share:

> And I think it's opened my eyes to think of things differently because now I have a whole host of people sitting there. It's not just my idea, it's everyone's idea, and having the

> presence of mind to know that it's just not my brain, the difference that makes is huge. And I think what's happening [is] I'm seeing my leadership really wanting to blossom. And I don't want this to sound funny, but what I'm seeing is they want to... they want to please me. And I don't like using that word, but I don't know what else to say, but I think they've really bought into the juice because of all these partnerships. And they know now, I can lead my own group and make this happen…And so, recognizing that it does work. You can see it once you get into it. And letting yourself let go of some things. Because I'll tell you, if COVID taught me anything, you've got to let go of some stuff. You can't do everything. Right? And so that's making it easier for me too now because I just know I can't do it all. There's no way. So, it makes a difference.

Finding #8: Superintendents in this study report that the experience of leading during this time has made them more acutely aware of how they inhabit the political space of their role and given them greater confidence to make hard decisions and take risks as they lead change in alignment with their values.

Throughout the narratives of participating superintendents, the politics of this time period and the political nature of their role were articulated as a throughline. That said, as they reflected on their professional growth and the work of their districts moving forward, they claimed to have gained confidence and discussed thinking strategically around their role in leading change. The themes that informed this finding were (a) attention to the political and emotional realms of decision-making; (b) strategic attention to social and racial inequities; (c) increased confidence to make hard decisions; and (d) increased confidence to take risks in service to their values.

Attention to How They Inhabit the Political Space. Tim Richards frankly described the superintendency as "probably the most political, nonpolitical position in the community,

especially at a time of leadership in crisis." As such, participating superintendents discussed how local, state, and national politics impact schools and how they inhabit the political space required by their role and navigate the political and emotional realms of decision-making. While some expressed frustration about the way that the political landscape impacts schools, all recognized that "playing the game" of politics and skillfully negotiating this terrain is a critical aspect of their role. Helen Larsen expressed her frustration at the way that politics has infiltrated the decision-making in schools and the impact on superintendents, stating:

> The level of politics to all of this is so infuriating all the time. I wouldn't understate the way this country has handled COVID and the schools being this microcosm of the political divides. That's just so unfortunate that we keep getting caught in that. So that's probably worth saying out loud because it's never far from any of us in these jobs, and I think it's changing us as superintendents…Yeah, so I think that's just worth naming.

Frank Mitchell expressed frustration with the political landscape but also recognized that in order to do the work, he needed to maintain his position as superintendent, sharing:

> It frustrates me, at times, that my committee brings their political beliefs into just about every discussion we have at the school committee level that's controversial. And it's frustrating to hear the Fox talking points. It's frustrating to hear the CNN talking points, you know. Give me the AP news. Give me something down the middle. And both sides want to tell me why everything is so good, or everything is so bad. But the nature of the job is to do what's best for kids and move it forward. And I feel as though I can't move it forward if I'm not in the seat because you're fired…because you're, you're too...because you're not reading the room, is what I'm saying. So, there's certainly a political component to it. But it's highly frustrating. It's highly frustrating.
>
> Acknowledging the necessity of skillfully navigating the political realm of local decision-

making, Tim shared his strategy for working with other city officials to forge relationships and ensure that the interests of the schools are part of the larger conversation:

> I do this for a mayoral race, even at the preliminary level, or for school committee, city council, any elected position in a city that's going to serve kids, ultimately. I offer to sit down with [them], and just talk about our strategic plan, and just to educate them and then answer questions that they may have about education or what their interests are and then how to support them. So, I'll support every candidate really the same, equally, because anybody could land in one of those seats. You know? And so, it's just that I look at it as an opportunity to really put forward an educational agenda and capitalize on somebody's campaign to then actually, sort of, preach the good word about the same things the school department is trying to do, but now they're using it as a campaign platform.
>
> So, if and when they get elected, it only works to our favor. They're supporting the school department by virtue of this is the thing they had the conversation with me about early on. So, I look at it as a tremendous opportunity. But again, that feels political, right? It feels like you're playing politics as opposed to the educator who becomes superintendent who says, 'You know, this is our school world, and I could really care less about anything else in the community. School is what matters most.' You don't necessarily get friends or buy in that way…So, it's very political in that regard where you have to be able to make the educational agenda the community's agenda...I think that's the challenge for us, that you have to play the game of politics.

Similarly, in her advice for aspiring superintendents, Arlene Fredericks also discussed the importance of having the backing of key stakeholders when communicating decisions sharing:

> I think, first of all, the first thing I would say is you never have to answer a question right away. Because I think that if anything, this pandemic has taught us is [that] people want answers right away. You don't have to…you can say to them, 'I understand you want it, but I need some time to think about it.' Right? 'And I need to gather some information.' I think that would be the first thing. I think the second thing would be to try not to be an outlier if you can. And what I mean by that is exactly what we talked about. Kind of, getting a sense from your peers around you what's going on and what are the decisions they're making. So, you're not out there on your own. So, if you're going to make a decision about masks or this or that…do you have other people who are making this decision, or are you out there alone? And even if it's not your peers, is the school committee with you? Right? Because if the elected officials are with you, you're more likely to have success.

Strategically Attending to Social and Racial Inequities. While the immediacy of the health pandemic was featured prominently in superintendents' stories, they also talked impact of events such as the murder of George Floyd, their personal reflections around this event, and their role as lead learners in the work around equity in their districts. As such, in helping their communities make sense of the social and racial justice crises and the work that lies ahead, they described closely considering the context of their communities and the political climate in how they were strategically beginning, accelerating, or extending work around equity.

After reflecting on his initial response to the murder of George Floyd and his approach moving forward, Michael Grant discussed how understanding the demographics of his community influences his response to this work:

> The community I'm in is very conservative. And we have a small population, our largest minority population, and it's growing, is people of Hispanic origin, Latinx families. We have a very small African-American community and some Middle Eastern families, too. So, the overwhelming response I got from the community is, "We don't have racism here. It's not a problem. Why are you.... Why are you creating this drama?" basically. And, and I got much less feedback from families of color who said, "Something absolutely needs to be done. Thank you so much for looking into this. Our experiences have been really unfortunate, and we want to join you in this work." So, the overwhelming voice of the community is, "This is not a problem, and you're making it a problem by looking into it." And that was difficult to navigate, or I should say it wasn't difficult to navigate. It was, it was a difficult problem that I think had an easy solution, which was we do have a problem systemically. And I'm going to do my best to educate every person, one at a time, that we have a problem that we need to work on.

Frank Mitchell discussed the importance of understanding the context of the community even when collaborating with other superintendents from surrounding communities sharing:

> You know, and I think the most important thing I can tell you about that small group is, context matters. Because even in my small group, we all have very different communities. So, the political nature in these communities [is] a little bit different. And the relationship of both the school committee and the union is very different. So, as much as we can seek their input, you know, you need to reflect and say, my union wouldn't do that or my union would absolutely support this. So, you need to understand the dynamics.

Further discussing the work around equity and the need to be strategic, he shared:

> You need to be reflective of what's going to work for your community. You know, there's... you have to understand who your school committee is, what your community is. We can all say, this is what equity is, this is what it should be, and we can go one

> hundred miles an hour forward. But the reality is that that may cost you your job in your community if you're not careful and intelligent about how you do that. So, it's the political reality of the job.

Arlene Fredericks also discussed the critical role that understanding community context plays in developing effective strategy stating:

> But I think more so than ever, you've got to be in tune with your community, and you've got to constantly be asking the questions. "Is this working for you? Is this getting us in the right direction? We know we need to work on this. What can you buy into?" All of that, I think, is hugely important.
>
> And I keep using this language. I'll say it again, "context matters." What I do here would be different than another community I was in because it all depends on the context of the community and the dynamics that are happening in that community that are going to make a difference. I mean, I've talked to some of my superintendents in the state, and they say to me, "[Arlene], I'm in Trumpville." That's a very different way of approaching [it] than [in] a town where it might be fully democratic, right? But you've got to understand that, and you've got to understand their language. So, what is the language saying, and where is the piece that you can use that they feel is supporting their language as you move forward? Because you won't get anywhere without doing that.

She further discussed the need to assess and rethink strategy based on context:

> And I think in this particular case, with the pandemic, with the equity issues that are happening around the nation, more so than ever, you can't be afraid to say, "I'm going to stop, I'm going to step back, I'm going to rethink, and then I'm going to move forward again." And I think some people think when you have to step back that you're losing. I don't think that at all. I think you're smart because you're saying, I'm <u>not</u> going to lose this.

Increased Confidence to Make Hard Decisions. In addition to the need to think strategically about the future work around equity in their districts, participating superintendents

also expressed an increased sense of confidence in their ability to make hard decisions they feel are in the best interest of students and in alignment with the strategic vision for their districts.

Helen Larsen discussed the need for superintendents to possess confidence and self-regulation when facing hard decisions and conflict, stating:

> You have to have this core self-confidence, like, you can't be at the whim of everything that comes at you…You've got to be sort of able to emotionally regulate the ongoing stuff that's coming at you, whether it's tricky situations or people demanding stuff or whatever… But that stability, that emotional regulation where you sort of look like Teflon, even though you're totally not, matters a lot.

Ellen Russo shared her increased confidence as a result of leading through this challenging period:

> I'm definitely less shy because [in this role], I don't have the opportunity to be… I think you get more confident in knowing what to do next when you don't know or picking up the phone and calling people that you really don't know, but saying, 'Hey, how do we engage in a conversation that moves things forward?' [and] being less hesitant to take on someone who is really challenging you in not-so-nice ways and trying to build some kind of relationship with them.

In addition to the impact of repeatedly making hard and sometimes unpopular decisions, superintendents also cited that experiencing an increased pace of decision-making during the convergent crises has impacted their confidence in this aspect of their job. Susan Miller explained this point, sharing:

> [Prior to becoming a superintendent], I've always sort of worn the curriculum hat where, you know, we always say, 'there aren't any curriculum emergencies,' so you can think

about it for a while. So that's been my experience as a leader all the way through my leadership experience. And so, I think I would say that I've gotten better at making some decisions more quickly than I would necessarily have been comfortable making prior to COVID. And that's given me confidence in a way that, OK, you can make a decision relatively quickly without thinking about it and thinking about it and thinking about it. And still, it will be the right decision or the best decision that you can make given the time frame that you need to make it in. So, I would say that has been a skill set that has changed for me with COVID.

Discussing how their confidence increased as a result of making unpopular decisions during this time and the scrutiny that superintendents experienced, many talk about having a "thick skin" and the notion of becoming more comfortable with feelings of discomfort in communicating tough decisions. Tim Richards underscored how the impact of leading through the convergent crises has increased his confidence and shifted the mindset he brings to making challenging decisions:

Just being comfortable making a decision that I know won't please everybody. You know, that was always something I never… You know, I like to make people happy. I'm kind of a people-pleaser kind of guy, right? You know, no one gets up every day and says, 'who can I make…?'. I don't think [so]. At least those aren't people I hang out with that get up every day and say, 'How can I make somebody's life miserable?' Everyone really wants to try to help others, and they're in this work for that reason. But people don't view it that way. People don't view well-intentions in the same way.

And so, I've come to terms with that without losing hope in humanity. And so that's been a big learning for me, where every day I get up, and I say, 'today's a new day,

> it's a hopeful day.' And I think about it more like, 'whose life can I make better today by my being part of it?'. As opposed to 'What can people do for me?'. And changing that mindset really has been a powerful reflection coming out of the pandemic. And, you know, I'm not sure I would have thought of it the same way without having lived through literally making a decision every day that made people unhappy, like every day, you know.

Increased Confidence to Take Risks in Service to Their Values. The confidence expressed by superintendents also extended into their focus on leading change while being guided by their values to make decisions in the best interest of students. Helen Larsen expressed that while the current political climate has been frustrating, she has been proud of the willingness of superintendents across the country to push back and make decisions in the best interest of students stating:

> The level of politics to all of this is so infuriating all the time. I wouldn't understate the way this country has handled COVID and the schools being this microcosm of the political divides. That's just so unfortunate that we keep getting caught in that. So that's probably worth saying out loud because it's never far from any of us in these jobs, and I think it's changing us as superintendents… And yet I'm prouder than ever in some of these places where they're taking stands with the stupid mask issues and being like, "No, this is what we should be doing, and I don't care who the governor is [saying]." And, you know, I actually feel like we've become more important because it's all ended up as local decision-making despite the politics. But this really, you know, a tricky microcosm of political, real high-stress stuff is. It's so challenging, for sure.

Larry Jacobs shared the critical challenge of navigating crisis while also keeping his values at the

forefront and the importance of staying focused on the big picture of equitably educating all students as schools move forward, sharing:

> It's been challenging. So, my priorities, I think they're all based on my core values, but there are typically, what would be a crisis once a month has become a crisis a couple of times a week. You know, so, I guess it's really trying to... also, we're in the process of updating our strategic plan to really reflect where we are. So, it's kind of keeping an eye... It's trying to continue to show up every day and manage these issues that come up, provide the most support we can for people, but also not losing track of the big picture--and where we want to be for kids.
>
> I think now more than ever, our commitment is to all students [and] to tackle our goals and our values that we normally do, but we also have to tackle for all students any unfinished learning. And last but not least, we also know that the pandemic and all involved with it has significantly impacted disproportionately certain groups within our community and so, we have had to take steps to level that playing field and provide that opportunity for an excellent education to all.

In the stories shared by superintendents, more than one pointed to the need to have a "thick skin" when it comes to facing criticism or standing by their values. Frank Mitchell discussed his commitment to doing what he feels is in the best interest of students, the understanding that doing so will invite criticism, and his willingness to it gives to weather pushback and disagreement, stating:

> The job is to lead the kids, Lead the school system...And I know...you know, I have a thick skin. You know, I understand people get worked up. People have their own belief systems and whatnot. And, you know, I get that. And you can have those opinions.

> And I have no problem if it costs me a friendship or whatever. My job is to do what's best for these kids. And I've been committed to doing that for twenty-four years. And I believe I'm the right guy [for] this job, and I'm the right guy to lead us through this time because I'm always going to do that. And I don't necessarily...it's not that I don't care how you think about me. Of course, I do. But I'm willing to take your shots but still lead in this direction. That's what I believe.

Bill Flanders shared this sentiment, emphasizing how this experience has increased both his confidence and willingness to take risks to maintain a commitment to his values, stating:

> You know, for me, I mentioned, kind of, the spring was weird, but home and kind of oddly felt great being with family all the time while working. And then the fall almost killed me. So, I think that kind of whole trajectory, and now having figured it out, has definitely given me a different balance and a different... And I think with that comes a different level of 'Fine, you want to disagree, disagree.' You know, committee, 'you want to fire me, fire me, but I'm going to stand for what I believe in.' And so, I do think it's given me a different level of willingness to take risks. Sure. Yeah.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, two guiding research questions were used to guide data collection in this qualitative study utilizing narrative methodology. The data were analyzed and organized using the themes and topics that emerged from the narrative stories of participants. In total, eight findings emerged from this study:

> **Finding #1:** Superintendents in this study reported that uncertain and unfamiliar conditions combined with inconsistent state-level guidance, a lack of local consensus, an escalating political climate, and the physical and emotional strain on themselves and

others hampered their sensemaking and decision-making.

Finding #2: Superintendents in this study reported that the complex and unfamiliar conditions of the health pandemic demanded they intensify their focus on the management and operations of their districts and supporting the needs of stakeholders ahead of their role as instructional leaders.

Finding #3: Superintendents in this study reported that the inordinate degree of communication, stakeholder engagement, and consultation associated with the convergent crises prompted them to reconsider and, in some cases, reinvent their routines around communication and community engagement, and input.

Finding #4: Superintendents in this study reported that the experience of leading their school districts through the convergence of crises while also experiencing these events on a personal level had a significant impact on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Finding #5: Superintendents in this study reported that in the midst of this unfamiliar and demanding context, they grew more inclined to combat the isolation of their role and lean on and toward others for additional expertise, problem-solving, and support.

Finding #6: Superintendents in this study reported a renewed appreciation for the interpersonal nature of leadership and a heightened recognition of the foundational importance of trust and relationship-building to their work as leaders.

Finding #7: Superintendents in this study reported a new understanding of inclusive leadership practices and expressed the value of hearing a variety of stakeholder voices and a commitment to ensuring avenues for expanding stakeholder engagement.

Finding #8: Superintendents in this study report that the experience of leading during this

time has made them more acutely aware of how they inhabit the political space of their role and given them greater confidence to make hard decisions and take risks as they lead change in alignment with their values.

In the concluding chapter, each finding will be presented with a discussion, implications for practice, and recommended action steps. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the opportunities for further research and final reflections.

CHAPTER FIVE: **Discussion, Implications of the Findings, and Recommendations**

Introduction

This study was built on the assertion that the interconnected health, social, political, economic, and climatic crises experienced during the years 2020 and 2021 brought systemic inequities within schools to the forefront and increased the urgency to examine long-standing assumptions and practices. Moreover, it presupposed that the experience of leading amid this convergence was likely to have significantly impacted superintendents and, therefore, public education and the nature of schools and school systems as organizations. As such, this qualitative study explored how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 affected Massachusetts' public-school superintendents personally and professionally. To do this, I developed two research questions.

1. What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?
2. How did this experience affect superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?

To answer these guiding research questions, this study employed narrative analysis methods to present how their experience leading during this period affected them personally and professionally. Analysis of the narrative accounts of participating superintendents resulted in eight research findings relating to the two research questions that guided this study.

1. Superintendents in this study reported that uncertain and unfamiliar conditions combined with inconsistent state-level guidance, a lack of local consensus, an escalating political climate, and the physical and emotional strain on themselves and others hampered their sensemaking and decision-making.

2. Superintendents in this study reported that the complex and unfamiliar conditions of the health pandemic demanded they intensify their focus on the management and operations of their districts and supporting the needs of stakeholders at the expense of performing their role as instructional leaders.
3. Superintendents in this study reported that the inordinate degree of communication, stakeholder engagement, and consultation associated with the convergent crises prompted them to reconsider and, in some cases, reinvent their routines around communication and community engagement and input.
4. Superintendents in this study reported that the experience of leading their school districts through the convergence of crises while also experiencing these events on a personal level significantly impacted their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
5. Superintendents in this study reported that in the midst of this unfamiliar and demanding context, they grew more inclined to combat the isolation of their role and lean on and toward others for additional expertise, problem-solving, and support.
6. Superintendents in this study reported a renewed appreciation for the interpersonal nature of leadership and a heightened recognition of the foundational importance of trust and relationship-building in their work as leaders.
7. Superintendents in this study reported a new understanding of inclusive leadership practices and expressed the value of hearing a variety of stakeholder voices and a commitment to ensuring avenues for expanding stakeholder engagement.
8. Superintendents in this study reported that the experience of leading during this time has made them more acutely aware of how they inhabit the political space of their role and given them greater confidence to make hard decisions and take risks as they lead change in alignment with their values.

This final chapter provides a discussion of the eight findings delineated by each of the guiding research questions and connected to relevant scholarship. Suggestions for future research follow, informed by the limitations of the study. Chapter five concludes with final reflections on the experience of conducting this study and the enduring understandings that resulted from this work.

Interpretation and Discussion of the Research Findings

This first section will discuss the eight research findings and their relationship to the two research questions that guided this study. While a narrative study does not offer generalizations or draw conclusions, my research offers insight into both the experience of superintendents during this period and lends a perspective on how that experience might influence their thinking about the role. To that end, an explanation of how the findings are situated within current scholarship and their implications for practitioners is included.

Guiding Question #1: What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?

The first guiding question for this study related to the experiences of superintendents as they led their districts through the converging crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021. While the experience of superintendents during this period contained variation for each individual, particularly related to community context and needs and their interactions and relationships with their school committees, findings related to their experience emerged relative to negotiating the situational context of converging crises and the intensified challenges and tensions they confronted as leaders. In alignment with the literature on crisis leadership, these findings also highlight key leadership and management competencies necessitated by crisis events and provide insight into the practical experiences of leading through crisis events.

Crisis leadership generally and the experiences of superintendents leading during the convergence of crises during this period specifically can provide insight into the key competencies of leadership practice in the current era. To that end, findings #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5, which related to the first research question of superintendents' experiences during this period, align with and provide practical insight into four key competencies of crisis leadership emphasized in the scholarship (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; Goswick et al., 2018; Kapucu & Ustun, 2018; Kahn & Sachs, 2018; McBath, 2018; Wooten & James, 2008): (a) sensemaking and decision-making; (b) transparent communication and stakeholder engagement (c) emotional intelligence and (d) collaboration. Table 3 summarizes the alignment between these competencies, the findings of this study related to the experiences of participating superintendents during the period, and the discussion focus.

Table 3

Alignment Between Key Competencies of Crisis Leadership, Findings, and Discussion Focus

Question #1: What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021??		
Crisis Leadership Key Competency	Finding(s) Discussed	Discussion Focus
Sensemaking and Decision-making	Finding #1 Superintendents in this study reported that uncertain and unfamiliar conditions combined with inconsistent state-level guidance, a lack of local consensus, an escalating political climate, and the physical and emotional strain on themselves and others hampered their sensemaking and decision-making.	Engaging in the Processes of Sensemaking and Decision-making
Transparent Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	Finding #3 Superintendents in this study reported that the inordinate degree of communication, stakeholder engagement, and consultation associated with the convergent crises prompted them to reconsider and, in some cases, reinvent	Establishing and Utilizing Systems of Communication and Strategies for Engagement

	their routines around communication and community engagement and input.	
Emotional intelligence	Finding #2 Superintendents in this study reported that the complex and unfamiliar conditions of the health pandemic demanded they intensify their focus on the management and operations of their districts and supporting the needs of stakeholders at the expense of performing their role as instructional leaders.	Utilizing Emotional Intelligence and Taking a Caregiver Stance
	Finding #4 Superintendents in this study reported that the experience of leading their school districts through the convergence of crises while also experiencing these events on a personal level significantly impacted their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.	
Collaboration	Finding #5 Superintendents in this study reported that in the midst of this unfamiliar and demanding context, they grew more inclined to combat the isolation of their role and lean on and toward others for additional expertise, problem-solving, and support.	Engaging in Collaboration for Support and Problem-Solving

Engaging in the Processes of Sensemaking and Decision-making: Discussion of Finding #1

Finding #1 encapsulates the complex and ongoing challenges that superintendents encountered while leading during the prolonged and ongoing convergence of crises of 2020 and 2021 and their processes of sense-making and decision-making. The narratives of all participating superintendents highlighted the ways in which navigating uncertain, evolving, and unfamiliar conditions in a highly emotionally and politically charged climate with little guidance or local consensus made it difficult to have a clear sense of direction for decision-making.

Sudden crises are largely unanticipated, low-probability, high-consequence events characterized by ambiguity and emotional strain (DuBrin, 2013; Pearson & Clair, 1998, Wooten

& James, 2008) and typically begin with a triggering event that requires quickly gathering and assessing information so that decisions can be made. Whenever a gap exists between what is expected and what is actually encountered, an individual is driven to make sense of a situation (Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005; Weick, 1995). As such, sensemaking becomes a key competency during crisis situations.

Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld (2005) advise that "sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action (p. 409)," suggesting that this process requires leaders to continually ask the questions: How did this come to be? What does this mean? and What should I do? Further, these questions need to be repeatedly asked and answered, as managing a crisis involves not only sensemaking for individual discrete events but, more often, making sense of a series or convergence of events that may seem unrelated but have an impact on the organization wholistically (Wooten & James, 2008).

Throughout their narratives, superintendents described key moments and events that alerted them to make sense of unfamiliar situations. Much like the turbulent 1960s, superintendents were positioned to respond to multiple urgent, highly charged, and unprecedented events, each with their own historical significance coming together at once, with multiple layers of impact. For instance, the initial closure of schools because of the pandemic forced decisions about how to make learning happen remotely and how to continue to provide services to students and families. At the same time, other monumental and highly divisive national events, such as the murder of George Floyd and the political hostilities rising from the presidential campaign, required them to consider if, when, and how to address its meaning and the actions the schools would take in response. In these decisions, they described the dilemma

they faced in attempting to consider the specific context and needs of their communities carefully in a climate of division and disagreement. Further, the convergence of issues created tension about where to focus attention and resources and unwinnable decisions about how to respond.

Leaders, especially those in the field of public administration, such as superintendents, commonly encounter public scrutiny and must effectively navigate conflicting values. In times of crisis, this also requires them to swiftly analyze and handle incomplete or incorrect information while working to reduce confusion and make appropriate decisions. (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Grissom & Condon, 2021; Mumford et al., 2007; Weick, 1993). That said, the prolonged and escalating nature of the conditions encountered by superintendents, the politicization of issues, and the lack of clear guidance available to them further intensified this experience for leaders. As described by Larry Jacobs, “It's probably, you know, the most scrutiny all of us have faced as superintendents, the most pressure we've all faced as superintendents, and the most sustained work throughout a crisis that we've ever done.”

Potentially adding to the challenges faced by superintendents is a lack of experience or preparation for leading during crisis events. Indeed, related literature (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Kitamura, 2019; Lichtenstein et al.,1994) note that superintendents typically do not receive formal preparation in the area of crisis management and that this focus is absent from the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Further, the AASA 2020 Decennial Superintendent study (Tienken, 2021) notes that 30% of superintendents cite this as an area of desired professional learning. This suggests that many superintendents may have had little experience with sensemaking during crisis situations and, therefore, may not have prior experience to draw from as a source when negotiating sensemaking and decision-making processes.

Many participants did discuss their experiences with some level of organizational sensemaking related to high-profile crises such as school shootings or the terror attacks of 9/11 at a national level. However, if those events had no direct impact on their own school communities, they did not have direct experience related to handling the immediate and ongoing response or management of those events. A smaller number of participants mentioned drawing on the experience of local events such as a student death or a school building-based fire as they managed their response to the 2020-2021 convergent crises, particularly around communication and community engagement, but having previously led their organizations through such crises was not universally described during their interviews.

Establishing and Utilizing Systems of Communication and Strategies for Engagement: Discussion of Finding #3

Finding #3 describes the intensified demands that were placed on superintendents for information, creating a need for them to reconsider the frequency and content of their communication and the mechanisms for communication and stakeholder engagement and input. Resultingly, this demand required them to reinvent routines and norms for communication and engagement with their communities.

Communication is fundamental to crisis management and leadership (DuBrin, 2013; Liu et al., 2020; Urick et al., 2021). During a crisis, it becomes the responsibility of organizational leaders to project as much clarity as they are able in an environment naturally defined by uncertainty and provide critical support for stakeholders' sensemaking around the impact of the crisis on their organization (Hackman and Johnson, 2013; Hesloot and Groenendaal, 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Lochmiller, 2021).

Leadership during a crisis necessitates timely and honest communication with stakeholders (Goswick et al., 2018; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Neptune, 2019; Sutherland, 2017) as well as high-functioning communication systems (Boin et al., 2013) to mitigate misinformation, establish a vision (Goswick et al., 2018; Kahn & Sachs, 2018; McBath, 2018), engage stakeholders and gather necessary input for collaborative decisionmaking (Kahn & Sachs, 2018; Sutherland, 2017). Communication and stakeholder engagement were major themes across the narratives of all participating superintendents. As responsibility was placed on them for managing the organizational sensemaking, particularly around the health crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced mounting pressure to provide information to families with greater frequency than was typical, and the ways in which restrictions requiring physical distancing created both challenges and occasions when increased community participation and engagement became imperative.

Notably, all participants discussed the need to provide stakeholders with information and gather feedback to inform decision-making. Gainey (2009) and Howat et al. (2012), in their studies of school response to natural disasters, suggest that well-constructed communication systems utilize a combination of mechanisms and strategies to reach various stakeholders to disseminate outgoing information and allow for two-way communication to gather input and that such systems should be established in advance of a crisis event. In line with this thinking, participants discussed utilizing previously established communication mechanisms for both information dissemination and gathering stakeholder input, such as email listservs and surveys.

Describing her use of systems of communication that had been established through navigating previous high-impact events in her distinct earlier, Helen Larsen shared, “Crisis builds toolkits, [but] no matter how prepared you are, you are still tweaking and creating the

toolkit, but we leaned on those structures." Further, in alignment with guidance from Grisolm and Wooten (2021) that communicating with consistency and emotional intelligence during crisis supports trust and engagement, participants reported they utilized their established communication tools with much greater frequency but also began layering on additional mechanisms such as Zoom and recorded video messages that allowed for interaction in real-time and allowed them to convey emotion and an empathetic tone that may not have been fully captured in an email or newsletter update.

Research notes that leaders who regularly practice open and transparent two-way communication in times of stability are better prepared to navigate crises when they occur (O'Keefe, 1999; Fairbanks et al., 2007; Cohen et al., 2017; Urick et al., 2021), and consistent, clear and transparent communication during crisis events builds trust and promotes engagement (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). These sentiments were echoed in the experiences of participants who overall felt that while challenging, their efforts around communication were generally appreciated by their communities and that they were able to maintain trust in the district's efforts through communication and engagement. As trust is foundational to leadership in general and in crisis specifically, both the experiences of participants in this study and current scholarship highlight the critical importance of attending to both organizational systems related to communication and the leaders' development of their own communication skills and routines (Boin et al., 2010; Lucero et al., 2009; Urick et al., 2021) as a means for building trust and for engaging in the processes of sensemaking and decision-making both in times of stability and crisis.

Utilizing Emotional Intelligence and Taking a Caregiver Stance: Discussion of Findings #2 and #4

Simply defined, "emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others, understand the causes and effects of emotions and manage emotions effectively to suit a goal or situation" (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). Promoting an atmosphere grounded in community relationships and mutual respect where emotions can be recognized and understood as critical information allows leaders to utilize this foundation for engagement and problem-solving in the face of high-stress, high-profile events (Mendelson & Stabile, 2019).

Finding #2 describes the way in which the health pandemic specifically required an intensified focus on the human resources of their districts, including an increased need to attend to the more basic physical and emotional needs of students and their families and the increased need to attend to the stress-levels and overall wellbeing of the school staff. Participants described circumstances that brought on their adoption of a caregiver stance toward others, prioritizing the management and operations of their districts and attending to the well-being of others in their approach to leadership and decision making.

Finding #4 describes superintendents' accounts of how leading their school districts through the convergence of crises while also dealing with them on a personal level impacted their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. According to participants, this dual focus made their awareness of their own emotions and well-being more urgent and brought into focus the benefits of taking a self-reflective stance in their work as leaders.

According to the model developed by Mayer and Salovey (1997), the skills of perception, facilitation, understanding, and managing can facilitate decision-making (Pellitteri, 2021). Perspective-taking specifically is essential for social functioning (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000;

Wooten & James, 2008), particularly when confronted with conflicting information and competing demands (Medelson & Stabile, 2019, Patti et al., 2018), as was the case for superintendents during this period.

Superintendents in this study all described an increased need to attend to the well-being of others by supporting students and their families and addressing and alleviating the stress on staff. In their narratives, they portrayed themselves as intent on listening to and understanding parent and staff needs and concerns. More specifically, Arlene and Michael both discussed having personal conversations with parents about their need for resources, and Helen pointed to her realization of the importance of taking care of adults so that they can also care for students and not wanting to forget that moving forward.

Prior studies have shown that leaders can work to develop their emotional intelligence through efforts to listen actively, accept criticism, and engage authentically with stakeholders (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Pelletteri, 2021). In this study, participant Tim Richards described how his 2020-2021 experience shifted his thinking about how to consider parent perspectives and understand the emotions of others:

> The learning experience for me was to come to these conversations with families who are upset, not knowing that there may be much more to the story…So, I shifted my lens to try to be in their shoes and kind of come at it with a level of empathy that I probably never had before. And that was a game-changer for me to try to live through that experience and just say, you know, "They're not mad at me," even though I felt like they were mad at me because it was really nasty messages, very, very unkind things people would say I tried not to personalize that, and I tried not to respond back in a similar way either. I tried to be as validating as I could.

In addition to stressing the need to understand the emotions and perspectives of others, all participating superintendents provided examples of managing and being aware of their own emotions and the toll that leading during this period took on them personally. The experiences they shared align with both the scholarship noting the job-related stress felt by superintendents prior to this period and literature that asserts that emotional intelligence generally, and self-awareness specifically, are key competencies for leading during crisis events.

Documenting the stress of superintendents prior to the convergent crises, the most recent AASA decennial study (Tienken, 2021) noted that job-related stress was the most widely reported problem for superintendents (61%). This suggests that even prior to navigating the high-intensity landscape presented by the convergent crises of this period, superintendents were already feeling tremendous pressure in their work. Tienken (2021) suggests the level of stress felt by superintendents should be of concern, citing research that suggests that stress without balance puts superintendents at risk for higher rates of health problems and potential challenges in their personal relationships (Gailer & Dunlap, 2018).

Grissom and Condon (2021) suggest that leading during a crisis requires emotional intelligence on the part of organizational leaders to withstand the emotional toll that crisis takes on themselves and as well as others. Indeed, in this study, all superintendents discussed the impact that stress, the intensity of demands, and the pace of the work had on them during this time and recognized the need to be aware of their own emotions and needs. Bill Flanders shared an example of this, describing a moment of recognizing his breaking point and resetting himself, sharing,

> By December, I was toast in a way that I've never experienced in my life, to the point where I said, I turned to the committee even, “This...something has to change...When we

> come back from the break, something has got to change because I cannot do this…[and] I figured it out to the point where by the end of the year, I have a better, measured approach.

This is significant because, as suggested in the literature, leaders must be aware of and in control of their own stress and emotions to make effective decisions and appropriately direct support to stakeholders (Boin et al., 2013, Weist et al., 2002; Zenere, 2013). Doing so allows them to mitigate the negative impact of emotions on these processes and act in the best interest of stakeholders (Grey, 2009; Mendelson & Stabile, 2019; Wooten & James, 2008).

Emotional intelligence and self-awareness, particularly in crisis situations, can also translate into leaders sharing their emotions with others in a way that may be atypical to their leadership practice or style. However, doing so honestly and authentically can model vulnerability and foster trust and relationship-building within a community. Frank Mitchell expressed the personal significance of this:

> I'm not a touchy-feely kind of guy. You know, I'm kind of all business. And to show that humanistic side of me and the empathetic side was... Because I was feeling it…And to show that we were in the boat with them, I think, was important.

To this end, literature also suggests promoting an atmosphere grounded in community relationships and mutual respect where emotions can be recognized and understood, allowing leaders to utilize this foundation for engagement and problem-solving in the face of high-stress, high-profile events (Mendelson & Stabile, 2019). Therefore, considering the experiences of superintendents during this period taken alongside the scholarship noting the already elevated stress levels of superintendents and the scholarship noting the importance of emotional

intelligence and self-awareness as mechanisms for mitigating the impact of stress indicate that competencies are essential for leaders, both in times of crisis and stability.

Engaging in Collaboration for Support and Problem-Solving: Discussion of Finding #5

Finding #5 also relates directly to the first guiding research question and describes superintendents' efforts to engage with others for support and problem-solving. This finding acknowledges the various ways that the complex and unfamiliar context created by the convergent crises and the demand that it placed on superintendents to problem-solve required them to lean into relationships and engage with others for expertise, problem-solving, and support.

Fullan (2007) recommends that due to the complex and dynamic nature of schools, fostering strong relationships both within the school communities and with external stakeholders is critical to the success of superintendents. Similarly, in their review and synthesis of the crisis leadership scholarship as it relates to schools, Grissom and Condon (2021) assert that school collaboration with other local organizations is critical to response and recovery during crisis events (Coopman & Young, 2009; Garran, 2013; Howitt & Leonard, 2006; Low, 2008; Weist et al., 2002 in Grissom & Condon, 2021) and studies by Liu et al. (2020), Lockmiller (2021), and Urick et al. (2021) related to leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic suggest that superintendents should develop relationships within their organizations and collaborate and coordinate across connected organizations. Taken alongside the understanding gained from the 2020 Superintendent Study (Tienken, 2021) that when making decisions, superintendents tend to draw on the advice of their district's administrative team, their fellow superintendents, and their school board and the general conception that superintendents should be collaborators (Brunner et al., 2002), it is unsurprising that the narratives of all superintendents acknowledged the ways that

they utilized their relationships with others and built new partnerships to support problem-solving in this context.

Within their narratives, all superintendents discussed partnerships with other public administrators or municipal groups such as the mayor, police department, or the board of health to coordinate efforts and share resources and expertise. The nature and level of collaboration in these partnerships were dependent upon context. For instance, Tim, as an urban superintendent, described daily meetings with the mayor and other municipal department heads. In contrast, superintendents of regional districts discussed having to coordinate across multiple municipalities, which was something under stable conditions they would occasionally do, such as when they present the annual budget.

Superintendents also discussed a variety of professional networks and groups. As opposed to their collaboration with municipal leaders, which was more about accessing specialized expertise or coordinating actions, these groups became a lifeline for overall support, a mechanism that aided in their sensemaking and a sounding board for ideas and problem-solving. Frank described his geographic roundtable as a "critical friend group," while Michael described his superintendent colleagues as "generous with each other" and emphasized their willingness to share. Arlene shared that she "surrounds herself with others going through the same struggle," and Helen stated that "nobody gets it like your colleagues." Although in alignment with the scholarship on crisis leadership, in that each superintendent discussed utilizing these networks for problem-solving, these statements are especially significant because they point to the mental and emotional support that professional networks provide to superintendents and their potential to support their overall well-being, their ongoing development of self-awareness and their ability to understand the perspectives of others. This implies a

potential need to continue to provide access to and strengthen and develop how these groups are structured so that they can continue to provide both technical support for superintendents as well as the emotional support that can also fortify them as leaders and potentially reduce stress and, therefore, burnout.

Lastly, superintendents also described their collaborative relationship with their nurse leader, their administrative team, and other internal groups, such as their school committee or local educator's union. When talking about these groups, they often discussed partnerships, leaning on them and valuing their support which alludes to how they position themselves in relation to them and understand their relationships with them as being essential to their ability to negotiate the uncertain conditions presented by this period successfully. To that end, Susan shared, "I knew I had a team that was going to help me make the right decision or the best decision that we could possibly make and help me carry it out." Ellen similarly stated, "You weren't doing it alone…and that was clutch."

This implies that superintendents must pay critical attention to nurturing relationships within their respective internal groups, such as school committees, union leadership teams, and administrative leadership teams. Further, concerning teams that they play a role in assembling, such as their administrative leadership team, they need to consider how individuals complement each other's strengths and areas for growth and nurture a culture of mutual support.

Guiding Question #2: How did this experience affect superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?

The second guiding question for this study related to how the experience of leading during this period impacted participants' thinking about the nature of leadership and their role as

superintendent. In total, three findings related to this question, each representing common reflection points in the participants' narratives.

Callahan (1966), Kowalski (2001), Brunner et al. (2002), and Kowalski & Björk, 2005 collectively note that the role of the superintendent has evolved through five broadly recognized conceptions tied to what was happening within the larger social, economic, and political context of American society. Further, while each role conception is based on the prioritized expectations of a particular era, as the priorities of the role have shifted and new demands and expectations have emerged, previous conceptions have not been rendered irrelevant (Cuban, 1976) but rather layered upon, and evolved as the positional demands of the superintendent have become more complex and demanding over time.

Current discourse surrounding the superintendency (Brunner, Grogan & Bjork, 2002) and current scholarship on school leadership promote leadership practices that emphasize collaboration, cooperation, and relationship-building and encourage superintendents to utilize organizational frameworks that encourage collective and inclusive leadership structures and practices. This conveys the expectation that they are communicators and collaborators (Kowalski, 2001; Brunner et al., 2002). Further, as part of the report on the most recent AASA decennial study (2021), Tienken asserts the increasing need for school leaders to "provide an education that includes and responds to diverse cultures and familial backgrounds (p. 50)" and suggest that superintendents adopting the perspective of applied social scientist have potential to eradicate injustice from public institutions (Johnson & Fusarelli, 2003; Kowalski, 2011) and ensure that schools are socially just, democratic, and productive (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 1991).

Therefore, in alignment with the current scholarship relating to the role of the superintendent, I will discuss the findings of this study related to how the experience of leading during this period has impacted how superintendents conceive of the role and responsibilities through the lenses of (a) relationship-building and building a foundation of trust; (b) engagement with others to promote learning and growth, and (c) habitation of the political realm and focusing on equity. Table 4 summarizes the alignment between the findings of this study related to guiding question #2 and the discussion focus.

Table 4

Question #2: Alignment Between Findings and Discussion Focus

Question #2: How did this experience affect participating superintendents' conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?	
Finding	Discussion Focus
Finding #6 Superintendents in this study report a renewed appreciation for the interpersonal nature of leadership and a heightened recognition of the foundational importance of trust and relationship-building to their work as leaders	Taking a Relational Orientation Toward Leadership That Builds a Foundation of Trust
Finding #7 Superintendents in this study report a revived understanding of inclusive leadership practices and reaffirmed the value of hearing a variety of stakeholder voices and a commitment to ensuring avenues for expanding stakeholder engagement.	Engaging with Others to Promote Learning and Growth
Finding #8 Superintendents in this study report that the experience of leading during this time has made them more acutely aware of how they inhabit the political space of their role and given them greater confidence to make hard decisions and take risks as they lead change in alignment with their values.	Embracing the Political Realm with a Focus on Equity

A Relational Orientation Toward Leadership That Builds a Foundation of Trust: Discussion of Finding #6

Finding #6 indicates that participants expressed a renewed appreciation for the interpersonal nature of leadership and a heightened recognition of the foundational importance of trust and relationship-building in superintendents' work as leaders. The finding emerged from elements of the participants' narratives that highlighted their reflection on the connection between honest and transparent communication and building trust.

In their narratives, the connection between how, what, and when they engaged in communicative acts with others and the trust it built was a consistent thread. Highlighted in the discussion of participants' experiences, taking a transparent, honest, and consistent approach to communication and utilizing emotional intelligence in their interactions with stakeholders helped superintendents navigate the challenges that they encountered and supported community sensemaking, their own decision-making, and the overall well-being of others. As such, it is not surprising, then, that as they reflected on their experiences, they were thinking about what communication looked like moving forward and how critical attending to relationship-building and maintaining a foundation of trust was to their ongoing work as superintendents.

It is widely recognized in the scholarship on educational leadership that contemporary leaders must attend to the interpersonal aspects of leadership practice placing emphasis on collaboration, cooperation, and relationship-building. As such, scholars such as Bruner et al. (2005) and Mendelson and Stabile (2019) recommend that leaders must consider how they work with and through others and lay a foundation for engagement and problem-solving by creating and promoting a culture grounded in community relationships and mutual respect where

emotions can be recognized and understood. Further, it is also suggested that leaders' ability to foster strong community relationships within the school and with external community members is critical to successfully working toward common goals (Fullan, 2007).

Emotional intelligence and honest, transparent communication as a means of fostering trust and developing relationships are stressed in crisis leadership scholarship. Further, the Relational Leadership and Authentic Leadership Theories, respectively, stress the importance of being responsive, responsible, and accountable to others in everyday interactions (Smit, 2018), ethical behavior, and the development of authentic and trusting relationships with stakeholders (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Seligman, 2002; Starratt, 2004) as contributing to these efforts.

At the heart of relational leadership is the idea of relational integrity, which refers to the quality of relationships that exist between leaders and their stakeholders and recognizing the moral responsibility to work through differences, learn from each other, and encourage growth (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Participant Susan echoed this guidance when she discussed her reflections on the importance of authentic and responsive relationships with stakeholders and how her experiences engaging in complex interactions with others has brought this to the forefront for her as a leader:

> I think relationships are the key, in my opinion, to everything. And again, being the kind of person that people can rely on and being the kind of person that people know, that when you say you're going to do something, you do it. Or if you can't do it, you say, "I can't do it," and why. So, it's…being approachable and being the kind of person that will listen and hear what people have to say, try to put yourself in their shoes. And that's all about building relationships and trusting relationships. And that's what I…that's what I've

always tried to do [but] I think the crisis...crises have made that more...not more apparent...but more necessary, right, just to get through it.

The connection between communication, honesty, trust-building, and the foundational importance of trust were themes present throughout participant narratives, coming up in every interview across both sessions as they discussed their work with stakeholders and their leadership teams. When discussing parents and community, their narratives often centered on how their efforts to maintain open and honest communication built trust in them as leaders. Similarly, when discussing their administrative team, their narrative often centered around their perceptions of how honest and open communication and nurturing an environment that allowed for vulnerability built mutual trust within their teams.

The concept of vulnerability and the experience of allowing themselves to be vulnerable were nuanced aspects of open and honest communication that were also expressed through multiple narratives. Across the narratives of the participants, in their accounts about communication—-whether with parents, the community at large, their school committee, or within their leadership team—their remarks about vulnerability were expressed in two distinct ways: (a) being open about not having all of the answers and (b) sharing their personal experience of uncertainty, impact, or distress. As they discuss both of these forms of vulnerability, there was a recognition that instead of projecting weakness or ineptitude as might have been their previous perception, communicating in these ways helped them have "a better relationship with people" and "gain some credibility for not trying to make it up as you go" and therefore contributed to trust and relationship-building.

This experience and their resulting recognition imply that vulnerability may have an impact on the quality of relationships that leaders build with others and, therefore, on their ability

to successfully engage others in adaptive efforts, such as those required to shift instructional practices and address institutional inequities, which necessitate honest reflection both individually and collectively. This is noteworthy. While the concept of vulnerability is found in some of the popular literature related to leadership and building leadership teams (Brown, 2015), it is not noted in the scholarship explicitly related to school leadership. While emotional intelligence requires that leaders be self-aware and reflective, it does not necessarily require sharing those reflections with others. Therefore, demonstrating vulnerability provides a potential aspect of relational school leadership practice to explore, particularly as it pertains to adaptive work within schools as organizations and the identities of positional leaders and how they perceive of themselves, and others perceive of them.

Engaging with Others to Promote Learning and Growth: Discussion of Finding #7

Finding #7 indicates that in addition to a new appreciation for the interpersonal aspects of leadership and how trusting relationships are fostered between themselves as positional leaders and their communities, participants also expressed a new understanding of inclusive leadership practices and articulated a commitment to ensuring avenues for expanding stakeholder engagement. Narratives related to this finding suggest that participants are contemplating their approach to how they work with and through others toward the goals of their districts. Within their narratives, participants notably emphasized active listening and actively seeking diverse perspectives as critical components of problem-solving. Additionally, there was also recognition of the ways in which creating more "seats at the table," receiving critical feedback and sometimes allowing others to take the lead has strengthened their leadership practice.

The positioning of superintendents between the functional internal workings of schools and their interplay with larger local, state, and national contexts acknowledges schools as

complex systems. The lens of Complexity Leadership Theory helps positional leaders see the need to pay greater attention to understanding the patterns of complexity, enable the conditions for organizational learning, and encourage the context for adaptive leadership (Morrison, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2007). This perspective requires attention to how positional leaders such as superintendents perceive themselves in relationships with others and how they encourage the engagement of stakeholders and the functioning of their leadership teams.

In reflecting on their experiences during this period, participants in this study universally discussed shifts in their thinking about their engagement with their communities and the leadership teams. While the increased demands around parent and community engagement presented challenges for superintendents during this period, it also afforded multiple occasions for exercising skills of understanding diverse perspectives and receiving critical feedback that participants saw as essential to their leadership practice moving forward. Helen expressed the thoughts of multiple participants when she discussed how increased engagement and the communication routines that had been established in response to the health pandemic were laying a foundation for challenging work moving forward. She further acknowledged her realization that becoming more intentional about engaging stakeholders, particularly previously marginalized groups of parents and students, was critical to gaining perspective on these issues.

Perspective-taking is considered a key to social functioning (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Wooten & James, 2008), particularly when confronted with conflicting information and competing demands, as is often the case in school settings (Medelson & Stabile, 2019, Patti et al., 2018). Tienken and Domenech, 2021 noted that about half of the superintendents in their study acknowledged that the largest racial/ethnic minority group in their districts expressed concerns that differ from the racial/ethnic majority in their districts. Therefore, ensuring

continued accessibility for previously marginalized parent subgroups and students to information from their children's schools and opportunities for providing input into decision-making is critical, particularly as schools deepen their involvement in the adaptive work of attending to issues of equity and social justice.

Similarly, superintendents discussed the importance of receiving feedback from their leadership teams and the benefits they experienced from gathering feedback and creating an environment that allowed for critical feedback with a focus on growth. In these narratives, they also expressed that sometimes they could take the position of learner and let others take the lead. This position is also aligned with the scholarship related to complexity leadership that recognizes that enabling capacity of positional leaders to build the capacity to generate knowledge and collectively problem-solve (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) by creating the conditions through which adaptive leadership can emerge throughout their organizations and the notion that leadership of the superintendent should maintain a perspective of working with and through others rather than commanding others (Bruner et al., 2005, p. 226)" and further implies that participants in this study are understanding their role from a relationally interactive perspective.

Embracing the Political Realm with a Focus on Equity: Discussion of Finding #8

Finding #8 indicates that participants, in addition to reconsidering how they are thinking about how they build trust and relationships with stakeholders and engage with them to work toward the goals of their district goals, possessed a growing awareness of the political nature of the superintendent's role and increased confidence to lead change. This finding underscores the urgency indicated in their stories that they become more adept political strategists focused on equity.

By all accounts, the twenty-first-century superintendent is expected to be an educational change agent. This charge demands that leaders are values-driven and participate in the larger political context of their communities. The participants in this study all expressed a clear sense of purpose, both in why they initially aspired to formal educational leadership roles and in why they eventually transitioned into the role of superintendent. While the nuances of their journey varied, each one, in their own way, expressed guiding principles having to do with positively impacting students. That said, as indicated in the narrative accounts associated with participants' experiences of sensemaking and decision-making, they each also recounted instances, within the context of converging crises, of having to negotiate the tension between competing demands and interests associated with student needs and their communities as a whole. What this meant to them at the moment was often described as feeling compelled to prioritize the immediacy of the health and safety issues created by the COVID-19 Pandemic over what was perceived as more long-term adaptive work relating to addressing systemic inequities and issues of social justice.

In discussing these in-the-moment decisions, they portrayed themselves as "just surviving," not being able to "keep any more balls in the air," and sometimes "pausing" work that was underway. That said, when reflecting on their experiences during this period and discussing how they were thinking about their role in and responsibility for helping their communities make sense of the social and racial justice crises and the work that lies ahead, they described closely considering the context of their communities, the political climate and needing to strategically attend to these issues by engaging with stakeholders. This stance aligns with the assertion that superintendents must attend to the current realities of national and local political discourse and engage with their communities around these issues (Tienken, 2021) and the notion that the applied social scientist characterization of the superintendent role, formerly prominent

during the 1950s-1970s, is still relevant and has potential to eradicate injustice from public institutions (Johnson & Fusarelli, 2003; Kowalski, 2011). That said, in discussing this work, there was an acknowledgment on the part of participants in this study of their own need to engage in learning, a commitment to leading with their values, and a recognition that they alone could not lead this work. The awareness of the adaptive and long-term nature of this work was further underscored as they reflected on the dilemma of where to focus and the tendency of issues related to the immediacy of the health pandemic to divert attention from these efforts.

This acknowledgment aligns with the results of the 2020 decennial study (Tienken, 2021), which found that while 89% of participating superintendents reported that conversations about race within their communities were an *extremely important* or *important* factor in ensuring student success, most also felt underprepared to lead these discussions themselves. Further, within this study, the commitment of superintendents, their personal need for reflection and learning, and the desire to engage with others collectively to forward this work speak to their recognition of the adaptive nature of these challenges and the relational orientation necessary to approach them.

Current scholarship further supports the approach of attending to issues of equity and social justice in schools from an adaptive, relational, and authentic lens. For example, Adaptive Leadership Theory (Heifetz, 2004) emphasizes building organizational capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and address adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges, like the issues of equity and social justice that school communities must confront, are complex and not easily remedied because the "necessary knowledge to solve the problem must be created in the act of working on it" (Wagner & Kegan, 2015, p. 18). Because such challenges demand the generation of questions, problem-solving, and solutions that require an assessment of values and new

learning on the part of individuals and the organization in order to grow in new directions (Jayan, Bing & Musa, 2016), they cannot be solved by formal leaders alone and require the collective and coordinated efforts of an organization.

Further, while superintendents have long resisted a characterization as political figures (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995), Tienken (2021) asserts that due to the growing partisan divide (Laloggia, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2017), and the prominence of social justice issues such as institutional racism, economic and educational inequity and the human rights of all individuals in the larger societal context, "superintendents must attend to the current realities of national and local political discourse" (p. 134) and engage with their communities around these issues. In alignment with this assertion, the recognition on the part of superintendents in this study that they must become comfortable with and inhabit the political realm of not just their local communities but potentially within the state and national spheres to forward the work of equity in schools seems noteworthy. Together with how they are thinking about the authentic and relational nature of communication, engagement, and collaboration moving forward, and their need to create and nurture the holding environment of this work implies that, from the perspective of participants in this study, they conceive their role as relationally interactive, politically embedded, and focused on equity.

Recommendations

In this section, the recommendations based on this study are delineated into three categories: (a) recommendations for leadership practice; (b) recommendations for ongoing support and professional development; and c) a discussion of the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Leadership Practice

The findings of this study indicate that superintendents should attend to key aspects of relational and interactive leadership practice as a way to promote trust, collective growth, and learning: (a) communication and engagement practices; and (b) stakeholder engagement and collaborative structures.

Communication and Engagement Practices Promote Trust

The findings of this study support the imperative that superintendents should practice honest, transparent communication and broad stakeholder engagement as means for building trust and relationships within their communities. While the expectation that superintendents must communicate and engage with stakeholders is widely recommended in the scholarship and in their current standards of leadership practice, participants, throughout their narratives, expressed a new understanding or increased awareness of the connection between the content, quality, frequency, and accessibility of their communication with stakeholders and the trust they were able to build and maintain within their communities. Further, there was a recognition that finding avenues for broader engagement with parents and community members, while challenging to manage, further added to the foundation of trust that they were able to build. As trust is a critical element to facilitating the adaptive learning necessitated by the current issues facing schools, superintendents should pay attention to how their practices of communication and engagement build trust in them and the work that lies ahead.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collaborative Structures Promote Growth, and Learning

Superintendents should utilize systems of engagement and interaction and encourage collaborative relationships and practices that promote problem-solving and growth in their communities. Throughout participant narratives, they indicated that they are reflecting on how

they work with and through others toward the goals of their districts, how they strive to bring people together and honor the power of others, and how they engage and collaborate with various stakeholder groups such as school committee, the local teachers' union, parent groups, and their leadership teams both generally and specifically during this period. As such, actively and intentionally nurturing the space for collaboration and problem-solving with and among various groups can also provide a foundation for adaptive learning and problem-solving.

Recommendations for Areas of Ongoing Support and Professional Development

The findings of this study indicate three critical areas of focus for superintendent preparation and ongoing professional development and support: (a) development of skills and knowledge necessary for crisis leadership and management; (b) understanding and development of emotional intelligence; (c) development of skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the political demands of the role; and (d) provide continued access to, support for and strengthening role affinity networks.

Crisis Leadership and Management Skills and Knowledge

Superintendent preparation and ongoing professional development should include crisis leadership and management and skill development in the areas of communication, stakeholder engagement, and emotional intelligence. Scholarship recommends that practicing honest and transparent communication, engaging stakeholders, and utilizing emotional intelligence benefit leadership practice in times of crisis and stability and should be developed before crisis events occur (Cohen et al., 2017; Fairbanks et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 1999; Urick et al., 2021). Therefore, ensuring that superintendents enter the role with practical knowledge of how to establish efficient and effective systems of communication and engagement and are given opportunities to continue developing both their skills and knowledge in these areas is highly recommended for

ensuring that leaders are able to engage their communities and gather the necessary information and feedback to make effective decisions as crises arise.

Understanding and Developing Emotional Intelligence

Understanding and utilizing emotional intelligence was underscored through the narratives of participants, the findings of this study, and the scholarship related to relational and authentic leadership. As such, promoting and developing both understanding and skill related to perspective-taking and self-reflection should be emphasized in leadership preparation and development and ongoing professional learning for superintendents.

Navigating the Political Demands of the Role

Superintendent preparation and ongoing professional development should include skill development that supports their ability to engage with community organizations and navigate the political aspects of the role. While the participants in this study described increased confidence and abilities due to their experiences during this period, there was also a recognition of the importance of their engagement as public administrators in the political arena. Given that most superintendents begin their careers as classroom educators, as they prepare for leadership roles that require greater and greater front-facing community engagement around challenging issues, supporting the development of skills in diplomacy and negotiating contentious issues and conversations while remaining anchored to core values becomes critical to success.

Continued Access and Strengthening Role Affinity Networks

Access to and support for superintendent affinity networks should be continued and strengthened. Throughout participants' narratives, they described benefiting from their relationships with other superintendents through various networked groups. These groups could provide an avenue for ongoing collaborative professional learning, problem-solving, and

emotional support that can help combat the isolation of the superintendent role, fortify them as leaders and potentially reduce stress and, therefore, burnout. Particularly, as superintendents engage in the reflection and sometimes challenging learning necessary to address issues of equity and racial and social justice in schools, these networked groups can provide a safe arena for superintendents' personal engagement and support their ability to facilitate this work with others. They may also be a place to practice and explore the concept of vulnerability in their leadership practice.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited in its overall scope and by the geographic and demographic delimitations of the study. While the convergent crises around which this study was focused were experienced by superintendents nationally, this study was strictly limited to Massachusetts superintendents whose experiences were affected by the particular sociopolitical realities of the region and the regulatory conditions specific to Massachusetts public schools. Expanding this study to understand the experiences of superintendents in multiple regions of the country may give greater insight into the shared experiences of superintendents and how this experience is impacting how they are thinking about their role.

The prior experience of superintendents and their intention to stay in the role was a delimited element of this study by excluding the experiences of new superintendents or those retiring. Expanding this study to include these leaders may deepen the understanding of the experiences of superintendents during this period and provide additional insight into how superintendents think about the role, as well as potentially gain a greater understanding of the support they may need at various stages in their position, provide insight into the motivating factors to remain in or leave either their current position or the role entirely.

Additional areas of future research utilizing targeted demographics could expand upon the findings of this study. This study intentionally did not delimit the race or gender of participants themselves nor the demographic makeup or geographic categorization of their school districts. As such, focused attention on superintendents, differentiated by some of these factors, could provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and how they approach their work as superintendents. For instance, while not represented in the overall findings of this study, participants spoke at times about their experience based on gender and race, how that impacted their interactions with others, and what they needed to be mindful of when approaching communication and collaboration with various stakeholders. Such understanding could provide guidance for support networks and affinity groups for superintendents and efforts to diversify the pool of rising leaders.

Lastly, as stated in the discussion, the concept of vulnerability and the experience of allowing themselves to be vulnerable were nuanced aspects of open and honest communication that were expressed through multiple narratives. As such, the experience of demonstrating vulnerability provides a potential aspect of relational school leadership practice to explore further, particularly as it pertains to adaptive work related to developing cultural humility within schools as organizations and its impact on the trust and relationship building between leaders and various stakeholder groups.

Concluding Statement

This study sought to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally by examining their narratives to understand their experiences of leading during this period and how that experience has affected their conception of their role. This exploration

resulted in eight findings related to the research aims and guiding questions that framed the study.

Notably, the experiences of superintendents during this period were characterized by complex challenges in the areas of sensemaking and decision-making and a critical need to provide transparent communication, engage stakeholders, utilize emotional intelligence, and engage and be collaborative with others. Further, based on these experiences, the participants in this study recognized the need for a relational orientation toward leadership and the importance of building a foundation of trust, the need to engage with others to promote learning and growth within their school communities, and an indication that they were embracing the political aspects of their role with a focus on equity. Taken together, these discussion points imply that as a result of their experiences during this period, they conceive of their role as relationally interactive, politically embedded, and inescapably focused on equity.

On a personal level, I have been deeply impacted both personally and as a leader by the totality of this research experience. Engaging with the ten superintendents who participated in this study through the interview process and the process of interpreting and analyzing their narratives provided me with a more nuanced perspective on the critical importance of communication and community engagement, the challenges and importance of engaging purposefully in issues of equity and inclusivity, and what it means to support students holistically.

Through the narratives of the participating superintendents, I have come to understand the superintendency as an immensely challenging, exhausting, and yet rewarding role uniquely positioned to support others to enact change. While each participant in this study was tired and feeling the bruises of leading during this unprecedented period of time, each was also reflective

and learning, hopeful, thinking forward to possibilities, and resolute in their work. That said, it has also given me a new appreciation of the power of stories, the knowledge locked inside them, and their potential to provoke reflection and learning for both the storyteller and the audience when we engage with honesty, transparency, and authenticity.

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APPENDIX A

Summary of the Sociopolitical Context, Discourse, and Expectations Associated with Historical Conceptions of the School Superintendency

Time	Sociopolitical Context	**Prominent Discourse** Brunner, Grogan & Björk (2002)	**Role Conception** Callahan (1966) Kowalski (2001)	**Current AASA Standards Associated Connected to Historical Conceptions of the Role** Kowalski & Björk, (2005)	**Interface of Current Prioritized Knowledge & Skills, Role Conceptions & AASA Standards** Kowalski & Björk (2005)
1850-1900	Common Schools Westward Expansion Rise of Industrialization State Curriculum	Superintendent is a master Educator	Scholarly Educational Leader	Standard 2: Policy & Governance Standard 6: Instructional Management Standard 7: HR Management	Pedagogy (6) Educational Psychology (6) Curriculum (5) Instructional Supervision (6) Staff Development (6, 7) Ed. Philosophy/History (2)
1900s-1930s	Progressive Era Increased Immigration Industrial Revolution Compulsory Ed. Laws Child Labor Laws WWI	Superintendent is an expert manager	Organizational Manager and Business Executive	Standard 2: Policy & Governance Standard 3: Communication & Community Relations Standard 4: Organizational Management Standard 7: HR Management	School Law (2, 4, 7) Personnel Administration (7) Budget & Finance (4) Facility Maintenance (4) Collective Bargaining (4,7) Public Relations (3, 4)
1930s-1950s	The Great Depression HR Movement The New Deal & Social Security WWII	Superintendent is communicating with the public	Educational Statesman in Democratic Schools	Standard 1: Leadership & District Culture Standard 2: Policy & Governance Standard 3: Communication & Community Relations Standard 8: Values & Ethics of Leadership	Community Relations (3) Collaborative Decision-Making (1,2) Politics (1, 2, 8) Governance (2)
1950s-1970s	Desegregation Civil Rights Movement The Space Race NDEA Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 IDEA Vietnam War		Applied Social Scientist	Standard 1: Leadership & District Culture Standard 4: Organizational Management Standard 5: Curriculum Planning & Development Standard 6: Instructional Management Standard 8: Values & Ethics of Leadership	Qualitative Research (4, 5) Quantitative Research (4, 5) Behavioral Science (1, 8) Measurement & Evaluation (5, 6)
1970s-1980s	Desire for Equal Opportunity for All Title IV End of the Vietnam War	Superintendent is accountable to the public and living with conflict	Communicator	Standard 3: Communication & Community Relations Standard 5: Curriculum Planning & Development Standard 6: Instructional Management Standard 8: Values & Ethics of Leadership	Verbal Communication (3) Written Communication (3) Public Speaking (3) Media Relations (3, 8) Listening (3) Curriculum (5) Instructional Supervision (6)
1980s-1990s	*A Nation at Risk* Push to Raise Instructional Rigor & Educator Expectations	Superintendent is a political strategist who must be focused on excellence			**Knowledge & Skills Crossing Multiple Roles:** Motivation (5, 6, 7) Organizational Theory (1, 2, 7) Organizational Change (1) Leadership Theory (1) Ethical & Moral Administration (8) Technology & Its Application (3, 4 ,6) Diversity & Multiculturalism (1, 3, 8) Human Relations (1, 2)
1990s-2020	Americans w/ Disabilities Act NCLB Act ESSA	Superintendent is a collaborator			

APPENDIX B

Invitation to Superintendents (Email)

Dear Superintendent (Use Title and Name),

My name is Robin Benoit and I am a graduate student at Lesley University where I am completing the requirements for a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. I am seeking participants for a narrative research project seeking to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents and [gatekeeper name] suggested that I reach out to you as someone who might be interested in assisting me in this study.

I am looking for participants that (a) are currently serving in the role of superintendent of a Massachusetts public school system serving grades PreK-12; (b) have served in their current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 school years; and (c) intend to continue working as superintendent for at least two more years.

Participation in this study will require two in-depth interviews between June and August this summer. The first interview will have two parts and will last up to 60 minutes. The first portion of the interview will be our opportunity to get to know each other briefly, establish your understanding about participation and for me to collect any necessary demographic information. The rest of the interview will follow a semi-structured format allowing you to share your experience as a superintendent during the period from March, 2020 until the present time. A second interview will follow at a later date. The purpose of this interview will be to clarify, build upon and explore your responses from the initial interview.

Interviews will be conducted and recorded via Zoom and the recording will be transcribed. Subsequent communication to verify the accuracy of transcription will be via email, phone or Zoom as mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the participant.

Participation is voluntary, confidential, and there will be no personally identifying information about you in the study. Even if you agree to participate, you may withdraw at any time. There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairperson at irb@lesley.edu.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the survey below to express your interest and allow me to determine fit for participation. Follow up contact by me will be made using the contact information you provide at the end of the survey.

[insert link to survey]

You may contact me with any questions via phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via email at rbenoit@lesley.edu. In addition, you may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Paul Naso at pnaso@lesley.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope that you are able to assist me with this valuable

research opportunity.

Sincerely,
Robin Benoit
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
rbenoit@lesely.edu

APPENDIX C

Demographic and Participation Interest Survey

You are being invited to express interest in participating in a research study exploring how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents.

The purpose of this brief questionnaire is to determine your interest in participating in this study and to determine if you meet participation in this study. Any information collected through this initial interest survey will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher.

Clicking "submit" at the end of this questionnaire will constitute consent and your responses will only be seen by the researcher.

After completing the initial interest survey, you are free to choose not to participate in the research in any further aspects of this research project and you may discontinue your participation in this survey at any time by quitting the survey.

1. Are you currently a superintendent in Massachusetts?
    a. Yes
    b. No
2. How many years of experience do you have as a superintendent?
    a. Open Response
3. What year did you begin your current position?
    a. Open Response
4. Do you intend to continue working as a superintendent through both the 2021-2022 & 2022-2023 school years?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Maybe
5. Does your district serve students in all grades, Pre-K-12?

   a. Yes
   b. No

6. Are you interested in being interviewed about your experience as a superintendent during the 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 school years and discussing the impact of this experience on your conceptions of your role and responsibilities as a superintendent and your identity as a leader?
   a. Yes (*This response will go to question 7*)
   b. No (*This response will end the survey*)
   c. Maybe, but I would like more information. (*This response will go to question 9*)
7. Are you available for two, 45-60 minute interview sessions during the summer of 2021?
   a. Yes
   b. No
8. Are you comfortable being interviewed via Zoom?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Maybe
9. Superintendent Name
   a. Open Response
10. What is the name of your school district?
   a. Open Response
11. What is the best way to contact you?
   a. Open Response

APPENDIX D

Letter of Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria:

- You are a superintendent of a Massachusetts public school system serving grades PreK-12
- You have served in your current position for a minimum of the 2018-2019, 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 school years
- You intend to continue working as superintendent for at least two more years

Your participation will require two 45-60 minute oral interviews, conducted via a teleconferencing medium using video and audio elements (Zoom). Each interview will be recorded and transcribed. Once a transcript is made of the recorded interview, you will be provided with a copy to you so you may review and add any additional comments. Additional contact may take place via, email, phone, or Zoom as mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the participant.

The following actions will maintain confidentiality of your responses:

- Identifying details will be kept confidential by the researcher. Data collected will be coded with a pseudonym, the participant's identity will never be revealed by the researcher, and only the researcher will have access to the data collected.
- All electronic data, such as interest survey data, interview recordings, and transcriptions will be saved in a password-protected computer file system.
- A separate, locked file cabinet (in a different location) will hold the list of participants' names, their pseudonyms, and their signed consent forms.
- At the conclusion of the study, all data will be kept for five years and then destroyed.

In addition

- The possible risk, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience to you from participating in this study is minimal. Personal reflection, when thinking about and answering interview questions about professional experiences may cause some slight discomfort.
- No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.
- Your participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. You may refuse to answer any question during the interview process.
- If you choose to terminate your participation, all data collected from you will be destroyed and will not be used by the researcher.
- There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study; however, the information learned from this study may provide valuable understanding about the experiences of Massachusetts' superintendents during this historic period. The results of the study may also expand and strengthen existing knowledge and research regarding leadership practice.

If any problem in connection to the research arises, you can contact the researcher via phone at (XXX)XXX-XXX or via email at rbenoit@lesley.edu. In addition, you may contact my faculty

advisor, Paul Naso at pnaso@lesley.edu.

My signature below affirms that I am 18 years of age or older. My consent to participate has been given of my own free will and that I understand all that is stated above. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_____ _____

Participant Signature Date

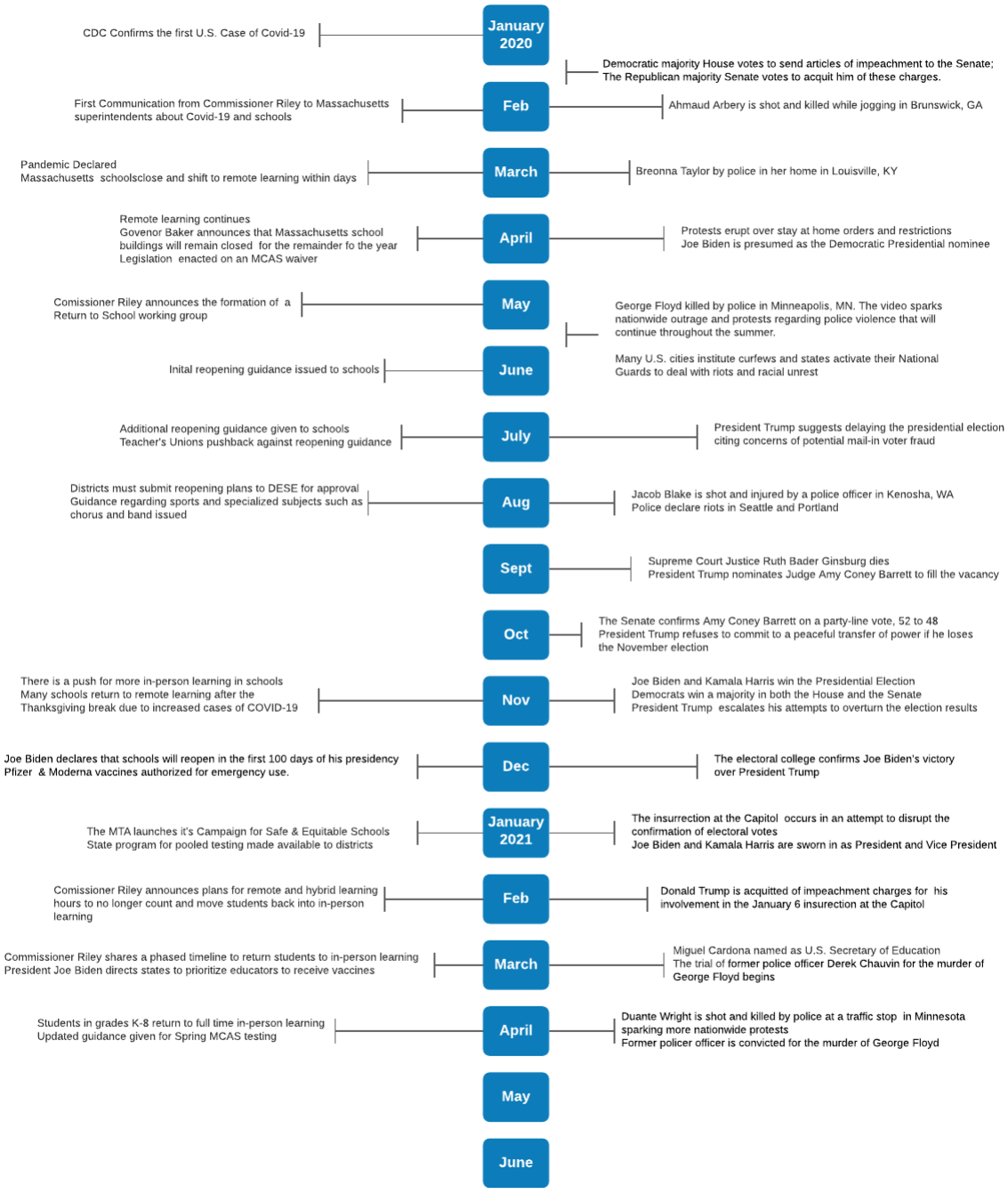
_____ _____

Researcher Signature Date

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairperson at irb@lesley.edu

APPENDIX E

Timeline of Events January 2020-June 2021



APPENDIX F

Interview Protocol

Introduction	My name is Robin Benoit and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Lesley University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this doctoral dissertation study.
Review the purpose of the study and requirements for participation	The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how the convergent crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 and 2021 have affected Massachusetts' school superintendents personally and professionally. Your participation will require two 45-60 sessions to reflect on your experiences of being a superintendent during this critical period and how this experience has affected your conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and your identity as superintendent.
Review of consent to participate	All information is and will be kept anonymous and confidential, with no personally identifying information used. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. With your permission, I will record this session. Afterward, I will provide you a copy of the transcript for your review. May I proceed?

After obtaining the participant's agreement to continue, the formal interview process as follows using the following questions as a guide to address the research questions put forward by this study.

Purpose	**Opening Statement**	
Framing the interview	While I'm speaking to you, I'm going to be referring to the convergence of various crises and issues. Acknowledging that others may come to mind in addition to the ones that I raise, I ask that you at least please consider the pandemic and the expectations placed on schools, the marked political divide and the ongoing movements for racial and social justice as you recall your experiences of the last year and a half.	
Purpose	**Interview Question**	**Probing/Follow-Up Question**
Beginning the interview and building trust	Tell me about your district.	
	Tell me about the road you traveled that brought you to the superintendency.	● Did you always aspire to be a superintendent? ● (If yes) What was it about the role that appealed to you? ● (If no) When did that change?
Addressing the research question: *What was the experience of being a superintendent through the convergent*	Thinking about the convergent issues I described when we began---the pandemic, the deep political divide, and the events related to the call for social and racial justice, what do you recall as moments when you noticed an impact from these issues or when you saw a	● Would you describe the challenges you faced as consistent with those you have faced in the past or different? How so? ● Did you experience unfamiliar expectations for stakeholders? (the state, faculty/staff, families, students, the community) ● Did you function or operate in ways consistent with how you have in the past or

crises and intense social and political climate of 2020 & 2021?"	need to begin to address these issues? What followed? Please say more about how these convergent events affected you. It is especially important for me to hear your explanations of how at the same time you experienced these challenges and tried to manage them. What kinds of learning did you have to facilitate or engage others in to meet the challenges presented in the past year and a half?	did you depart from your past practices? As a leader? As a district? ● Did this require creative or innovative thinking on your part? ● What previous experiences, prior knowledge or skills served you well during this time? ● What new understandings were revealed by these circumstances?
	Tell me about the ways in which you communicated with stakeholders in your district community during this experience? Where did you turn for guidance and support?	● Did you notice any changes to the nature of what and/or how you communicated? ● Did the ways you communicated or how frequently you communicated change? ● What was the nature of your communication with other superintendents during this experience? ● Did you notice any changes to the ways in which and/or how frequently you interacted with other superintendents?
Transitioning the interview	Some people say that the conditions of the past year---the convergence of the pandemic, divisive politics, social and racial injustice---have brought public education to a crossroads. Would you say these experiences have brought public education to a crossroads? Why?/Why not?	● Does this cause you to think differently about the goals you have for your district or for yourself as a leader?
Addressing research question: *How did this experience affect their conception of the role and responsibilities of being a superintendent and their identity as superintendent?*	What has been the impact of this time on you personally? What impact has this experience had on how you perceive or think about yourself as a leader? Have you noticed any changes in the public perceptions towards superintendents as a result of the last year and a half?	● What has this meant for your own learning both personally and professionally? ● What does this learning mean in terms of how your think about your work as a superintendent in relationship to others ● How has the experience of the last year impacted your leadership priorities or the stance that you are willing to take on issues? ● Has this experience changed the ways that your work with various stakeholders in any way?

	Having gone through this experience, do you perceive your role any differently? Have experiences of the past year and a half changed the kind of advice you would give new or aspiring superintendent?	• Do you think that experiences of the last year should cause the public to think differently about schools and superintendents?
Closing the interview	Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences and thoughts with me. Is there anything else about your experience as a superintendent in the last year and a half that would be important for me to know or that you think is important to share?	