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**UNDERSTANDING SUPERINTENDENTS' APPROACHES TO THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTRICT SYSTEMS IN THE CONTEXT OF A CRISIS**

by

Jarad C. Munroe
B.A. May 2011, Virginia State University
M.Ed. August 2018, Old Dominion University

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Approved by:

Karen Sanzo (Chair)

William Owings (Member)

Petros Katsioloudis (Member)

ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING SUPERINTENDENTS' APPROACHES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTRICT SYSTEMS IN THE CONTEXT OF A CRISIS

Jarad C. Munroe
Old Dominion University, 2022
Chair: Dr. Karen Sanzo

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a crisis that district superintendents and their leadership teams had not before experienced. In a matter of weeks, school systems needed to transition away from a traditional learning model, where teaching and learning occurred in a physical classroom, to a virtual learning environment. School districts were provided little time to strategically develop a model to transform their systems to continue to meet student learning goals. The districts were still expected to fully operate, while prioritizing the acquisition of resources that could provide the means for a deliberate shift to establish a virtual learning system. This qualitative study examined how superintendents aligned resources and implemented systematic change during the initial months of COVID-19. Findings show that the voices of the local community stakeholders played the most integral part in identifying the values that primarily influenced how the districts navigated the crisis. Choice was the most prevalent value and, as a result, stakeholders were provided learning offerings in myriad formats. Superintendents considered how their decisions would affect each stakeholder group, as well as every aspect of their organizational structure.

I give all praise and glory to God, my Father in Heaven and to Jesus Christ my Lord and savior.

This journey has strengthened my faith and resolve.

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Ausha, who supported and encouraged me throughout my doctoral journey. When I had reservations about beginning the program, she provided me the motivation and affirmed belief that there was no better time than the present. Ausha, I thank you with sincere love and regard. Your support to offer another pair of eyes, willingness to read the paper aloud for consistency and organization, and overall preparedness to take on more responsibility with the household and our children all contributed to the successful completion of this project.

I thank each of my children, Janelle, Amina, Ellis, Naomi, and Landon. My children motivated me to see this process to completion as I want to be an example to them that anything they endeavor to accomplish in life can be done.

I thank my mother, Margaret, for valuing my education as early as I can remember. She provided me with a foundation which culminated in the completion of this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A school superintendent is commonly expected to make decisions on behalf of the school or district that they serve as a leader. More specifically, the superintendent is an individual who must emphasize or support decisions to be made that are deemed to be in the best interest of the school division as a whole (Bird et al., 2013; Fierke, 2015). The decisions that are made by someone who assumes the role of superintendent is done with his or her personal values, beliefs, and knowledge of a situation, and the intended outcomes that are anticipated when a decision is made (Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Walter et al., 2012). As defined by Robbins and Judge (2012), decision-making is a process that results in a choice between a set of alternative possibilities to attain a desired outcome for a specific environment. The concept of decision-making and a superintendent's process in making decisions can have rippling implications for the district that he or she serves when choices are made and applied to educational organizations based on the holistic and systematic needs that can be implemented to impact the entire school district (Mette & Bengtson, 2015). However, a superintendent thinks to apply a decision within his or her district, it should be guided by a thought process which gives consideration to the complexity of schools as organizations (Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Shaked & Schechter, 2019) and the implications of how decisions will affect the functionality and performance capacity of the school district as a whole (Mette & Bengtson, 2015).

A superintendent who holds beliefs toward systems change will oftentimes determine the feedback that is valued to implement into the framework of the organization as a whole and whom to seek this feedback from (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Feedback loops, as defined in selected literature and conveyed in the context of systems thinking, are the methods in which leadership

can discern the selective feedback that warrants attention in order to determine what aspects of the organization need correction so to maintain the core values that are desirable within and throughout the district (Shoup & Studer, 2010; Shaked & Schechter, 2019).

Superintendents who are systematically inclined can conceptualize strategies which emphasizes the contextually specific issues of his or her school district and how to combat said issues with a framework that provide circumstantial decision-making while continually evaluating the effectiveness of the system as a whole if or when the contextual needs of the district changes (Mette & Bengston, 2015). There is literature that investigates and supports a systems-based thinking approach for a superintendent and their staff to consider by making decisions through an examination of the school district as a whole in order to determine greatest areas of need and to establish and implement systemic interventions that are contextually specific to serving the improvement of the district (Haimes, 2009; Mette & Bengston, 2015; Shaked & Schechter, 2013; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). According to supporting literature, superintendents have the direct capacity to bring forth methodological change that can be implemented on a districtwide scale (Arghode et al., 2020; Aureli & Schino, 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). The research on systems thinking approaches establishes the importance of the superintendent's role in having a clearly defined understanding of his or her school district and to establish feedback loops that, when utilized effectively, can be the cause for maintained excellence within the school district (Ford, 2009; Shaked & Schechter, 2019).

I sought to develop an understanding of the methods and motivations for a superintendent to lead change in his or her district. Specifically, I explored the values and beliefs that guided a superintendent in their work within the context of systems change during a crisis.

Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how superintendents implemented systems thinking to align resources to bring forth change within their respective school district during a crisis. Studies support the importance of systemic learning environments for staff and students in order to increase and improve student achievement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Sirinides & May, 2009). Furthermore, studies also support the significant role of school leadership in the endeavor to implement and practice systems thinking approaches that make it possible for district wide school effectiveness to take place (Dernowska, 2017; Fullan, 2010; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). There are possibilities for success to be had in an individual classroom or even within a school. However, when thinking about success on a district wide scale, transformational change occurs when there is leadership intact who can analyze how the parts of an organization are able to function together comprehensively through purposeful interactions of its parts to operate as a whole (Shaked & Schechter, 2018). This study is significant because it considers superintendents who employed systems thinking under the circumstances provided by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Problem

Many studies support the applied concept of systems thinking toward organizations and how leaders may theoretically influence change through such a process. However, given my research and the timing of COVID-19, I did not come across many studies which discussed if or how systems thinking could guide organizational change as a means of necessity when navigating through a crisis. I sought to determine the necessary philosophy and leadership of a superintendent to enact systems change in order to ensure a successful approach when dealing with a crisis that impacts the organizational structure as a whole.

Purpose of This Study

Although there have been significant contributions in literature surrounding the role of the superintendent in public schools and how a superintendent's tenure is an important factor to the success of the district they serve, I did not find much research that sought to connect the superintendent's use and implementation of a district-wide systems approach from a testimonial perspective of superintendents who have mobilized their values and beliefs to take actionable steps toward utilizing a systems thinking approach with a contextually specific lens which applies during a time of crisis. The purpose of this study was to identify how a number of superintendents have implemented a systems approach that is geared to the perceived needs of the district they served and how the systems approach was executed with an intentionality that transformed the organization during a time of crisis. Specifically, this study sought to comprehend how these superintendents managed to align and mobilize resources available to them to lead their districts through the crisis presented by COVID-19. The connection between the district's transformation toward continuous improvement through a district-wide systems approach and the possibility of whether that success will leave a legacy that outlives the superintendent's tenure within the organization will be examined.

In this study, I sought to determine how superintendents influenced change in their respective districts while navigating their organizations through COVID-19. Also, I aimed to discover whether the change that these superintendents were able to implement is aligned with a systems thinking approach as described by selected literature in my research. I analyzed the values of a contextually specific systems approach and compared the approaches suggested in the literature to the actions taken by the studied superintendents. By conducting interviews with superintendents from a state in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I hoped to gain

information that would provide me a greater understanding of each district's considerations and implementation of systems change during the course of COVID-19.

Research Questions

I sought to understand how superintendents have implemented systems thinking to align resources to bring forth change. Specifically, I intended to discover how systems in crisis have implemented change through a superintendent's leadership. I examined the actionable steps taken to create and sustain a district-wide systems approach within each superintendent's school district after the impact of a crisis. I intended to investigate these claims through the following research questions:

1. How did superintendents lead their school district through a systematic change during a crisis?
2. How does a crisis impact decision-making practices?
3. What are the values and beliefs that undergird the superintendent's actions?

Overview of Research Methodology

This was a qualitative study that examined how the values and beliefs of superintendents guided their leadership to enact change during COVID-19. Furthermore, I sought to discover themes of motivation behind each superintendent participant's desire to enact systems change and how he or she engaged with the system upon their arrival to determine the need for change as the crisis posed from COVID-19 began and evolved over the course of time. Use of a qualitative design with a context specific focus allowed me to make sense and gained meaningful understanding of the experiences and actions taken by the participants in the study to arrive at the current district-wide systems outcomes they experienced (Coyne, 1997).

Participant Selection

The participants for this study were selected through a purposeful sampling technique and are superintendents in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Many of these participants have been recognized for implementing and leading a systems thinking approach to teaching and learning (Creswell, 2009). The selected participants have a pedigree of recognition for their role and responsibility toward upholding a systems thinking approach in the districts that they have served. I sought participants who have received

Each participant has been in a leadership capacity, either as an executive director, deputy superintendent (or assistant superintendent), or as superintendent of schools, prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and served as superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given each participant's experience and understanding of district leadership and systems thinking before and after the onset of COVID-19, each participant was determined to be of value to the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews of each superintendent. The use of interviews provided me with a descriptive understanding of the values, beliefs, and attitudes (Barriball & While, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of my participants as it related to their independent and collective ideology toward the implementation of systems thinking approaches. Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to establish trust with my participants and provided more opportunity for me to attain firsthand knowledge of the experiences that have contributed to the perceived successful implementation of a systems thinking approach and the superintendent's direct involvement in the establishment and maintenance of said systems approaches in the context of a crisis (Creswell, 2013).

Delimitations

There are delimitations of this study that might not prove to be related with qualitative studies of similar topics. I have chosen to include data from 10 mid-Atlantic superintendents to make up the qualitative study for the implementation of a district wide systems approach. The research is developed in the context of how a crisis situation, namely that of the COVID-19 pandemic, has guided each superintendent's practice to apply systems thinking to the school district they currently serve. For this study, I purposefully made efforts to limit the scope of data to 10 school districts that all are within the mid-Atlantic geographic region. Because of the political implications associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, areas of more homogenous thinking may have had less conflict in response to the needs of stakeholders. Thus, the systems approach taken into consideration for this given study might not apply directly with another school system with different needs.

Overview of the Study

This study will be developed through five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces and provides an overview of the position of superintendents and their capacity to impact change through proper mobilization of district resources, both human and capital, to determine the needs of the district he or she serves and put systems in place to ensure that needs are met. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to superintendent leadership through a contextual lens when the organization acts as an organism. As an organism, leadership decision-making affects the interrelated aspects of the organization within its individual schools and as an entire district. The literature reviews the ways in which a superintendent navigates the contextual needs of the organization's various stakeholders to provide a systems thinking framework that promotes continuous growth and improvement. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and research processes that will be used

throughout the study. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data collected for the qualitative study. Chapter 5 provides the findings of the study and draws conclusions from the study for recommendations for future research.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were applied throughout this study:

Feedback Loops - The means of receiving opinions from select stakeholders to improve and refine organizational operations and to find ways to more efficiently and effectively communicate new knowledge among necessary actors (Akbar et al., 2018).

Systems Thinking - The ability to comprehend the relational connectedness between the various parts within an organizational structure (Peters, 2014; Thornton et al., 2004). Systems thinking seeks to ensure all aspects within an organization are structured and ordered to serve a common purpose (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Furthermore, members of a systems thinking organization are aware of the impact that a decision in one department of the organization may have on the entirety of the organization due to the interdependent nature of organizational structures (Thornton et al., 2014).

Complexity Theory - Organizations, such as a school system, can be unpredictable in its behavioral response to change (Anderson, 1999). Complexity theory attempts to explain and predict the way various components of an organization respond to change by identifying the root cause(s) of issues and determining how the organizational environment is being influenced behaviorally by its existing issues and providing the needed change to overcome said problems (Anderson, 1999; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Single-Loop Learning - When the members of an organization, usually those who serve in a leadership capacity, seek to solve a problem by adjusting the actions that are taken to address

the symptoms of an issue but not the root cause of an issue (Argyris & Schon, 1978; ; Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Shih & Huang, 2011; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Double-Loop Learning - Double-loop learning requires members of an organization, particularly those in leadership, to modify their way of thinking toward the values and norms that have previously been utilized to govern the organization (Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Kim et al., 2013). As a result of challenging old assumptions, new systematic values can be implemented to bring forth new meaningful strategies that address and solve the root causes of organizational problems (Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Kim et al., 2013;).

Superintendent - The superintendent is the lead administrator and considered to be the chief executive officer of a school district who is responsible for overseeing the entire district's operations and the implementation of systems that are deemed beneficial to the advancement of the entire organization (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

Scientific Management - The methodical training and development of a worker so that he or she is well equipped to operate efficiently to accomplish tasks in a standardized way (Taylor, 1984).

Sensemaking - When an individual evaluates an organization based on experiences had within the organization and constructs meaningful ideas for the organization as a result (Introna, 2019).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The superintendent is an individual who is entrusted to execute a vision who implements core values in support of curriculum, instruction, and the overall growth in direction for the district he or she leads, which is often measured by the achievement of the student population (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Kelleher, 2002). While student achievement is the ultimate goal of any school district, it is the district initiatives and systematic approach used to implement programs for growth that are most impactful to ensure that student achievement is obtained and sustained (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). There are studies in support of the superintendent as a key figure in establishing district system approaches in order to bring positive and lasting change to the school district that he or she serves (Arghode et al., 2020; Aureli & Schino, 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Research also shows through adequate superintendent leadership, school improvement efforts can be advanced systematically when the organization is viewed as a living organism where in many aspects, both on a macro and micro level, actions are taken to influence change that can have a rippling impact throughout the organization (Aureli & Schino, 2019; Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). The superintendent who has a vision to view the organization holistically and to maintain an effective systems approach that can be applied to the context specific needs of the district will likely be aware of his or her decision-making and the implications of those decisions (Kelleher, 2002). The capacity of a superintendent to think and lead in a way that is warranted by a systems thinking approach can maximize the potential for sustainable change and directional growth for the organization that he or she serves (Kelleher, 2002). Furthermore, as a part of the sustainable improvement process, a superintendent who leads from an authentic standpoint will seek adequate and

necessary feedback loops from appropriate stakeholders to gauge how impactful his or her approaches have been and where change must occur to ensure continuous improvement (Bird et al., 2013).

I explored the historical context of the superintendent and how the position has been pivotal to determine outcomes for a district and the systems that are implemented. Also, I seek to learn how the implementation of a context specific systems thinking approach can impact systems growth and sustainability for a given school district. I focus on contextually specific leadership and the necessity of a systems thinking superintendent to spearhead consideration of the needs of his or her district in the decision-making process. I then synthesize the literature as it pertains to what a systems thinking approach is and how it can be applied from the superintendent perspective toward the district he or she serves. Next, I examine the lens of organizations as organisms (Morgan, 2006). I will investigate how every component of a school organization is interrelated and the actions taken to affect one aspect of an organization can have implications for the entire system. Afterwards, I explore aspects of complexity theory, particularly as it pertains to feedback loops and its ability to provide context specific direction for a superintendent to grow his or her organization. I also explore the sensitive dependence between the implementation of adequate feedback loops and its implication in the direction a superintendent can take an organization (Shaked & Schechter, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). I will then discuss the concept of leadership legacy and the stake in which a systems thinking superintendent should take in aiding the continuity of his or her school district, including adequate knowledge management, establishing an organizational identity which values stability in the superintendency, and knowledge continuity. I conclude this chapter by synthesizing my research and making recommendations.

Historical Development of the Superintendency

The earliest superintendency is a position that began in the mid-1800s out of a perceived need within some localities for someone who could execute ideals set forth by local school boards (Brunner et al., 2001). Needs were determined through a comprehensive view of the local community the school district served which during this time typically shared a common belief in relatively homogeneous neighborhoods (Brunner et al., 2001). Some of the earliest superintendents in the United States were driven by religious doctrine and held the position of superintendency as a “calling” in a similar fashion to clergy in the church (Tyack, 1976). The position itself was not clearly defined (Brunner et al., 2001), and oftentimes those who served as a superintendent led from a scientific management methodology (Morgan, 2006; Tyack, 1976). From a scientific management perspective, there were goals that superintendents and their respective school boards aimed to accomplish and those goals would oftentimes be achieved through routine processes that everyone was expected to follow (Derksen, 2014). These routines were upheld to maintain consistency and efficiency throughout the district and were overseen by administrators in a managerial sense and not from a leadership lens (Derksen, 2014; Morgan, 2006; Tyack, 1976). Administration and the school board would determine the objectives of the organization without consulting staff, and the staff would be tasked with implementing the goals communicated by administration according to the way that they were trained (Morgan, 2006).

As the United States began to experience and acknowledge an expanse of multicultural views, schools became more politically inclined to emphasize government ideals and less centered on religious ideologies which resulted in major implications for the superintendency (Brunner et al., 2002). Not only did inclusiveness of students with different cultural backgrounds lead to a more patriotic and government centered curriculum, but the change of the late 1800s

also resulted in a growth of a more clearly defined superintendency (Brunner et al., 2001; Hansot & Tyack, 1982). The superintendent became entrusted with the authority to make sure students of his or her district were educated to be good citizens with a moral character that was in alignment with democratic ideals (Brunner et al., 2002). Furthermore, with a common movement to assimilate students toward American ideologies and a curriculum that became standardized and centralized to meet this cultural requirement, the role of superintendent also became somewhat of a lead learner (Kowalski, 2005). The superintendent would be tasked with overseeing the educational delivery and progress of the curriculum (Brunner et al., 2001; Tyack, 1976).

Horace Mann & The Common School

The historical responsibilities and expectations of a school superintendent have evolved in the United States over time (Reavis, 1946). Historically, superintendents have exercised authority through a business management lens that requires the executive leader to oversee the daily maintenance and operations of the schools and their respective buildings (Morgan, 2006; Reavis, 1946). Although some of the business management responsibilities remain intact, such as the authority to oversee the management of school buildings and the development of rules to assist in the governance of practices exercised by administrators who serve in those buildings, today's superintendent is required to have a vision for instruction toward student progress and a means to execute this vision to obtain desired district wide outcomes (Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Klocko et al., 2019; Nino, 2018;).

Today's superintendent is tasked to lead through concepts of values, change, and to be involved in the academic growth and success of students more than ever before (Bridges et al., 2019; Klocko et al., 2019). A superintendent's success is judged on their ability to adapt and

apply practices to the specific circumstances the organization is faced with. Success is then measured in the superintendent's capacity to lead his or her district to overcome adversity and to maintain positive change (Bredeson et al., 2011). According to Fuhrman (2003), a superintendent's leadership significantly contributes to determining how a school system responds to the demands and expectations it is faced with. Therefore, the ideals a superintendent emphasizes will be the same concepts that drive the motivations, successes, or failures of the district at large (Bredeson et al., 2011; Fuhrman, 2003; Goetz & Massell, 2005). Furthermore, the values and ideologies which become adopted by a school district will drive the expectations placed upon district wide leadership and the ideals that leaders perceive to be important (Nino, 2018).

The superintendent is a figure who holds a wide range of responsibilities in service to his or her school district (Bird et al., 2013; Bridges et al., 2019; Klocko et al., 2019). As the lead administrator and chief executive officer of a school system, a superintendent can and will be lauded or scrutinized for the performance of the district that he or she serves (Bird et al., 2013). This is because a superintendent is oftentimes given the positional authority to leverage the resources at his or her disposal within the district and is trusted to utilize these resources in a way that drives forward progress for the district as a whole (Bird et al., 2013; Nino, 2018). Put simply, the superintendency is a position whose leadership can influence the outcomes of the school district through the governing practices that he or she values and the way in which resources are leveraged to ensure desired outcomes are achieved while working in agreement of their school board (Bredeson et al., 2011; Shaked & Schechter, 2013).

Organization as an Organism

An organization viewed through the lens of an organism requires a school leader to determine the different aspects of the organization that collectively comprise the social ecology, or relational patterns within and throughout the organization, that can or currently do impact the system as a whole (Arghode et al., 2020; Aureli et al., 2019; Morgan, 2006). Like an organism, organizations constantly experience change (Morgan, 2006). Public schools are organizations that operate within a larger society and, oftentimes, reflect the culture in which a school functions. As a mirror of society, public schools within the United States have experienced demographic shifts throughout American history, which have also contributed to policy modifications that have supported the need for organizational change (Fowler, 2013). To maximize effectiveness of the organization as an organism warrants the development of a standard concept of values that would define the organization and its personal beliefs. This would also establish the organization as one that has a willingness to grow and reflect on what does and does not work in practice for the sustainability of the system as a whole (Arghode et al., 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2013).

School leadership that is cognizant of the parallels found between an organization through the lens of an organism would be thoughtful to consider the aspects of change that impacts their organization, and can make efforts to adapt the organization in the way it responds to its changing environment so that the organization can maintain balance and effective operability no matter what influential factors are evident (Arghode et al., 2020; Dawson, 2014; Morgan, 2006). The process of seeing a school organization through the lens of an organism requires school leaders to know the influential environmental factors found within the school district and similar factors of impact surrounding the school system (Morgan, 2006). The more

cognizant a leader is of the factors which influence the organization, the better equipped he or she can be to make sound decisions when faced with complex problems that will undoubtedly make efforts to interact with the organism, or school system (Morgan, 2006; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Systems Thinking Leadership

Systems thinking is a scientific approach that seeks to ensure all parts within an organization are structured and ordered to serve a common purpose (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Change results in a shift in values and ideologies emphasized in efforts to address the complex issues a district is faced with (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). In an effort to combat challenges, a leader with a systems thinking approach will be more compelled to examine issues and the ways in which those issues impact the entire district (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Through use of a system's thinking approach, district leaders will be able to make connections between the complex issues which plague the school system and can leverage these connections with high expectations that are supported through accountability measures (Lewis et al., 2008; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). The systems thinking approach provides a framework in which leadership can influence change by seeking statistical patterns found within the organization and utilizing a comprehensive approach to make sense of and simplify the complex system for others who are expected to operate successfully within the system (Richmond, 1994). Furthermore, a holistic approach to systems thinking emphasizes the necessity for parts of a system to work together through established networks of interaction and does away with allowing parts of the system to act on its own accord as if it were a separate entity to another part of the system (Senge, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Therefore, the use of a systems thinking approach that is implemented with fidelity can establish an organization in which all its actors are aware of their

common purpose and will compel them to operate within that purpose to serve the overarching goal of the system (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Shaked & Schechter, 2014, 2019).

One of the most important aspects of systems thinking is the communicated and internalized acceptance of the organization's function or purpose (Arnold & Wade, 2015). The commonality that systems thinking promotes through the deliberate effort to interconnect the various parts of an organization to serve a single purpose or objective has a favorable impact on the way the system behaves (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008). The system, or organization, will know how to behave because the actors within the system have a clearly defined objective and said individuals are able to recognize their role within the system (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Shaked & Schechter, 2019;). Furthermore, the objective of the system will provide clarity in how interconnected the various components of the organization are and how they must work together through use of feedback loops to develop effective communication and understanding of each parts role to inspire and impact the organization as a whole and the way the system continues to behave (Hopper & Stave, 2008; Plate & Monroe, 2014;). When all actors comprehend the system's structure and their respective role in maintaining the system's interconnectedness to fulfill the organization's common goal or purpose, then the system can continue to grow in its functionality and capacity to use feedback loops to modify its behavior as the needs of the system grows or changes (Arnold & Wade, 2015).

A holistic view through systems approach would require consideration in how one interaction or change might affect another aspect of an organization (Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Systematically inclined leaders view the organization in its interconnectedness and make determinations based upon how one decision would affect the whole system and whether that

decision would improve the cohesiveness of the organization or make the organizational environment more susceptible to negative environmental influences (Morgan, 2006; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Systems thinking can combat undesired norms and actions that are found in various schools within a district if leadership develops a theory of practice that is consistent with the contextual needs of the school system while garnering buy-in from staff throughout the system to collaborate in change efforts that reform thinking and not just actions (Anderson, 1999; Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Kim et al., 2013;).

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is a practice in which processes are developed within a system to enhance sharing of organizational knowledge (Cheng, 2017). School districts have staff within each school building and in the central administrative office building who have peculiar skill sets, experiences, and overall knowledge in their roles that can be used to affect more stakeholders than just the ones they come across on a daily basis (Cheng, 2017). Individuals will operate alone and keep their expertise to themselves if there is no clearly defined vision or expectation for the sharing of knowledge between actors within an organization (Basile, 2009). Knowledge management practices seek to leverage the use of an organization's various human resources to benefit the entirety of the system and maximize the outcomes within the organization (Cheng, 2017; Hansen et al., 1999). Knowledge management seeks to align the values of sharing and pursuing knowledge among members of a common organization (Fullan, 2010). However, knowledge sharing does not simply happen on a large scale without the active prioritization of such a concept among the actors within an organization (Cheng, 2015, 2017). In a school system, it is up to administrative leadership to set the expectation of knowledge sharing

and to mobilize the effective management of knowledge in a way that will normalize the concept and make it a standard practice within his or her organization (Blackman & Henderson, 2005).

One individual's professional knowledge has minimal value within the larger environment of an organization unless it is identified by other actors within the organization and given context in which said knowledge can be transferred to other staff in a way that can be utilized to benefit and maximize their practices as well (Blackman & Henderson, 2005; Cheng, 2017). The system that actors commonly serve must offer a platform in which knowledge can be transferred between knowers and seekers of knowledge in order to support knowledge management on a larger scale (Blackman & Henderson, 2005). Leadership must see the utility of knowledge as a mechanism to grow the organization and its capacity to enhance the learning and expertise of its actors within the organization (Blackman & Henderson, 2005). An organization whose leadership is willing to foster a successful knowledge management system can provide a platform for his or her staff to experience continuous growth in their professional roles which can develop a greater commitment on behalf of the employee to the organization (Razzaq et al., 2019).

Knowledge Continuity

Districts that are oriented in group culture leadership practices will contribute to an established rapport and trust between the individuals who are involved (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012). The norm of group culture provides an atmosphere where knowledge sharing can become normalized between the participants which is a natural progression of an organization where collaboration is valued (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012; Liebowitz et al., 2008). As a result, collaborative best practices are shared and discovered among group members, which grows the knowledge and capacity of those who are afforded the opportunity to participate in the decision-

making process (Kan, 2019). The growth that occurs within a group culture can be described as a transfer of knowledge, which is the process of growth in knowledgeable practices and behavior on behalf of the group cultural dynamic, which will naturally accommodate an exchange of knowledge between participants (Biron & Hanuka, 2015; Kan, 2019;). Knowledge continuity happens when the consideration of knowledge and what to do with it is deemed as valuable among the most knowledgeable individuals within the organization (Biron & Hanuka, 2015).

Contextually Specific Leadership

Organizations all have contexts. Contexts are the internal and external factors that have collectively influenced the behaviors and outcomes of an organization and its participating actors over time (Brewer et al., 2020; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Educational leaders are influenced by the context in which they are expected to operate within (Brewer et al., 2020) and use the context of the organization to determine the way in which best practices should be leveraged to establish desired outcomes for the school system (Nino, 2018). Proper context will provide understanding, which can allow a leader to adequately consider the strengths and needs of the district they serve (Smith et al., 2020). With context, a leader can then align his or her leadership style and skillset to plan and execute a vision which can more effectively meet the needs of his or her school system and its constituents (Hart, 1993).

The needs of a school district as an organization can be discovered through the intricate examination of the climate and culture found throughout the various work environments the superintendent is responsible to govern (Schein, 2013). An example of district environments that make up the whole of a school system are the individual school buildings and the way in which they are led (or managed) by their respective administrative leaders (Smith et al., 2020). The way in which a building principal operates his or her school can dictate the climate and culture found

within the internal and surrounding community (Dellar, 1998; Gruenert, 2005; Kuperminc et al., 1997).

Context-Responsive Leadership

A leader's approach to guiding their organization is one that is often embedded in and influenced by the organization he or she serves and the context in which leadership is required to operate in to bring forth positive and sustainable change (Bredeson et al., 2011). Organizations are usually well established in the way they are structured and the practices that the staff has become accustomed to long before a new leader arrives (Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Smith et al., 2020). Leaders must operate within organizations that have a storied history with pre-existing norms and expectations whether those aspects have influenced the organization positively or not (Nino, 2018). Becoming acclimated to an organization upon arrival is within a leader's best interest so that he or she can make determinations as to what can remain and what must be done away with to affect positive change (Nino, 2018). A leader's success is predicated on their ability to adapt and apply practices to the specific circumstances the organization presents him or her with (Bredeson et al., 2011). An examination of the contextual needs a leader perceives the organization to have can influence the approaches taken to implement core values in response to the areas where the organization lacks (Bredeson et al., 2011; Fuhrman, 2003).

Context-Based Organizational Culture & Climate

A school district can sometimes foster customs and beliefs that affect school buildings and the people within them if there is not an active concern for, and recognition of a particular culture and climate the school system seeks to create and have replicated throughout the organization as a whole (Smith et al., 2020). Culture and climate are other aspects to the systematic operation of a school district where consideration is required to positively and

sustainably change the organization (Dellar, 1998; Gruenert, 2005; Kuperminc et al., 1997;). Culture and climate are two distinct terms with different meanings as they relate to organizations, yet they are terms that are used synonymously when systems change occurs. To be specific, culture is a combination of the values, beliefs, and norms that people share and use when they work together, and in some instances where they must overcome obstacles that present a challenge to the members who all share the same culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Culture has a direct impact on the common practices that members of an organization will engage in and be influenced by (Gruenert, 2005; Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Culture is when the values that are held true by members within an organization are acted upon as if these actions were normal behavior to expect from a member of the organization (Gruenert, 2005; Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Smith et al., 2020;). As for climate, this is the perceived experiences that various stakeholders have whether it be internal members of the organization or external individuals who have engaged with members of the organization (Dellar, 1998; Kuperminc et al., 1998). The perceptions that individuals who engage within the organization in any capacity have are valid experiences which directly reflect the organization's values and normative practices (Voight et al., 2015).

Culture and climate are related to one another because the terms coincide to provide the real-world norms and values that are believed and practiced by organization members, which can and will impact the direct experiences that are had and believed to be expected from all individuals who happen to come into contact with the organization (Kuperminc et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2020;). Interactions that may occur between a student and staff member or a parent and administrator are real life experiences that will reflect the entire district and not be

considered an isolated incident that is just representative of a few individuals (Dernowska, 2017).

Leadership Legacy

Fierke (2015) defines a legacy to be when someone leaves his or her significant imprint upon an organization where that individual's practices will continue to exist even after that person is no longer with the organization. Legacies ensure that successful practices which were developed during the time a leader was in authority to positively affect their organization will continue even if they are no longer serving said organization (Kan, 2019). The consideration given to maintain practices implemented by a leader who is no longer with the organization he or she once served is a reflection of the enduring influence that he or she was able to establish while in authority (Zacher et al., 2011). A leader's legacy will only be as impactful as his or her level of belief in actively seeking to leave one behind (Zacher et al., 2011). Leaders with high legacy beliefs will seek to take actions that will ensure the positive change they have established will live on by developing the potential in other leaders around them to execute the same vision and mission with fidelity (Nanton, 2011; Zacher et al., 2011).

An appropriate way for an active leader to leave a legacy is for him or her to share and transfer essential knowledge to other trusted individuals within the organization who he or she believes would serve as equally great leaders if given the opportunity (Kan, 2019; Wilhelm & Durst, 2012). This transfer of knowledge can maintain consistent outcomes for the organization due to the development of other leaders who will continue the viability and sustainability of the system he or she serves (Biron & Hanuka, 2015; Kan, 2019; Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Nanton, 2011). Leadership legacies are beneficial because it provides the current leader in authority with the ability to groom others under the same context and culture that he or she has led through

(Nanton, 2011). Therefore, the transfer of knowledge can be strategically imparted with the intent to socially orient other leaders to maintain systems and values that have proven to yield desired outcomes (Fierke, 2015; Nanton, 2011). The explicit sharing of knowledge will provide a competitive advantage to organizations that are committed to a particular vision for the district they serve and will do what is necessary to align resources and internal actors to systematically implement and execute this vision for the sake of sustainability for the organization (Fierke, 2015; Kan, 2019).

Organizational Identity

Organizations are identifiable by the values that are internalized and conveyed to all stakeholders (Liebowitz, 2008). Values are a major contributing factor that influences the behavior of the individuals who serve the organization (Gregory et al., 2009). As an influence, strong organizational values will guide the decisions being made among leadership in support of the maintenance or even furtherance of the organization (Gregory et al., 2009; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). The beliefs and values that are shared within an organization will greatly contribute to the type of culture that is established and will be reflected in the practices of the district in question (Gregory et al., 2009). A school district that is committed to organizational continuity should acknowledge how values affect its ability to achieve and maintain a standard of success (Bourne et al., 2019; Wang & Howell, 2012). Leaders within an organization are figureheads whose position speaks volumes about the values that a school district emphasizes (Bourne et al., 2019). It is through administrative leadership emphasis that certain cultural norms and expectations become prioritized over others, which affects the decision making of other leaders within the organization (Gregory et al., 2019; Kan, 2018). A leader who seeks to create a group culture can provide a cohesiveness in the mentality and approach which is then enacted

and internally motivating for staff within and throughout the organization (Gregory et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 1993).

Group Culture

Gregory et al. (2019) defines a group culture as one that deems the sense of belonging to a group as valuable and that the group dynamic is one where decisions are made with consideration and participation of more than just one individual. The group dynamic provides perspective from numerous individuals to collaboratively handle situations that impact the organization (Leithwood et al., 1993). The premise of a leader engaging in such collaborative problem-solving not only provides more insight from other members within the organization, but it serves as a means for leadership to develop other leaders within his or her staff who gain knowledge and procedural insight (Durst et al., 2012; Leithwood et al., 1993; Wang et al., 2011). The collaborative nature of a group culture will provide staff with a common vision and goal to thrive to collectively achieve (Leithwood et al., 1993). Furthermore, leaders who are inclusive of staff in the problem-solving process will grow others' capacity to be well equipped with applicable knowledge and procedures to solve issues more effectively as they arise (Bourne et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 1993).

Single-Loop Learning vs. Double-Loop Learning Organizations

As Argyris and Schön (1978) state, organizational learning must occur in order to detect and correct the problems that are found within organizations (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). However, Argyris and Schön (1978) also suggest that there are two models of learning that organizations and their leaders can participate in which are single-loop and double-loop learning (Shih & Huang, 2011).

Single-Loop Learning

Single-loop learning is defined as an organizational learning method which seeks to change behaviors of participating staff members to combat a current issue without consideration of the organizational values and norms that have precipitated the problem (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017; Argyris & Schön, 1996). The concept of single-loop learning implements an action strategy on behalf of necessary actors as a mechanism for change from an undesirable circumstance that negatively affects the organization in some aspect of its outcomes (Tagg, 2007). Participants seek to accomplish a specific goal and will make adjustments in their actions but will continue to act through the lens of the organization's existing values and beliefs (Huang et al., 2011). Single-loop learning is often a result of seeking out desired feedback from a specific source and using that feedback to adjust accordingly so that change is implemented, and a course is set for the organization to achieve its goal (Shoup & Studer, 2010; Tagg, 2010). The feedback loop is often most successful when it is sought out and used accordingly for its intended purpose (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

When the leaders of an organization seek to solve a problem by adjusting the actions that are taken as a means to address the issue without completely challenging the assumptions that have led to the problem is to address an issue through single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Huang et al., 2011; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). In the case of a school district, an example may be replacing a failed program that sought to increase student achievement with another program that seeks to accomplish the same endeavor. However, given a single-loop learning model, the actions taken to address the problem are done at a surface level that will address the symptoms of the issues within the organization, but will typically fail to change the deep rooted systemic problems that exist within and throughout the organization (Thornton et al., 2004). Therefore, simply replacing one initiative with another without correcting the system that has

allowed for low student achievement to become commonplace, will only continue to perpetuate the problem because the underlying issue has not yet been addressed and the system has not been assessed in a holistic sense (Huang et al., 2011; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Single-loop learning makes organizations more susceptible to consequential problems where the perceived solutions are short-term and do not truly get to the heart of the underlying issues plaguing the organizational infrastructure (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). When a system acts as “intended,” or the way it is expected to, then single-loop learning can be deemed as an effective measure for an organization to operate within (Tagg, 2010). However, given the complexity of a school organization, the concept of single-loop learning cannot adequately address problems that affect the interrelated subsystems that must coincide to improve and transform an entire organization (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Therefore, double-looped learning would be more appropriate for a complex organization which seeks to establish and maintain a successful system thinking approach (Huang et al., 2011; Kaplan & Owing, 2017; Tagg, 2007, 2010).

Double-Loop Learning

Double-loop learning is in direct contrast to single-loop learning. Double-loop learning is an organizational learning method where “long held assumptions about systems and policies are challenged by questioning existing processes and procedures” (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017, p. 318). Double-loop learning occurs when the members of an organization actively seek to identify the root cause of the organization’s issues (Kaplan et al, 2017). When the root cause is identified, that information is used to change the underlying values of the organization to result in a cultural shift in the ideological thinking of the organization’s actors (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Research supports the concept of double-loop learning as needed when applied toward complex organizations that are susceptible to constantly changing conditions and

circumstances (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Double-loop learning is a mechanism that tests assumptions through strategic and proactive use of feedback to assist organizational leaders in adapting systems to the needs of the environment the organization serves (Kim et al., 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Double-loop learning is a continuous process that is accomplished through receiving public feedback from the various groups that hold a stake in the success of the organization and for the organization's leaders to determine what feedback applies most specifically to identifying the problems that exist within the organization (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). A leader who can properly identify the feedback that is most impactful for organizational change can then use that knowledge to determine what adjustments need to be made and why those adjustments will be impactful toward the organization's intended values and outcomes (Kim et al., 2013; Shoup & Owings, 2010; Tagg, 2010). The goal of double-loop learning is to identify what structures are currently in place that are undesirable and to revise action approaches that are practiced among organizational actors to ensure a more context-appropriate method is in place to warrant positive change (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017; Kaplan & Owings, 2017).

Double-loop learning seeks to not only solve organizational problems, but to shift the way things are done and to ensure that actors understand the rationale behind the change so that it becomes internalized and culturally normalized (Kaplan & Owings, 2017; Kim et al., 2013). Double-loop learning can provide a significant and viable change that combats long standing issues that were perpetuated through untested and often outdated underlying beliefs held by individuals within an organization (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017). Furthermore, a double-loop learning approach will signify that an organization is able to grow and its individuals are continually learning and value change for the sake of meeting the needs of the stakeholders who

the organization seeks to serve (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017). Double-loop learning eschews the fixed mindset of maintaining a traditional outlook in actors' roles, responsibilities, beliefs, and overall core values, if those aspects of their work has done little to nothing to improve the circumstances and environment of the organization that all actors commonly serve (Bredeson et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2011; Kelleher, 2002). The key to this sustainable change is for leadership to value the receipt of genuine feedback from various stakeholders that can be utilized to provide reflection for change in order to ensure that needs of an organization's primary consumers are continuously met (Bird et al., 2013; Kaplan & Owings, 2017).

Development Through Succession Planning

Succession planning ensures continuity of leadership within an organization (Leibman et al., 1996) and through its use, can warrant the long-term sustainability and growth of leadership (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Hart, 1993). Succession plans require a clear identification of a staff member who is a prime candidate to assume a leadership role and has shown his or her capacity to develop in alignment with the core values of the organization he or she serves (Fusarelli et al., 2018). From the time a potential candidate is identified, he or she will be expected to complete a step-by-step process that will grow his or her capacity to lead through intentional and purposeful hands-on training with established administration (Eckert, 2018; Firestone, 1996). As a candidate is cultivated through a series of collaborative development opportunities, they can shift their focus to become a leader through a pipeline that allows them to grow and learn in association with the school district (Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

Succession plans are organized to emphasize an organization's objectives and the character traits each leader is expected to have in order to legitimize a unified push to lead all schools with the same mission and vision (Cohn et al., 2005). In the sense of a systems thinking

district, if ever there were to be anticipation of turnover in the role of the superintendent, then a potential place-bound candidate could be found within the organization if succession plans were incorporated into the systems thinking design (Carlson, 1961; Cohn et al., 2005; Eckert, 2018). Succession plans constitute the need for a formal means to recognize such a staff member so that he or she can be chosen to continue in preparation to move forward in leadership and that it is done strategically to transfer skill and knowledge during his or her training (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Succession plans are contextually specific, meaning there is no inherent best model (Fusarelli et al., 2018), yet a school district must cooperate with its essential administrators to determine the specific steps taken to grow and further promote staff members with the greatest potential for sustained leadership that is modeled after the organization's theoretical framework for leadership development (Eckert, 2018; Hargreaves et al., 2006). An organization with a specified plan will be able to develop leaders who are well vetted and explicitly committed to lead the way the district desires (Eckert, 2018).

Leading Through Crisis

The term *crisis* is defined as a threat with unknown factors that elicits a number of responses from leaders in order to maintain the sustainability of the society or organization they serve (Boin & McConnell 2007). A crisis poses a threat to the values of an organization and its functionality when there is looming uncertainty impeding its operation (Rosenthal et al., 2001; Boin & McConnell, 2007). A crisis is perceived by the conditions of uncertainty that it may have toward threatening the “core values of a society and/or life-sustaining systems in that society” (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020, p. 121). The collective perception of those who are to be impacted by a crisis is what gives an impending uncertainty its legitimized urgency. When

perceptions converge and it becomes apparent that mitigation must be put in place immediately, is when an event is most often deemed a crisis (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020).

Crisis Leadership Management

Crisis leadership management often requires a reexamination of the ideals and values that have governed an organization to ensure that it is able to continue operational effectiveness post-crisis (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Crisis leadership management is not to be confused with emergency leadership management. Emergency situations are different in that they pose an unforeseen circumstance that, although unusual, are predictable and may have a history of occurring within the organization itself or has occurred within other organizations of similar structure for reference in mitigation. Emergency leadership management situations have a history of happening and correlational studies to provide school leaders with actionable mitigation plans to maintain a safe response in the event of it occurring again (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Both a crisis and an emergency situation require action on behalf of leadership, but a crisis cannot be completely prepared for from an operational standpoint in the same way as an emergency through a traditional checklist of pre-planned responses (Crowe, 2013). However, there are different types of crises that can yield varied responses and levels of preparedness.

Types of Crises

As stated by McConnell (2003), there are different classifications of crises. Crises can be sudden or creeping. A *sudden crisis* is one that may onset unexpectedly, but organizational leadership may have a contingency plan in place in the occurrence of a sudden crisis (McConnell, 2003). A sudden crisis can also be classified as a fast-burning crisis, as it occurs quickly, impacts an organization, then is over with (Hart et al., 2001; Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). The significance of a sudden crisis's effect on an organization is more

devastating if the organization was not well prepared for the crisis and could not account for the effect that it would have (Hart et al., 2001). The aspects of the crisis that the organization did not account for during a sudden occurrence will require improvisation from leadership and members of the organization throughout the duration of the conflict (McConnell, 2003).

A *creeping crisis* differs in that it is a situation where precipitating events occur over time, sometimes over the course of years (McConnell, 2003). The slow buildup of a creeping crisis often goes undetected or not completely defined. When the creeping crisis is one that individuals are aware of, it is often only aspects or symptoms of the crisis and not the underlying causes that are understood (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). The seemingly simple symptoms can be easy to address but does not mitigate the greater concern that is still developing (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). While the symptoms of a creeping crisis may be easy to account for, the underlying issues can still go undetected or completely ignored (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020), which can develop into a significant threat to the validity or operability of an organization completely. The concept of a creeping crisis is a process that occurs through the combination of (a) a root cause, (b) an incubation period, and (c) a significant escalation from the known inception of the issue.

Contingency Planning During Crisis

A leader who finds their organization in a crisis is tasked with assessing the situation in order to make sense of the circumstances so that he or she can strategically decide how to mitigate the crisis and collaborate with other leaders when necessary to coordinate the implementation of strategies that alleviate the situation (Boin & McConnell, 2007; Boin & Renaud, 2013). Crises require leadership management to implement procedures centered on mitigation strategies and time-sensitive adaptive responses for any potential issue(s) that might

arise within the school district (<https://www.doe.virginia.gov>). Crises often affect the organization in question, and difficult decisions must be made in order to ensure the organization recovers and/or makes necessary adjustments to restore its equilibrium when it is on the verge of imbalance (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Preparedness for a crisis is determined by the leader's ability to be flexible given the assessment of the situation and how often circumstances change (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Leaders can also prepare through prompt decision-making and communication as the situation evolves or changes (Boin & McConnell, 2007).

Reflection of Crisis Event

A crisis situation will leave a lasting impact on an organization and require reflection to assess aspects of the crisis that were either well mitigated or poorly handled. Crisis provides leaders with perspective that can show how well prepared the organization was to weather unforeseen circumstances, but it will also reveal shortcomings in crisis planning and vulnerabilities of the organization that allowed it to be susceptible to such a crisis. The handling of the situation can result in the reexamination of the structures in place to support preparation and mitigation of future crises. Sometimes, the lasting impact of a crisis can even result in a change of some of the underlying beliefs that are emphasized within the organization and driving factors in the values and daily operations of its structure.

Complexity Theory

Complexity, as it pertains to organizations, is when interdependent factors all contribute to being influential towards the same environment (Aureli et al., 2019; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Complexity theory is the study of complex systems (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Organizations that are highly influenced by values and competing societal interests, such as a school district, are part of a complex system in which the organization is able to influence the environment it is in,

as well as be influenced by the environment itself (Shoup & Studer, 2010, p. 5). Complexity theory is driven by the social interactions within an organization that forms a network of interdependent parts where engagement between internal actors will create self-organization based upon the norms that become commonly practiced and accepted throughout the system (Hatt, 2008). Systems will form naturally through these interactions that are guided by underlying values and beliefs as an organization does act as a living social organism that will evolve and change whether guided by leadership or not (Bateson, 1972). A leader is then needed to make sense of an organization and provide contextual understanding to his or her members in order to facilitate guided change (Mitchell, 2009) while navigating the political landscape to sustainably yield better outcomes for the organization and the way it operates.

Organizations as Living Social Systems

Organizations establish social systems that result in the development of relationships that form between actors within the organization (Bateson, 1972). Organizations are driven by the relationships and interactions between stakeholders within and outside the organization. These relationships create a living social system from which the organization self-organizes and ecosystems form within (Hatt, 2008). Networks and social processes will form within the organization and norms will arise as a result (Morgan, 2006). As networks form and grow, the organizational environment will be influenced through every interaction that takes place (Morgan, 2006). As a social system, an organization will learn norms and assumptions through the network of interactions within and around the organization (Senge, 2006). Underlying norms and assumptions can damage the structure of the organization if it is not bound by clearly defined expectations and values. Furthermore, the interactions among the network of social systems found within the organization can yield consequences for the way the organization is perceived

and in the way it operates (Senge, 2006). Unchecked norms that are not bound by expectations and values will evolve and can begin to affect parts of the system until the organization as a whole is negatively impacted (Bateson, 1972; Morgan, 2006). The complexity of organizations requires them to be bound by values and beliefs that are informed from adequate feedback and made adaptive by effective leadership in order to operate efficiently and sustainably (Mitchell, 2009). Otherwise, without clearly defined systems and expectations as a guide, the organization would self-organize in a way that may or may not be characteristic of a successful and sustainable environment (Bateson, 1972; Morgan, 2006).

Leadership to Sustain Complex Systems

Organizations can be led in different directions and organizational leaders are tasked with exploring the multitude of paths that can be taken and choosing the direction which proves most beneficial to the organization as a whole (Mitchell, 2009). Adequate information is required for a leader to make an informed decision to evaluate his or her organization's strengths and to determine in which ways it will need to change or adapt in order to maintain its effectiveness. A leader must understand the complex issues that his or her organization is faced with in order to become an agent for change who can discontinue norms that have not served the organization's progress in favor of transforming networks to better serve organizational outcomes (Plowman et al., 2007). Prior to implementing change, leaders are to familiarize themselves with the organization and recognize areas of importance to maintain and areas to reframe. Leaders who embed themselves in their organization can interact with the networks and begin to make sense of the elements that work and those that do not prove useful for the goals and objectives that the organization should seek to accomplish (Marion, 2002).

Leaders are to establish an analytical lens to examine the organization to make sense of the interdependent networks and give meaning to the natural occurrences that have become normalized behavior within the organization (Plowman et al., 2007). By directing attention to dominant underlying behaviors and how they have negatively affected the organization, leaders can provide a contextual understanding of the need for change and empower his or her networks to mobilize in consideration of necessary change (Marion, 2002). The complex system begins to stabilize due to its leadership providing the influence and the conditions for necessary reform to occur (Uhl-bien et al., 2007). As a result, agency and buy-in can happen among internal stakeholders to support the leader's belief in change and the system will begin to make small adjustments that can have large implications for sustainability and success (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Politics of Change

Levin (2009) describes politics as, "the vehicle through which our aspirations for education are expressed and eventually...turned into reality" (p. 70). The concept of politics requires those who are in a position of authority to make decisions with the best interest of impacted stakeholders in mind (Levin, 2009). However, politics for change sometimes come at the expense of a targeted timeline, meaning that the individual(s) who orchestrate the change in an organization might desire to see the impact of their policy decisions bear positive outcomes immediately in order to support their continued tenure (Harris, 2009). Also, organizations are highly influenced by competing values and interests, which further contributes to the influential factors that must be taken into consideration by leaders of an organization when making decisions for said organization (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that leaders who have the positional authority to impact change do so with an understanding that

sustained change takes time to implement and execute (Harris, 2009) and are able to give credibility to the necessary strange attractors that compete to be prioritized as the dominant value that should be taken into consideration to be applied to initiatives taken by leadership (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Leaders must be cognizant of the fact that new policies which are intended for positive and sustainable change do not always garner overwhelming support from the stakeholders it is intended to impact but might instead be faced with scrutiny and opposition (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Change in the way an organization operates will only be received and successfully implemented if protectors back it to changes in the system (Shoup & Studer, 2010). A shared sense of solidarity among leadership on a district wide scale throughout an organization can actively support and drive necessary changes to be successful and begin to have legitimacy (Fowler, 2013; Placier, 1993).

Chapter Summary

Superintendents who employ a system thinking approach must make themselves aware of the competing variables that seek to influence the governing values of his or her school district (Kaplan & Owings, 2017). Competing interests can be influential from within or even outside of the organization given the socially complex nature of public-school districts and how easy it can be for individuals to have a vested interest in the outcomes of their local school system (Aureli et al., 2019). School districts are liable to be scrutinized by individuals and groups who hold thoughts and ideas about the school system as an organization (Alsburry & Hackman, 2006). The feedback a superintendent and their district leadership team is willing to listen and respond to, will become the direction in which the organization grows (Aureli et al., 2019; Fowler 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010) Systems thinking approach can strengthen the resolve of school

leadership to know and maintain the importance of structures they already have in place, regardless of the feedback that the organization receives (Shaked & Studer, 2013). However, the same systems thinking leader would be wise to know when feedback warrants change (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Small adjustments can have major implications for positive change outcomes that can become reflected in the practices of the organization (Shaked & Schechter, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Change is sensitively dependent upon the ability of a systems thinking school leader to be reflective of valuable feedback when they receive it, no matter who it is from, and to make necessary and appropriate changes to the structure of the organization based on valued feedback (Shaked & Schechter, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). As the organization adjusts to added values, the superintendent is responsible to ensure the new systems coincide well with the previous systems that were already in place and continue to be upheld (Arghode et al., 2020, Mertkan, 2014; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Furthermore, proper context can drive a superintendent's ability to find and maintain success in his or her district. A superintendent's approach to leadership should not be overly reliant on the successes that he or she has accomplished in previous endeavors with prior districts (Bird et al., 2013). While the core values a superintendent brings with him or her is important, success in a new organizational environment is contingent upon understanding the district he or she now serves and the variables that contribute to the peculiarities and needs of the district more so than the superintendent's personal style of leadership (Bird et al., 2013).

System thinking affirms that solutions are found when values are shared and collectively pursued by the members of an organization (Fullan, 2010). District leadership would be wise to incorporate knowledge management practices among the organization's respective administration and staff members to implement a sustainable system thinking approach

successfully and adequately (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). The antithesis of systems thinking is when knowledge is heralded as an asset to benefit an individual above the organization that he or she serves (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012). Knowledge is valuable and can be transferred between individuals as a mechanism which strengthens the capacity of those who serve the organization to grow. Knowledge can be shared in two ways: (a) explicitly and (b) tacitly (Wang et al., 2011). Explicitly shared knowledge is the processes and routines used in the daily operations of an organization, whereas tacit knowledge is the personalized learned experience that an individual can share from his or her perspective while operating in a particular position of power within the organization (Wang et al., 2011). Both types of knowledge must collectively be disseminated and learned by other individuals in order to provide all staff proper insight to more adequately perform their respective roles and responsibilities in service to a system thinking organization (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2013; Wang et al., 2011). The more structured and systematically considerate an organization's knowledge management is, the more likely it is that a culture will be formed where knowledge sharing becomes a value of the leadership within the organization (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discussed the research questions I intended to answer, as well as the approach I took to conduct my research, my data collection, and analysis methods, and the limitations to my research. I began with my research questions, then I explained my use of a qualitative study. Afterwards, I discussed the selection criteria of my research participants which includes the means in which I collected data and my methods for analyzing the data. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of my research methodology.

Research Questions

The purpose of my study was to better comprehend how a superintendent understands his or her role and responsibility to grow and shape the school district he or she serves and how values have driven decision-making for the betterment and sustainability of the organization during a time of crisis. Specifically, I sought to discover how superintendents' value for systems thinking impacts the way they chose to lead their district during the onset of COVID-19 and if underlying values were put into actionable steps to create and sustain a district wide systems approach. I utilized a qualitative methodology and employed the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews to obtain my data (Seidman, 2006). My research questions are as follows:

1. How did a superintendent lead a school district through a systematic change during a crisis?
2. How does a crisis impact decision-making practices?
3. What are the values and beliefs that undergird the superintendent's actions?

Study Overview

This study uses a qualitative methods approach to identify the personal experiences of superintendents and complexities that they are faced with in leading a school district given the context of change that comes with the ongoing crisis of COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of each superintendent in shaping change and how he or she makes meaningful decisions based on his or her experiences (Seidman, 2006). The commonality presented by COVID-19 provided a context of change which required all participants to address and make necessary adjustments in order to serve the organization that each participant led at the time of the interviews. Participants were selected purposefully based on their (a) comprehensive knowledge of the changes that were required within his or her district at the onset of COVID-19, and (b) a determination of the logistical impact that crises have on the operation of the district from a systematic approach.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research provides greater understanding of the decisions that individuals make based on the contexts they are provided with when actions must take place (Denny & Weckesser, 2019). In this study, I chose to implement a qualitative study with mid-Atlantic superintendents using a grounded theory lens (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory allows the researcher to explore the natural experiences of individuals and the active role that people have in shaping the society that they are a part of (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The concept of grounded theory will allow me to study the conditions surrounding the superintendents and consider the processes that were put in place to seek and emphasize desired change in their district. Grounded theory allows me to take into account the interrelated concepts of the following: (a) conditions within the environment, (b) ways each superintendent makes meaning

of these conditions and come up with resolutions when appointed to head their current district, and (c) the actions taken and continues to take in order to ensure that the vision for sustainability and success is actualized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The qualitative design that is embedded in a grounded theory approach will assist my research and allow me to gain an in-depth understanding as it relates to 10 superintendents and how through a crisis their background before becoming a superintendent was utilized, how they prioritized the needs of both internal and external players, and how they were able to pivot based on feedback in a quickly evolving environment that the pandemic inevitably established. Given my use of a qualitative approach, I intend to provide descriptive insight and information that can explain the rationale behind the decision-making process on behalf of the superintendents and if each of their values have impacted the underlying beliefs and contextual thinking toward a more systematically inclined approach to leading change.

Context of Change

The analysis of numerous superintendents will provide my research with insight in the actionable steps each participating superintendent was able to take in order to get internal and external stakeholders within their school district to mobilize around a common focus in navigating imminent needs during a crisis. Furthermore, I sought to determine whether there was politics involved in each superintendent's endeavor toward transformational change of their school district at the onset of COVID-19 and which actors were necessary to engage with in order to impact systems change to benefit the organization through the circumstances of the crisis. Considering these areas of focus, I was able to understand how each superintendent in this study engaged in systems thinking and why it may have benefitted each district throughout the continual crisis presented by COVID-19.

Participant Selection

The selection of participants was done through purposeful sampling which Patton (1990) describes as the means in selecting individuals who are information-rich and can provide depth to support the research and its intended purpose (Coyne, 1997). In this study, the superintendents selected are information-rich participants because through their leadership, systems thinking approaches have been implemented and used within the school systems they serve. Each participant has been in the position of superintendent of their respective school district at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and held positions of superintendent prior to the beginning of COVID or held a position in which he or she could work closely in alignment with his or her superintendent. All participants have led school systems during the crisis presented by COVID-19. The selection of each participant provides unique insights from individuals who all serve their respective district within the context of an ongoing crisis situation.

Data Collection

In this section, I describe the processes used to collect data for my study. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with each participant. I deemed this approach to be most impactful because it provided me with a method well suited to explore the perceptions of purposefully picked individuals who are expected to provide information that is contextually specific to lived experiences (Barriball & While, 1994). Interviews offered me a comprehensive understanding and ability to evaluate the values, beliefs, and attitudes (Barriball & While, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of my participants as it relates to their independent and collective ideology toward the implementation of systems change. I specifically want to gain insight into how superintendents from various localities in a mid-Atlantic state define the concept of systems thinking and what their role had been in leading each of their school divisions

through change throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and whether each participant perceives said change to be aligned with systems thinking (Biron & Hanuka, 2015; Bourne et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 1993).

Interview questions were predetermined and open-ended to allow for genuine input from participants. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate 30–60 minutes in length. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, all interviews took place remotely via a live video conference with each participant. Field notes were taken during each interview. To capture participant thoughts with complete accuracy, each interview was recorded on a secure device. The live video conference was recorded through a Voice Memo application and uploaded through the Rev Voice Recorder app to provide a transcript of each interview. Prior to each interview, I sought permission from participants before recording.

Interview Protocols

I purposefully selected participants to be interviewed based on (a) the length of time that they have been in their superintendency and (b) based on efforts to incorporate varied participants based on race, age, and gender, so to provide my research with diverse insights and perspectives. I made initial contact with potential participants via email and provided each individual with an overview of the study, why I am seeking their participation, and to ask if each individual would participate in my study. Once a participant agreed, I determined their availability and sought to establish a date and time to hold the interview. Prior to the interview, I presented each participant with a consent form which described the purpose of the study, the way data will be collected, the participant's right to privacy, and the participant's right to withdraw their participation from the study at any time during or after the interview. The consent form was

provided to increase validity of the study and with intent to ease any apprehension that a participant had to being a part of the study.

Each interview was held via Zoom, and I took written field notes while conducting my interview. After each interview, I emailed each participant my transcribed interview for their personal review and for them to provide feedback to make suggested changes or revisions to their responses if desired. My hope in providing such transparency through the process is to increase the level of trust between myself as the researcher and that of each participant in the study (Creswell, 2009). I documented consent from each participant and keep it on file for the duration of the study and after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

I transcribed interviews through Rev software. Data were analyzed through active memoing. I created code notes after interviewing a participant. The code notes offered initial thoughts and impressions of the interview responses and provided me with a preliminary means to label aspects of participant responses into appropriate sub-categories. To further assess interview data, I then used the code notes to construct theoretical notes. The theoretical notes allowed me to summarize research and findings and indicate correlational data between each study participant's desire to enact change in their school district during COVID-19 and whether those ideals aligned to systems thinking. Lastly, I established operational notes to draw comparisons between each participant's approach to enacting change in contrast to what the literature suggests. Determinations were made as to how each superintendent's values and beliefs for their school district have accomplished change during COVID-19 and whether aspects of systems thinking leadership approaches were incorporated into each participant's change

process. Categories were placed into three areas for analysis: (a) Underlying Values & Beliefs; (b) Use of Feedback Loops; and (c) Mobilizing Change.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study conducted through data collection and analysis from school superintendents within 10 public school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. The findings highlight the experience of each superintendent while leading their school district through a crisis in the context of COVID-19 and the systems that were implemented to guide decision making during such a time. This study was guided by three research questions:

1. How did superintendents lead their school district through a systematic change during a crisis?
2. How does a crisis impact decision-making practices?
3. What are the values and beliefs that undergird the superintendent's actions?

The findings presented in this chapter are a representation of a qualitative study gathered from 10 interviews conducted with school superintendents within a mid-Atlantic state. Each interview lasted approximately 1-hour and each participant interviewed via Zoom.

Purpose of Study

The research design had three areas that would be analyzed. First, was to understand each superintendent's perceived responsibility to respond to the crisis at hand and the extent to which system thinking was implemented as a means for providing shared and collectively pursued solutions among members within the organization. Second, was to explore the use of feedback loops and to determine the extent to which feedback was sought and whether feedback has led to viable and sustained change under each superintendent's leadership in school districts that now must be run with COVID-19 in mind. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews of 10 participating superintendents. Furthermore, the transcribed recordings were then interpreted

and disseminated using categorical and summative memoing. Lastly, I analyzed the causal relationship between each participating superintendent's leadership approach toward system-wide change and whether the approach toward implementing change is directly related to a desire to leave a legacy.

Chapter Overview

Section 1 will highlight each participating superintendent and the experiences that have led to their advancement to being a superintendent. A profile will be compiled to provide the demographics which make up each participant in the study. Demographics include (a) a pseudonym for each participant, (b) a denoted gender of male or female, (c) each participant's identified race, (d) how long (in years) each participant has served in his or her current role of superintendent at the time of the interview, (e) the total number of students served in the district, and (f) whether the superintendent serves a high rate of students who are economically disadvantaged.

Section 2 details the commonalities in the way each superintendent described a crisis and how COVID-19 has impacted each participant's perceived role of a superintendent. Furthermore, each superintendent discussed how his or her strategic approach to leading was affected given the disruption that the crisis of COVID-19 presented to the operation of each district. Each superintendent discussed leading through crisis and the need to reexamine the ideals and values that have governed their approach as an educational leader to ensure that their organization was able to continue operational effectiveness. While a reexamination was needed, that does not necessarily mean that a complete overhaul in each superintendent's leadership approach was required. I explore to what extent adjustments needed to be made for each participant to describe

feeling as though they were able to successfully navigate through the uncertainties that the pandemic presented at the onset of COVID-19.

In Section 3 I discuss the complexities that accompany leading as a superintendent. An examination of competing interest groups was weighed and explored how each superintendent had to consider input from various stakeholders when making decisions during COVID-19. Superintendents discussed the increased feedback that COVID-19 produced among various stakeholders. Community members who did not have a voice in the realm of K-12 education before the crisis now provided input that mattered. Superintendents were now tasked with the presentation of more information and knowledge than ever before during their leadership tenure and were required to take the feedback and make decisions that were in the best interest of the population that they served. While teaching and learning have always been the primary focus of all school leaders, the participating superintendents spoke on the importance of yielding to the input of community feedback that was deeply entrenched in learning and understanding COVID-19 mitigation and safety protocols. Safety now preceded learning and could not be overlooked as a priority that influenced decision-making among each superintendent and his or her division leadership team. The complication that COVID added is considered and explored as an obstacle to address in order to continue running a school district efficiently and effectively. Adjustments that were deemed necessary to division operations are investigated.

Section 4 evaluates the personal values of each superintendent and that of their school district. The superintendent has the capacity to impact change on a system-wide scale. Given the authority to do so, consideration is given to whether the participants are influenced by their capacity to impact change. The ability to leave a legacy is asked of each superintendent and a

determination is made as to whether or how each individual's approach to leadership is influenced by the potential to leave a lasting mark through distinct change processes.

Superintendent Backgrounds

I met with 10 mid-Atlantic superintendents via Zoom from their district offices and within their homes. Each participant spoke freely and comfortably about their journey toward becoming a district superintendent, their approach to leadership within their current role, and spoke in great detail about their lived experiences while leading through COVID. Every superintendent leads a school district located in a mid-Atlantic state. Of the 10 superintendents, three identify as African American with the remainder identifying as White. Three identify as female and seven identify as male. See Table 1 for further demographic information of each superintendent.

Table 1

Superintendent Demographics

Name	Gender	Race	Total Students	Years in Role
Anthony	M	White	2,070	2
Shannon	F	Black	3,550	3
Sean	M	White	12,750	8
William	M	Black	13,870	3
Martina	F	Black	4,050	3
Heather	F	White	11,300	5
Nicholas	M	White	3,040	3
Spencer	M	White	65,600	8
Vance	M	White	4,160	6
James	M	White	19,220	7

The profiles that follow offer more insight into each superintendent's background and how each participant's career culminated in a superintendent role.

Anthony

Anthony served the same school system for 30 years of his career. Anthony began teaching in a traditional middle school (Grades 6-8) setting in a small county in North Carolina. While teaching, Anthony took up coaching and became an athletic director. Anthony credits his principal of the time, who spoke with him about his potential to serve in a leadership role, gave him the nudge to pursue his master's degree in leadership. Heeding his principal's advice, Anthony pursued his master's degree and shortly after finishing that program, Anthony was promoted to assistant principal and served under the very principal who nudged him to consider administration. Anthony discussed his transition to becoming a principal of a newly constructed high school that opened within the district and he served in that role for the next 11 years of his career. Anthony then served as the Director of Secondary Instruction, Chief Academic Officer, Assistant Superintendent for Operations, and Assistant Superintendent for Instruction.

Upon reaching 30 years and being eligible to retire, Anthony realized he was not quite ready to do so and seized the opportunity to serve as the Superintendent in his current position where he has been for the last 2 years. Anthony states that serving in education is his passion and that his decision to relocate for the superintendency was done because "it doesn't have to be in a particular community. The work is important wherever you do it." Anthony assumed the role of Superintendent to begin the 2020 school year being aware of the unprecedented challenges he would be faced with in leading a district during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shannon

Shannon has served the same district for 40 years—the entirety of her professional career. Shannon grew up in the city she serves, matriculated through the city’s public school system and knew that she wanted to return home to teach. Shannon’s journey to enter administration began as she expressed during 1981 that there were discussions in educational circles that “they were suggesting nationally that all teachers would need master’s degrees.” Shannon explained that within that same school year she saw postcards from one of the surrounding universities and “thought, wow, this will enable me to be qualified if [earning a master’s degree] becomes a mandate.” Shannon earned her master’s in curriculum and instruction and upon completion of her coursework, states that an opportunity arose in which she served as an Administrator’s Assistant that was a quasi-administrative role. Shannon was afforded more time in which she would perform certain responsibilities similar to that of an assistant principal, but the position required that she still taught. Shannon’s enjoyment of the administrative side of being an administrative assistant is what prompted her to return to school again to pursue an endorsement in administration.

Upon receipt of her administrative endorsement, Shannon then began to further her career in positions such as director of instruction, director of testing, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and personnel. Shannon was convinced by her superintendent to pursue her doctorate while she held the position of assistant superintendent of personnel. Shannon also credits her superior for pushing her to further her career, as earning her doctorate assisted in her appointment to becoming deputy superintendent and ultimately culminated in Shannon being named superintendent to begin the 2019-2020 school year. Shannon’s journey is unique in that she became superintendent only a short while before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sean

Sean had aspirations to begin his career in television and radio communications and earned his undergraduate degree in said field. However, he stated that he “really struggled with connections trying to break into TV and radio.” Sean then applied to be an instructional assistant where he secured his first job in the field of education providing assistance for students with Autism in a self-contained setting. Sean discussed his time as an instructional assistant:

One of them was my student. I was a one to one. He was a non-verbal student. I was trying to help him with his hygiene. He broke his toothbrush in half and proceeded to punch me right in the face. He split my lip, the whole deal, literally 30 minutes on the job. I learned so much from that lesson about working with children, that when I went home, I bought a book on how to teach sign language. I ended up teaching that child 180 signs in like 5 months. I made a big difference in the kid’s life.

Sean’s introductory experience in education did not deter him. In fact, it prompted him to further his education through a pathway to teaching program. Sean continued to serve through special education. Sean’s professional journey continued as a special education teacher and he eventually earned promotions as a behavior specialist, instructional specialist, and then a principal in the same building where he initially worked as an instructional assistant. Sean spoke on his opportunity to transition to a new district as a special education director. It was in this position that Sean credits for his growth. Sean stated:

[It was] a great training ground for me. I got to touch so many different parts of special education being a special education director. You get to touch instruction, budget, law, human resources, and every aspect of the organization, transportation, you name it.

Sean began his doctoral degree while the special education director and met another gentleman in his cohort who became a superintendent in Georgia upon graduating. The superintendent contacted Sean and asked if he would consider working as one of his zone superintendents. Sean accepted the position and worked in that capacity for nearly 4 years. It was at the conclusion of his second year that Sean states that he knew he was ready and desired to be a superintendent:

After the second year I knew I was ready. I knew I wanted to jump into the superintendency because [the superintendent] had given me so many experiences. He put me in so many difficult situations politically with board members that I had to figure out. I had to have a ton of very difficult [human resources] situations. I had 24 principals. I had to replace 12 in 2 years. I had 30 something [assistant principals]. I had to replace like 18 of them in 2 years in the whole division. In the whole district. We got rid of 70 principals out of a hundred. It was a massive turnaround situation. And quite honestly, that just gave me the confidence to do the work because we were reshaping and reframing the district to be student driven. It was about kids.

Sean began applying to be a superintendent during his fourth year as a zone superintendent. His current assignment as superintendent is his first and he has continued to serve for the last 8 years.

William

William has been in the field of education for 26 years where he has served six different school districts in various capacities. He has become known for his ability to yield high student achievement data in every capacity which he has served. William taught for 10 years in both elementary and secondary schools. William states that he values “an environment where teachers

have great energy and students are actively engaged [in the learning],” which is what has contributed to his success. William also coached athletics during his time in high school where his approach in coaching was similar to that of teaching and also yielded successful results. As William moved into administration, he began as a dean of students at a high school. He served in that capacity for one year then became an assistant principal. William served as an assistant principal for 2 years but spent a year a piece in two different school districts.

Once William received his opportunity to lead as a principal, he managed to lead school improvement outcomes significantly by emphasizing increased minority student achievement and bridging the academic achievement gap by promoting that more students of color earn placements in advanced and honors classes. The successes that the high school achieved and maintained while William led as principal resulted in his promotion as the director of administrative services. After 3 years, William became the chief of schools in another district where he helped to gain and sustain 100% accreditation rate during every year of his tenure. William’s desire to become a superintendent was actualized in 2019 where he cites having only had “5 normal months before COVID began,” which has since required an intentional and strategic adjustment on his and the school district’s behalf to ensure that his high expectations for achievement does continue.

Martina

Martina has been in the field of education for 34 years where she has served in different capacities in various states. Martina speaks to her pathway of becoming a superintendent as traditional. Martina spent the first 10 years of her career teaching high school English and debate in Louisiana. Martina transitioned to becoming an associate principal of a high school in Texas for 1 year before becoming a principal of a middle level school consisting of fifth- and sixth-

grade students. Martina spent 4 years as a principal in what she identified as a building where she and her staff worked together to turn it around. It was Martina's efforts and success as a principal that she credits for forwarding her career quickly thereafter. Martina then became a director and eventually an assistant superintendent.

While an assistant superintendent, Martina was recruited to participate in the Broad Superintendent's Academy, a 10-month program designed to prepare current and aspiring executive leaders to grow in their readiness to lead an urban public school system. Through the connections made while in the Broad Superintendent's Academy, Martina was offered a position in Pennsylvania to be a chief academic officer. Martina then transitioned to North Carolina where she was asked to serve as the state director of K-12 curriculum and instruction where she served in that position for four years until she became a superintendent of a local school district in North Carolina. Martina served her first stint as a superintendent for 3 years before returning to the state department to be a chief academic officer for 3 years. Martina's second stint as a superintendent began in 2019 where she led for nine months before COVID began.

Heather

Heather's journey to becoming a superintendent was unlike many of the other participants. Heather initially did not have aspirations to become a superintendent. Every step in the journey was intentional—Heather taught for 18 years and became a school-based administrator for 2 years. Heather's trajectory continued as she became promoted within a new district to the head of a leadership development program and shortly transitioned to director of organizational development. From there, Heather worked for another district where she served as the chief academic officer and chief accountability officer for 5 years. Heather then received another promotion to become deputy superintendent to the school district which she currently

serves as superintendent. However, when asked if the superintendency was always an active goal, Heather responded:

That was never a goal. I was a very happy number two who liked to do the work and not get involved in the politics. I was very much very happy in a number two role, supporting the person and doing all of the work and making things happen in an organization. But then when the superintendent left quite quickly, I ended up as interim for almost the year. Then I decided that maybe I would go at it.

Heather did state her appreciation for the school board members who were in place at the time of her appointment to superintendent due to their belief in her to lead in that role and continue to push the vision of the school district forward. Heather had been a superintendent for her school district for a few years before COVID began. Therefore, Heather had an opportunity to become established as the superintendent before the onset of the crisis.

Nicholas

Nicholas has been in education for 25 years. Within that time span he has served two school districts. Nicholas' first school district was the one in which he experienced many positions of leadership. Nicholas served in what he classified as a large urban school district as an elementary teacher who became an assistant principal, principal, executive director of school leadership, chief academic officer, and interim acting superintendent, in that order. Nicholas actually spoke to serving as the chief academic officer while being the interim acting superintendent. It was not until he pursued the superintendency that Nicholas began serving the district which he is currently positioned. Nicholas credits his successful journey to those who saw his potential and states the importance that public education has had on him:

My story is that public education saved my life. I'm a first-generation college graduate, [who] went on to get my master's and doctorate. So, my life has all been about giving back. Somebody opened a door for me, so I try to open doors for other people.

Nicholas spoke to his desire to serve others throughout his participation in the study as his motivation to be a difference maker through his decision-making. Nicholas was appointed to his current position of superintendent in July 2019, which provided him with 7 months before COVID presented a crisis situation that would require a shift in some of the approaches that were initially planned and prepared for.

Spencer

Spencer has been in public education for 28 years. His professional journey began as an elective teacher. He decided that he wanted to pursue a career in administration which prompted him to earn his doctorate degree in leadership. During his pursuit of his degree, Spencer took an internship opportunity in a new school district which led to his eventual appointment to becoming an assistant principal and then principal. Spencer served as a principal for 8 years and then transitioned to a curriculum director in a neighboring county. Spencer then had an opportunity to become the chief high schools officer in a locality in Texas where he “served on the superintendent’s cabinet running the 37 comprehensive high schools in the city of Houston.”

From there, Spencer applied to become a superintendent in a local school district in North Carolina and served in that capacity for 3 years before eventually becoming the superintendent in his current school system where he has served for 8 years. Spencer has been credited with his vision to launch a division wide digital learning initiative during his first stint as superintendent which he brought to his current position. It was such vision that Spencer states assisted significantly with the transition brought about with the COVID pandemic. Being a digitally

driven district eased the transition to being placed in a circumstance where students were expected to learn exclusively in online formats.

Vance

Vance has been in education for 20 years. During this time, he has served in positions which include being a secondary school math teacher, a coach of athletics, a high school assistant principal, a middle school principal and a deputy superintendent. All of the prior experience Vance has gained through these positions have been earned through localities in North Carolina. Vance is a supporter of continuing to push innovative means to support teaching and learning. He will also use this primary value to support and grow leadership in various capacities throughout the district. Vance is value driven and even with a crisis such as COVID, he spoke to reprioritizing which values would be propelled to the forefront and which would not be as immediately implemented and supported. This did not suggest that the values would need to change. Standing by values and using them to make decisions is what Vance has credited as being a means to the success he has experienced in his career.

James

James is the only participant who is currently a deputy superintendent who spoke on behalf of the superintendent. John spoke from a perspective of someone who is very much knowledgeable of what has occurred during his superintendent's tenure and how the district has navigated the COVID pandemic.

James has been in the field of education for 27 years. During his time in the profession, he has served as an elementary teacher for 4 years, a middle school assistant principal for 3 years, a middle school principal for 3 years, then a building principal in a Grades 4-6 school for 4 years. These promotions all occurred within the district that James currently serves as deputy

superintendent. James states that he did leave to a neighboring district to be a principal for three years before returning to his first school district, now to serve as an executive director of school leadership. After being in that position for 4 years, James then became deputy superintendent which is a capacity he has been in for 7 years.

James did mention his school superintendent as one who leads from a systems approach which greatly assisted with the transition brought about by the COVID pandemic.

Leading Through Crisis

The data collected among the superintendents interviewed generally consisted of each participant stating the need for a shift in their strategic approach to leading through COVID-19. During interviews, there were three needs in the reprioritization of a strategic approach that was commonly brought up by multiple superintendents (see Table 2). The most commonly discussed needs were as follows: (1) a need for more technological resources to assist in the shift to a digital only approach to instruction, (2) the importance of collaboration among various staff to assist in the decision-making process, and (3) enhanced need for communication with various stakeholders.

Technology Needs

COVID-19 brought forth an immediate need and sense of urgency for the integration of technology into teaching and learning. Six of the 10 participants explicitly stated that they were not prepared to have their teaching staff deliver instruction in a digital environment solely based on the fact that prior to the pandemic, students were not provided one-to-one devices. Therefore, an immediate strategic priority was to secure the necessary technology to ensure that students were able to learn while still being connected to their teachers in synchronous and asynchronous formats. Mobilization of financial resources that were already available to spend as part of the

district budget was now required to secure computers for students to be issued to take home. Meanwhile, districts that were not afforded the financial ability to provide the technology resources on their own had to ask their local government to support their endeavor to have all students with devices to support learning in an online format. Each participant who states the need for students to have a device were able to supply the necessary technology in a matter of weeks.

Hotspots

All districts, including the ones that were already providing one to one technology for students prior to COVID-19, needed to ensure that every student was able to access their learning materials online because some students did not have WIFI in their homes. As Nicholas stated during his interview:

We really did a lot of that, even though we were one to one, it was almost in name only. Every kid had a device, but really that device wasn't highly utilized. [Our district] is a place where about 60% of families have access to high-speed internet. And I use that term loosely because the high-speed internet I was used to in [my former district] and high-speed internet [in my current district] are two very different things. We had a large portion of our population that didn't have access and we've talked about that for years, but in the pandemic, we had to find the solution. So, we got very creative with hotspots. We found devices that did work in areas [where] other devices didn't work. We parked mobile hotspot buses all over the county. We were able to close the gap in that problem in weeks when we sat around a table for years and didn't do anything.

Nicholas was not the only superintendent who stated the need to find ways in being creative to supply WIFI access to students and staff. William also stated the need to provide WIFI hotspots

on buses and in school parking lots while some districts ensured that students were provided hot spots in their homes upon request.

Curriculum & Teaching

Connectivity was the first priority but ensuring that effective teaching was still occurring was just as important. Participating superintendents spoke of the need for (a) virtual curriculums to be in place, and (b) teachers to become adept in providing instruction in a completely virtual learning environment.

Eight of the participants stated the need to develop learning plans or curriculums that were accessible and deliverable on a virtual platform. There was a concerted effort to establish a system of learning that could be achieved without physically having teachers in front of their students. Spencer stated:

We needed to think quickly about how to create a second system of learning. A system that's done, not in school, but at home, and how do we put supports around children and teachers to make sure that that could happen?

So, while the objective was not to get rid of the systems that were put in place and yielded successes in a traditional school setting, the system needed to be recreated to serve the learning environment that everyone now found themselves in. District curriculum teams were tasked with transferring lessons onto mediums that could be taught virtually and provided interactivity for students and staff. Various online learning platforms were evaluated by each superintendent and their district leadership teams, and determinations were made as to which were deemed appropriate to provide instruction in a way that met the needs of teaching and learning standards for the district.

The virtual curriculum was well established for two other participants as students in their districts were already using one-to-one devices and were expected to interact with their devices while in school and when at home. For those districts, their learning plans already accommodated the potential for an extended absence from a physical classroom even if district leadership did not foresee the crisis that COVID-19 presented. Therefore, as the media suggested that the crisis presented a prolonged period of school closure, the superintendents of these two districts and their district administration ensured that their websites would be updated to allow for more accessibility to the virtual teaching and learning tools available to students and staff. The superintendents of these school systems valued the importance of continuing learning at home given such circumstances that may have been presented for inclement weather. However, unbeknownst to these leaders, their value of virtual learning plans benefitted their district systems approach to make circumstantial adjustments in order to continue learning online without a major shift away from instructional initiatives that were already emphasized.

Collaborative Decision Making

Collaboration became more valued and deemed as a necessity with the constant experience in change and uncertainty in how long the district systems in use would be completely applicable with the virtual learning model that was now required due to COVID-19. The expertise of internal stakeholders was now tapped in ways which some district leadership teams previously did not require. Each participant discussed collaborative efforts that were put in place and spanned a number of different staff members, from district leadership team members to building administrators, and in some cases teachers.

Every district leadership team was now more communicative in their approach to leading their district through the uncharted educational landscape that COVID-19 presented. Where

some superintendents were used to holding monthly meetings with their district leaders, there was now a need to do so more regularly, on a weekly basis and sometimes more frequently given the evolution of data that was being discovered during the pandemic. While tasks were delegated to district leaders, it was imperative that everyone on the team was aware of decisions that were being recommended and those decisions were made in the best interest of every individual that would be impacted. Now, the impact was not only based on how decisions would affect student learning outcomes, but these decisions also carried a burden of maintaining public safety and wellness of the entire community that the school district served. Participants knew that decisions would not be supported by everyone, but given the collaborative efforts of district leadership teams to have COVID-19 research and response teams, and to have district leaders all offer their insights before decisions were made, this provided more knowledgeable and sound decision-making on behalf of the superintendents.

There was also common involvement of teachers in collaborative efforts to prepare for the virtual transition of teaching and learning. Most participants stated the level of involvement members of their teaching staff had in assisting the transition. The most notable involvement teachers had was to provide training support to their colleagues in preparation for online teaching and learning. Some districts used teachers to assist the district curriculum team in developing the online lessons that were used to provide instruction while many of the participants stated that they sought their most technologically savvy teachers and asked that they provide training in the use of new platforms and digital delivery of instruction that would take place for the foreseeable future. Adept teachers served as instructional technology resources who assisted their struggling peers. As William put it:

Once we identified the staff members who were sharper, we kind of made them de facto instructional technology resource teachers, where they were helping some of the other staff members who couldn't do well and needed support. I needed some extra support. So, we incentivized it, we made it competitive. Then we celebrated [them] because we knew that we were asking teachers to do a lot of different things. We wanted to give them as much recognition and celebration attached to it.

Collaborative problem-solving assisted in the procedural advantage to remedy the issue of ensuring all staff members were equipped to teach in an online only environment. It was a matter of knowledge management, as in the case of William, as he relied on teaching staff who held a particular skill set with technology to set a vision for these individuals to share their knowledge and enhance the skills of their colleagues throughout the organization (Cheng, 2017). Technology proficiency became an immediate value and priority within the entire school system. Therefore, aligning these values through mobilization of shared knowledge management was key to normalizing instruction through technology integration (Blackman & Henderson, 2005).

The inclusion of staff who had not traditionally been consulted in matters of decision-making is a reflection of superintendents operating through crisis leadership management (Boin & McConnell, 2007). COVID-19 presented a complex crisis that could not be completely prepared for through a pre-planned response system (Boisrand, 2017; Crowe, 2013) as it posed a situation that was unlike any other crisis that each superintendent was prepared to lead their district through. Therefore, as uncertainty remained, particularly in the way each school system would operate from a teaching and learning standpoint, there became a legitimate sense of urgency to reexamine the ideals and values that had governed the way each organization was previously managed for practically applied measures that could be implemented and executed to

sustain operational effectiveness once the COVID-19 crisis was present (Boin, Ekengren & Rhinard, 2020).

The incorporation of stakeholder feedback held significant benefit as it presented a contrast in the way things had previously been done. Superintendents admitted to not having all the answers needed to navigate through the crisis without consulting others who were experiencing the same circumstances within and outside the organization. Superintendents understood that decisions made under these crisis circumstances would affect the entire organization and every individual who was invested in the school system. Therefore, engaging in collaborative problem-solving allowed each superintendent to gauge the needs and fears of their constituents and to offer genuine consideration for these stakeholders by taking a collaborative approach to handling these newfound circumstances now affecting the school district (Leithwood et al., 1993). While the crisis presented by COVID-19 was one where it could not be resolved, superintendents sought mitigation strategies and processes to ensure safety and maintain high standards of teaching and learning. The inclusivity of staff to navigate through the crisis was an understated value that may have contributed to the creation of a cohesive group culture that enhanced staff commitment to the organization (Gregory et al., 2019). Creation of a group culture promoted members of the organization to feel respected in their professional knowledge due to their expertise being sought as vital contributions to assist in the prepared response to the crisis (Boin et al., 2007).

Enhanced Communication With Stakeholders

Communication was invaluable at the onset of the pandemic. Some superintendents, particularly the ones whose leadership teams agreed to resume in-person instruction to begin the 2020-2021 school year, discussed developing or expanding upon advisory teams once COVID-

19 impacted their district. Members of these teams acted as mediums who represented the needs of their colleagues or the community and could speak on behalf of the fears that their peers were experiencing due to the uncertainties presented by the pandemic. Superintendents who held advisory groups did so to maintain open lines of communication with stakeholders and to ensure that they felt heard and knew that their safety was a genuine concern. Vance, a superintendent whose district leadership team agreed to bring students back to school to begin the 2020-2021 school year, stated the importance of holding a teacher advisory group and how it quelled the fears and concerns of his teaching staff:

One of the structural things I did was have a standing teacher advisory group. I expanded that group and made it a little bigger. Then I met with them every week. So typically [my] teacher advisory met once a quarter. So 3 times a year, essentially. By meeting weekly, I was able to get in front of them, through zoom or Google meet, and answered every single question, acknowledging that it could be a little scary for some, but then, overly committed to doing every, and I mean, every single thing, right by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] CDC guidelines. I was very clear that it was not our role and certainly not my role to be a medical expert. So, in staying within those parameters we were going to come to school. I think our teachers really appreciated that.

Anthony had a similar rationale for developing what he referred to as a task force that was more encompassing to include not only staff, but also parents and external community stakeholders in the open communication, as his district also returned to in-person instruction to begin the 2020-2021 school year:

We put a task force together quickly which involved parents and staff at all levels. The goal was, we surveyed our community quickly. What is it you want us to do during this

time? It became apparent that at least in our community, they wanted us to push the envelope a bit. We're very passionate about kids being back in school in person as quickly as possible. Now we were not going to take huge risks in that. We [were] certainly not going to sacrifice human life to do it, but we were going to be as aggressive as we could to get our kids back in school and the task force worked very hard to make that possible. We changed schedules. We did everything the CDC was recommending in the form of layered mitigation at the time. And of course we learned as we went through, this is working and this doesn't work, but we had kids in school on the first day.

These superintendents established clear feedback loops as a means to develop more effective communication between members of the organization (Plate & Monroe, 2014). The incorporation of these advisory groups assists in developing a more interconnected framework in which two-way communication could be had between district leadership and individuals within and outside of the organization. The feedback provided by each member contributed to growing the superintendent's understanding of what values were most important and needed to be emphasized during this transitional period. The systematic approach to seek and establish feedback loops aided the necessary modifications needed to provide for the changing landscape of the organization in the way teaching and learning would look from an operational standpoint (Arnold & Wade, 2015).

Section Summary

Each superintendent discussed the need to reexamine their practice while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Each superintendent addressed the idea of putting certain strategic initiatives on pause while emphasizing the need to make necessary adjustments to provide teaching and learning in a way that could be done while minimizing risk of health or safety for

students and staff. This was a reflection of school systems experiencing change that affected not only the buildings where teaching and learning historically were held, but the larger society beyond the walls of a school building as well. Superintendents had to remain cognizant of the crisis at hand and how it would impact change for their respective organization. At the onset of the pandemic, all the superintendents were required to hold classes in an online only format, which is something that not all were readily prepared to do. There was a sense of urgency needed, as the response effort needed to occur quickly and in a way that would maintain operability of the school system while factoring in a crisis that was not completely known at its inception.

Superintendents were tasked with mobilizing their resources and efforts toward establishing a system where virtual learning could operate effectively. While this did not cause a complete shift in the values that were in place, each participant understood the need to provide the resources and comprehensive approach necessary to assist each staff member to operate effectively and with a common intent to continue providing purposeful instruction. The effort to shift resources toward an online only format of teaching and learning was deliberate as it became the singular objective of each school system. Each superintendent's school system was impacted in the way it behaved out of necessity, but those who were most prepared to meet the challenges of creating a new system understood the importance of feedback loops to effectively communicate with stakeholders and to use that communication as a mechanism to reassure staff and parents that they had a voice and their concerns were taken into account in the way the system would behave. Therefore, even when school leaders determined that they would bring students back into the physical classroom setting, the system had already become structured in a way that supported teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

Feedback loops promoted the interconnectedness of the school system and its stakeholders. The more willing superintendents were in listening to and communicating with their stakeholders, the greater the response was to providing systems of safety and mitigation strategies that were desired. The implementation of such feedback loops assisted in building trust between district leadership and the stakeholders they serve as it showed how the system had evolved to better accommodate the needs of all under the circumstances presented by the crisis.

Weighing Competing Interests

Superintendents lead while considering the opinions of stakeholders, both internal and external. However, with the emergence of COVID-19, each superintendent identified how the interaction between interest groups changed. COVID-19 contributed to a more political landscape where stakeholders proved to be more invested in the decisions that were being made, particularly as it related to the daily operations of the school system. Now the health and wellness of every internal stakeholder had to be considered and made a priority of each school district at the discretion of the state department of health and the CDC. Each participating superintendent discussed how health and safety became the first priority of their school system and that teaching and learning, historically the top priority, was now required to occur within any and all safety protocols that were put into effect. This meant that district leadership teams were responsible for deciding whether learning would take place for an extended period of time in an online only platform, if there would be a hybrid model offered, or if the entire school system would return to in-person instruction to begin the 2020-2021 school year. The decision was not entirely the superintendents to make as the local community that each school system serves had many constituents who held a strong desire to voice their opinions or concerns. Each superintendent also could not act regarding such matters without the support of their governing

school board. The data collected shows the common response that most of the participating superintendents held about the interest groups identified and what they allowed to be influential factors in their decision-making processes.

Governing Guidance

Decisions were made with the consultation of each superintendent's state departments. Health and education departments were able to disseminate information and data regarding COVID-19. It was imperative that superintendents adhered to the advice provided at the state level as this was a crisis where knowledge and understanding of its implications were being learned of while superintendents were still expected to lead their school districts. One major outcome of adhering to state guidelines was that school districts were required to publicize if and when students or staff were affected by COVID-19 while in the building. COVID-19 dashboards were created to monitor infection rates throughout school systems and communication was relayed to all potentially impacted parties. Schools were required to maintain contact tracing documentation when a positive case was identified. Furthermore, it also became essential that schools ensure mitigation strategies were incorporated into each school building to lessen the potential spread of the virus. All persons who were in a school building were required to wear face masks and students were provided desk shields. Desks were spaced as far apart from one another as a classroom could accommodate. Sanitation became more important than ever as the cleaning products used and documentation of areas being cleaned was emphasized. Areas that were commonly used to promote assembly and congregation were either minimized in the capacity of people who were allowed in a given space at once or were completely off-limits of use. This encompassed cafeterias and auditoriums. Superintendents had to be mindful of each change that came at the recommendation of their state departments. However, each

superintendent did state that their decision-making was also with consideration of their local constituency. Different localities held various ideologies toward how to handle COVID-19 as it pertained to the school system. What superintendents needed to do was navigate the feedback that was provided from various interest groups, both within and outside of their local community, and determine which feedback would drive the values that would be emphasized and supported while dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

Emergent Values

Emergence is when a system grows in the direction of its feedback (Shoup et al., 2010). Each superintendent found it necessary to engage with their community and solicit feedback at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the nature of the crisis and the immediate impact that it had on the school system and the entire community it served. With little preparation, schools were closed, and students were learning from home. Some parents were afforded the opportunity to work from home while others were not. The productivity for parents who had to be home for work while also expected to provide academic assistance for their student(s) was just as much a concern as was parents who had to go to work and were required to leave their young child home while the student was expected to attend virtual class and be engaged from a computer screen. As Vance stated during his interview:

COVID forced us to really ask the question, why do we exist? And educators want to believe that we exist for [only] academic learning, which is absolutely true. We also exist to provide a service to families so they can go to work. I think communities didn't want to embrace that. And sometimes teachers get a little bent out of shape when they hear that because it's, you know, they want to, and rightfully so, believe our jobs are more than that. And they certainly are, but at the end of the day, public schools, you can count on

the schools to take care of your kid and do something productive for seven hours a day, 180 days a year. That allows you as a mom or a dad or a caregiver to go to work and provide for your family...And then as you heard me say the why, [we provide] all these safety mechanisms outside of academic learning for our students from breakfast and lunch to social and emotional safety and security. We're important.

The importance of school being a physical location for students to attend daily while their parents were able to earn a living and be able to financially support themselves and their families was a genuine concern for many. Furthermore, some parents felt as though their students were not able to learn from home as well as they would be able to do so in-person. The concern of a lack of social engagement with peers was also realized by some community members, which drove the desire for some localities to return students to in-person instruction as soon as possible. However, there were those who were more concerned with the COVID-19 virus and were unwilling to send their children back to school given the initial uncertainties of the virus.

The communities that were easy to serve were the ones who were homogenous in their wants and needs for their students. Superintendents who received feedback that yielded correlated dispositions were more likely to make decisions to support the expectations of the society they served. The notion of the accepted pattern of values and beliefs that were expressed from homogenous localities would be represented in the school systems that were embedded within those communities. This is known as fractals (Shoup et al., 2010). Superintendents prioritized the values that were expected of their school system based on the pressures that were placed on them by the dominant opinions provided by their communities. The feedback of local stakeholders assisted each superintendent to align his or her ideals with that of their constituents to determine how they began the 2020-2021 school year while COVID-19 was still very relevant

and politicized. For school systems to maintain their legitimacy in the minds of the society they serve, it became imperative that superintendents aligned their values and beliefs toward the instructional model that was most commonly supported by their locality.

A participating superintendent, Vance, opted to bring his students back to in-person instructional models to begin the 2020-2021 school year after having been in a virtual format to close out the previous year. His reason is supported by the local community his school system is embedded in and the values that were expressed by its community members. When asked about his decision making, he expressed the individuals whose input he valued most. Vance used his community input and partnered with a neighboring superintendent whose constituents also held a strong view toward in-person instruction:

In my immediate region, [the superintendent] in [the neighboring] county and I worked hand in glove, and we were both committed to sticking together. He's the county that surrounds me as a city. So that was, that was so important. I'm not sure how I could have done it without being together because if he had done something different than me, our communities are pretty much intertwined, and it would've been really hard. If he said, "yeah, we're not going to school," and I'm like, "no, we're going to school," that would have been really challenging. So, we did a lot of communicating, my school board, same, you know, every school board meeting we talked about our response and our plan. I was fortunate to have a board that was very supportive of the direction we were going. The hardest things we dealt with were like in that first year, whether to do sports or wait another couple weeks, that was pretty contentious with our community. And then the mask stuff, we certainly had our fair share of community members that were anti mask,

but my board was solid, like a hundred percent. So, we just had to sit through a lot of ugly public comments.

Anthony is another superintendent who made the decision to bring students back to in-person instruction to begin the 2020-2021 school year. However, in his response to how he made decisions in terms of weighing competing interest groups, his community seemed to be more divided, but he did take time to listen to input and base his decisions on not only that, but what he believed was in the best interest of the students:

I think [COVID-19] has broadened our perspective of working with our stakeholders in all areas, seeking very real and evolving input from the community. In each group, what you're going to find is the lack of agreement. We currently live in a very divided nation and what COVID taught us is that even in an international pandemic, we're still divided. We can't agree on what steps we should take. So, I think that is the biggest part of the change in environment, in leading through this pandemic is this became a very divisive topic because it affected the kids and families in a very real way.

Overall, the remaining participating superintendents made a decision to provide a hybrid model of instruction based on the feedback that was received from members of the community in the year following the initial COVID-19 crisis. The hybrid model allowed students to come to school on alternating days to support smaller classroom sizes which would allow for social distancing. When students were not physically in school, they would learn virtually. There were also opportunities for parents to keep their students virtual for the entirety of the 2020-2021 school year. This supports the fact that although feedback was sought and was taken into consideration, the participating superintendents emphasized the importance of valuing and exercising choice during the continuous crisis that COVID-19 presented. The implementation of

a hybrid learning model provided community members with options that they determined suited them and their children. While some families valued safety and wellness first, which prompted those individuals to keep their students on a completely virtual learning platform for the 2020-2021 school year, other parents were concerned with bringing their students back into the school building to learn sooner rather than later.

Communication & Collaboration Among Superintendents

The one thing that every superintendent spoke on was the enhanced collaboration they experienced when COVID-19 first began. Not only did superintendents rely on their community stakeholders to drive their decision making, but they also leaned on their fellow superintendents. As previously mentioned, Vance worked personally with a neighboring school superintendent because of how closely the communities of both districts were intertwined. Other superintendents attributed their need for collaboration with neighboring superintendents given the magnitude of the crisis that COVID-19 presented. This was a circumstance that all districts were navigating at the same time. It was not a situation that only affected some. Therefore, communication and in some instances, collaboration was important. Martina and Shannon both explicitly mentioned the importance of maintaining a close line of communication with their regional colleagues because of the communities they served and how connected they are. Superintendents understood that the decisions they made regarding COVID-19 safety and learning protocols would have an impact on their colleagues and the communities they served. The importance of unity among superintendents was made clear given Spencer's response when asked about working with colleagues across the region:

I have a network of colleagues across the country, and we have a local network of regional superintendents and we spent a lot of time talking with each other. I was part of

a national recovery task force with our national organization where we met to try to talk about what the issues were and how different school divisions were responding to them and share that information across the country in an organized way. So, there was communication. The unfortunate part of a lot of this was that most states elected to not provide clear guidance...it was pretty horrific because you know, if you had a school division nearby that decided, well we're going to open our school and we're still closed, everybody's mad.

The inability to satisfy all constituents is attributed to why, although superintendents did lean on one another for support and guidance, many of the participants took the information provided by their colleagues, the guidance by the state, and the input from their community to make decisions that seemed best suited for their own locality. Heather expressed the dilemma presented in the level of communication that was initially fostered between superintendents at the onset of COVID-19 and how those discussions ceased once decisions had to be made in the best interest of each superintendent's community:

I think all of us were talking to each other about what we were doing. We were a very united group. I think we started to break apart because people started to do different things, responding to their own community...When it came to coming back to school and decisions started to come out, I think it put a strain in those relationships because it was almost like, you know, I'm bringing my school in, you are not. People had to do what was right, what they felt was right in their community, not what everybody else thought was right. Ultimately it was coming to us as individuals. So, we do collaborate and ironically, we came [together] through COVID and it [also] split us apart a bit.

Emergence of Systems Change

The decisions superintendents made were done with the specific feedback they gave the most attention to. Decisions emerged from superintendents deciding how the impact of COVID-19 would shape their systems to best meet the needs and concerns of their constituents while also making efforts to maintain high standards of teaching and learning. Although superintendents received guidance from their state departments, there were no mandates on whether they could have students attend school physically or virtually for the 2020-2021 school year.

Superintendents had to decide how to proceed with the approval of their governing school boards. Thus, the feedback of community members was vital to the decisions superintendents made. Regardless of how superintendents chose to proceed with the school year, the systems that each superintendent relied on prior to COVID-19 had to be altered and meet the demands of its most valued feedback loops. Staff, students, and each school district's immediate local community was of most importance and superintendents had to embrace feedback and respond to it with the changes necessary to maintain support and systems effectiveness.

Support from stakeholders and systems effectiveness were sensitively dependent upon one another, as disapproval from the community on the decision to attend school physically or virtually would have severe implications. If teachers were unwilling to agree to the decisions that were made about how they would provide instruction given their knowledge and understanding of the crisis, then they would not have a desire to report to work. If parents were vehemently against the decision to send their children to school in an in-person setting and there were no other options within their school district, those parents would look for alternatives. Stakeholders were needed and their support of the system was essential to ensure the shift in each superintendent's systems approach would work. Therefore, superintendents created systems that

would garner support of their constituents. Communities in uniform agreement of in-person instruction found themselves in school buildings to begin the school year, but communities that were more divided in opinion had virtual and hybrid options to choose from. Furthermore, superintendents had to ensure that they provided for the safety of students and staff who were in-person. Personal protective equipment, such as masks and desk shields, were provided. Enhanced cleaning protocols were put in place and air purifications systems were now found in classrooms and in other areas where internal stakeholders spent a lot of time. Superintendents not only had to provide such measures, but they needed to communicate that said measures were being implemented to emphasize the importance of the safety and well-being of students and staff. Superintendents needed to maintain the stability of their systems as it pertained to teaching and learning while also ensuring that decisions were made with the community in mind. Superintendents understood the community their school system was embedded in and applied the community's values to the practices that were implemented during the first full school year during COVID-19.

The Impact of Values on System Change

The decisions that superintendents make have lasting effects on the district they lead. Systems are implemented on behalf of the authority of a superintendent and those systems bring forth change to the way the district operates as a whole. Systems change from determined need. While the authority rests in the superintendent to make the decision, it is the invested stakeholders whose feedback influenced those decisions. A superintendent evaluates the effectiveness of their organization primarily based on the sustained academic success that is demonstrated by the number of students who are reaching a proficient pass rate on the end of year assessments provided by and reported to the state. While test results are a measure of

success, systems effectiveness is also measured by analyzing how structured each department and building of the district is to provide the most adequate and effective means for teaching and learning to occur unobstructed. This is a commonly shared value of educational leaders.

However, from a superintendent, they must be cognizant of the issues that are specific to the organization they serve and solicit feedback from key stakeholders to determine the most appropriate way to improve the organization while meeting the needs of those he or she serves.

The active involvement of key stakeholders is important because they are the people directly affected by decisions made to influence the systematic way in which the district is structured. Although, the strain that superintendents may have felt to maintain necessary and appropriate feedback loops were possibly minimal prior to COVID-19. However, school districts experienced significant engagement by concerned community members who had opinions on how the school system should operate in the wake of the pandemic. The crisis presented by COVID-19 brought forth community involvement at a higher level than each superintendent attested to experiencing prior. More community involvement meant that superintendents felt further compelled to be transparent while also seeking additional collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. Given the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and how strongly people responded to the way schools would operate in the early days of understanding the crisis, superintendents were compelled to be influenced in their decision making by not only the crisis they were presented with, but also the stakeholders they served.

Managing COVID-19 as a Crisis

Participating superintendents were forced to close their school buildings when the pandemic began due to public safety concerns at the discretion of the governor. Therefore, each school district sent students home well before fulfilling the requirements of completing a

traditional school year. This was an unforeseen circumstance that was not predictable and had no structures for mitigation already established. Superintendents found themselves trying to ensure that students were able to learn from home whether synchronous or asynchronous. School systems with a robust system for learning through technology were equipped with one-to-one technology for students to take home and utilize for their studies. Those districts were the ones where students were also able to continue their education synchronously with their teacher providing live instruction through a virtual format. Meanwhile, school systems that were not readily prepared technologically had to make becoming a one-to-one device district their first priority before anything else. Operationally, there had to be a viable and guaranteed curriculum in place for all students to learn.

As the 2019-2020 school year concluded, superintendents had the summer to establish more mitigation measures and contingency plans through making sense of the circumstances they found themselves in and understanding strategies that would be necessary to ensure a response was in place to assist the school system in its recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. While there was an abrupt change experienced to conclude the 2019-2020 year, each superintendent sought to restore the equilibrium of their organization by maintaining a level of transparency with stakeholders while seeking feedback through the process. Decisions were made in such a manner to maintain the legitimacy of the school system. Superintendents had to be flexible during this time as the circumstances necessitated that the community had a direct impact on the structures put in place. Therefore, the values of constituents became weighted and there was a sense of obligation to accommodate the desires of the community. When asked about how values influenced her leadership to impact the entire school system, Heather responded:

Ultimately, I make [decisions] because I have to hold it and stand over it and be comfortable with it. But if there's ever a time that I say we really can't do that, I always explain why, or I'll ask for input and say, this is the decision I will make, but I want to hear your thoughts on it. So I think there's a clarity in decision making that comes in a collaborative environment... You try to work through to the best outcome that you can possibly do in the safest and the best instructionally and for kids.

Although every member of the community was given more consideration, decisions were made on behalf of each superintendent with the best interest of their students in mind. Each participant attested to students being the most important stakeholders to base decisions around. As the pandemic transitioned from an unnavigated crisis to one that could be handled successfully while still providing in-person instruction, all superintendent participants weighed the cost of bringing students back to school buildings and pursued doing so as the primary objective while most maintained a virtual learning option as a secondary alternative. Pursuit of returning students to their respective school buildings to learn was a result of feedback loops returning to its homeostasis state, meaning feedback from most constituents sought that the system returned to its most desirable state of being which was learning in the school building.

School Systems Experiencing Homeostasis & Change

Each superintendent's school system experienced drastic, undesired change when being forced to shift from the traditionally accepted model of in-person teaching and learning to that of virtual only instruction. Feedback loops from state health departments and local community members necessitated the change. Each system was required to mature from its traditional infrastructure in order to continue its legitimacy and sustainability. Each school system experienced the strange attractors of moving toward virtual instruction at the very beginning of

the COVID-19 crisis given the limited scope of knowledge that was available at that given point in time. However, as more information became available and individuals became more knowledgeable in mitigation strategies, the impact of the virus, and the varied success of virtual instruction that students were experiencing, feedback began to change, and it warranted each system to trend back to in-person instruction. Although now, health and safety were now given greater consideration than prior to COVID-19. The result of experiencing COVID-19 was that each superintendent became charged with leading school systems that became more complex than they were previously.

Health, safety, and choice in how parents elected for their students to access their academic learning became dominant values which now govern school systems and their practices. Superintendents of communities that are more impacted by the value of choice had to establish parameters which allowed for their school system to still operate effectively for those who desired to have their students continue to learn virtually. Each system became more accessible to its constituents given the new circumstances that were required to navigate through. The accessibility of maintaining a virtual learning environment provides for equality in educational attainment for students whose parents remain most comfortable with that means of learning. However, parents who eventually expressed a desire to have their children report back to an in-school setting were granted their equal access to educational attainment as well, now with more mitigation strategies in place to reassure stakeholders that their safety is constantly being considered and taken seriously. Superintendents who found themselves in environments that were not homogenous in their desire to return to in-person instruction contributed to further stability of their respective school districts by implementing and considering two systematic ways of teaching and learning.

Leaving a Legacy

School systems are living organisms in that they are constantly responding to the environment they find themselves in. Change is a constant and the members of the organization must be ready to accommodate any change that is affecting the system. Each superintendent spoke of leaving a legacy and many described their work as not necessarily wanting to be remembered as an individual, but rather wanting the organization to be in a better condition than it was in when they each began their tenure as superintendent. A superintendent's tenure is not guaranteed, and their departure is part of the change that school systems must all respond and adapt to. However, the extent of the need to change is dependent upon how well the organization was able to function as a system upon that superintendent's departure. Each superintendent spoke to their awareness of the system they currently serve and provided reflection on how leading through COVID-19 has impacted their approach to district change processes. When asked about leaving a legacy and how he approaches change, James responded with reflection in previous positions and why leaving a legacy has become important to him:

I think there were times when I left my first principalship or there were some things that I implemented that I thought were great practices and they were making a difference. But when I left, I realized that I was kind of the gatekeeper and the practice left and wasn't sustained. So, in fact, even this morning, I was thinking through some things that in this role, I've tried to do a better job of building capacity so that some of the initiatives, whether it's my idea or not, but it's being led from this department that it, it outlives me that it is a legacy piece. And so, I think COVID has actually heightened my awareness of that.

Each participant had the desire to lead their respective district to be better and the crisis that COVID-19 presented did not enhance their aspiration to do so, but it did contribute to a greater understanding for some of the work that it would take to accomplish system change efforts that did not live and die with the superintendent's tenure. Collaborative problem-solving became more normalized and sought after to develop a group culture among leaders throughout the district which also ensured that members within the system could operate to collectively serve their district in a more unified way where everyone knew and understood district goals and how their role as a leader served the organization and its intended outcomes.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how superintendents aligned resources and implemented change during a crisis. Each superintendent's perceived responsibility to respond to COVID-19 as a crisis and the extent to which system thinking was implemented as a means for providing shared and collectively pursued solutions were analyzed. Findings suggest that superintendents were required to (1) prioritize acquisition of adequate technology resources to provide for a deliberate shift toward establishing a virtual learning system at the onset of the crisis and (2) collaboration and feedback became paramount to the success and sustainability of each superintendent's decision making during the operational changes that COVID-19 presented. COVID-19 was stated by each participant to be unlike any other crisis any of them had previously faced. Targeted feedback from internal and external stakeholders impacted the emergence of system change to accommodate a viable means of educational delivery virtually and in-person. Furthermore, the insights and voice of the community became a vital part of the decision-making process and contributed to a prioritization of the values that were given

precedence at various intervals throughout navigation of COVID-19 as the crisis developed over time.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this study I sought to understand how superintendents aligned resources to implement change during a crisis and to determine how the values and beliefs of the superintendents guided their strategic approach to enact change. My research emphasized whether, and in what ways, superintendents enacted a systems approach to affect change during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data, when analyzed, revealed that each superintendent did act according to what they perceived to be in the best interest of the stakeholders they served, but that each superintendent took on the values that were most important to the communities they found themselves serving. This chapter identifies the connections between the concepts of crisis leadership, feedback, systems thinking, and the value of change.

A Creeping Crisis

Crises can occur in a “fast-burning,” or “slow-burning” manner (Hart et al., 2001). The fast-burning crisis is one that is more common as it often occurs without warning or many precipitating events while leaving an impact after quickly passing. Although these crises pose a threat, there are more predictable responses to fast-burning crises and are oftentimes the ones that organizations and their leaders prepare for. Furthermore, whether the crisis response provides resolution or not, a fast-burning crisis will come and go, leaving an impact on its affected organization and stakeholders without having to endure the imminent threat over a length of time. The slow-burning crisis, or “creeping crisis,” is one that arrives slowly and may remain or linger in its ongoing impact on an organization. As defined by Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard (2020):

A creeping crisis is a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and/or societal attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities (p. 122).

The theory of the slow-burning crisis helps make sense of what school systems experienced at the onset of COVID-19 and how superintendents responded once their organizations became impacted by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a creeping crisis, as it had precipitating factors that could be identified for months before affecting the United States directly. Furthermore, its emergence into a societal threat became clearer as the crisis began to receive more attention. The creeping crisis of COVID-19 presented complex challenges with multi-tiered intervention responses toward a prolonged threat which required school superintendents to reconsider the operational infrastructure and core values of their respective organizational systems (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020; Boin, Lodge, & Luesink, 2020).

Political and Relational Feedback

COVID-19 required school superintendents to form a close working relationship with multiple agencies in capacities that were once uncharted. Primary agencies included varying levels of government and health departments which all worked collaboratively in an effort to mitigate the known and unknown concerns and challenges of navigating an educational system that was experiencing rapid change while simultaneously being expected to not once cease its operation (Hulme et al., 2021). Superintendents had to ensure that their school system remained serviceable to its community when schools closed at the beginning of the pandemic and were to enhance their connectedness to students and families during the first full school year in the time of COVID-19 (Hulme et al., 2021; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Superintendents sought

assistance from their local government in order to provide the necessary technological resources which would ensure that impactful teaching and learning was still a possibility even with school buildings closed. Superintendents also pursued the guidance of their state and local health authorities to receive updates on the virus and its societal impact to assist in making informed decisions regarding school system operations (Park et al., 2012). School superintendents were required to be flexible in their constant need to frame and reframe their understanding of the crisis and its evolutionary capacity to not only linger, but to compound (Boin, Lodge, & Luesink, 2020; Hulme et al., 2021; Woulfin & Gonzales, 2016). It is due to the compounding complexity of the crisis which necessitated that superintendents not only sought guidance from their governing and health agencies, but also desired to establish candid feedback loops with stakeholder groups that were directly impacted by the decisions which were made during the course of the pandemic.

Staff were a vital stakeholder group to ensure the successful shift in the systematic way schooling was delivered during the pandemic. Superintendents asserted that communication was imperative, but it is the enactment of transparency in the flow and sharing of knowledge that assisted each school system to become effective in decision making and adaptable during the crisis (Li et al., 2021). The immediate shift to an online only learning platform which was remotely administered was a first for most stakeholders in the traditional K-12 realm of education. The adequate management of knowledge and its ability to be shared was necessary to provide solutions to the quickly changing landscape of education while still maintaining effective teaching and learning (Li et al., 2021). Some superintendents strategically emphasized the need to identify staff members who were well versed in navigating modern technology and included those individuals as leaders who were highlighted for their expertise and committed to sharing

their knowledge with colleagues in order to enhance their instructional delivery through online means.

A heightened awareness of transparent communication for staff was also required of superintendents. The transparency was what Li et al. (2021) referred to as accountable and participative. Internal communication was used as staff were inclusively privy to information in the way the system was shifting as a superintendent and his or her team became aware of the growing circumstances surrounding COVID-19. Communication was also participative because there became a sense of accountability on behalf of superintendents to their staff which prompted that relevant information be provided in the way the school system would operate during various phases of the pandemic. As a result, operational outcomes benefited significantly due to communication being a central focus. Transparency among this stakeholder group built trust with their leadership and provided an organizational environment conducive to values and behaviors that were grounded in inclusivity which aided the constant need to shift in the ever changing landscape that COVID-19 presented (Rawlins, 2008).

Another stakeholder group that required an established feedback loop was the parents of students who attended school during the pandemic. The challenges that the educational system experienced as a result of COVID-19 also impacted students and their parents. As school systems made swift changes to close their buildings at the discretion of their Governor in efforts to mitigate the pandemic, districts had to create a system in which a virtual learning environment was viable. Parent response was vital as the ability for teaching and learning to be feasible was predicated on the level of preparedness and willingness that parents and students experienced toward virtual learning. Targeted communication became an important mechanism to provide reassurance to parents that the school system was invested in their concerns and would listen and

respond accordingly when given the opportunity (Daniel, 2020). Online learning was the only option for most school districts in March 2020 when state governments across the United States mandated that schools be shut down at the onset of COVID-19. However, superintendents were given a choice to begin the 2020-2021 school year with safety guidelines to abide by should they determine that their school system would return to in-person learning. Parents were provided surveys to gauge their comfortability with having their students attend school in-person. Superintendents made sure to communicate the mitigation procedures that were put in place to reassure families that the safety and wellbeing of their children were given utmost consideration. Communication with this stakeholder group was more important than recent history has suggested, and the consensus of parental feedback determined the direction in which superintendents would have their schools operate (Kearney & Childs, 2021; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Parents were given more opportunity to interact with their children's educational environment and influence it to fit their personal need or beliefs and that of their children (Daniel, 2020; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Parents were able to be more intertwined with their children's school system and through their collective input, provide the feedback needed in order for their children's school district to adequately accommodate their learning needs as a consequence of COVID-19 (Khanal et al., 2021; Shoup & Studer, 2010). As a result, superintendents and their leadership team felt compelled to oblige the requests of their parent stakeholders whether that meant schools would (a) remain virtual, (b) offer a hybrid learning option, or (c) have students return to in-person instruction to begin the 2020-2021 school year. This is a result of COVID-19 requiring school systems to change as the precipitating factors involving the pandemic forced transformative measures upon the system's organizational

structure. This created a complex situation that prompted external stakeholder response in order to assure superintendents of what their families valued which became the governing factor toward their operational practice (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Superintendents who found themselves serving a school system that had an overwhelming response toward virtual learning in the name of safety from COVID-19 felt obliged to continue to make the requisite adaptations toward solidifying their virtual learning offerings while superintendents who received the opposite response toward returning to in-person instruction made the necessary corrections to prepare their school system to go back to traditional classroom environments that were now more conscientious of COVID-19 mitigation protocols (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Choice became an integral value in how parents wanted their children to learn and this impact became valid given the circumstances which demanded change to a system that had not been disrupted in such a way prior. As a result, an analysis and reevaluation in the way schools as organizational systems operated was needed in order to transform and maintain its effectiveness (Fullan, 2010).

Evaluating Systems Thinking in the Context of COVID-19

A systems thinking leader considers the specific issues that affect their organization and determines a framework to base decision making on needs while an evaluation of organizational effectiveness is ongoing as the needs of the district are monitored and might change (Jiang & Men, 2017). Given the context of the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents were forced to make organization-defining decisions at a much higher rate and with a heavier impact on not only the school district, but the surrounding community it served as well. School districts had to implement a systematic way of teaching and learning that was outside the strategic approach that superintendents have become accustomed to and prepared for. A system of virtual and online

learning had to be created to meet the needs of learners because of health and safety concerns. However, unlike a traditional system thinking approach, the systematic decision to close school buildings and require students to learn from home was not at the discretion of superintendents but was the circumstance within which they found themselves having to operate. Yet, given the circumstances, superintendents still employed effective elements of a systems-based thinking model which began with aligning resources and establishing clear feedback loops to base their decisions on (Ford, 2009; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). The context of COVID-19 required safety to be a top priority of the superintendent which became the central focus of decision-making during the abrupt transition of schools closing. As the head of a complex organization, superintendents were tasked with considering every aspect of the organization while simultaneously valuing its community surroundings (Anderson, 1999). The surrounding community served as a subsystem to the school system that superintendents had to be mindful of in their decision-making (Anderson, 1999). Given the interconnectedness of the school system and its neighboring community, decisions could not be made in a fashion that would only affect the school district, as any decision made would have effects on anyone considered an invested stakeholder as well (Anderson, 1999; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Therefore, a concerted effort to acquire the opinions from stakeholders as a means to refine organizational operations when the change to virtual instruction happened was vital (Akbar et al., 2018). Superintendents used these feedback loops to emphasize the most pressing issues of stakeholder groups and structured their system processes to serve the needs of majority interest. As a result, change became a value that was employed in an effort to overcome the issues presented by COVID-19.

Response to Change

Superintendents valued change under the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis. Each part of the school system had to experience a complete structural shift in the way the organization operated while also giving consideration to the extent that leaders, staff, parents, and students were expected to interact with the school system (Naicker & Mestry, 2016). Change occurred as the interconnectedness of the system and its subsystems became strengthened given the need for each part to interact collectively to promote the organization's effectiveness (Naicker & Mestry, 2016). The change process was driven by what Joseph and Reigeluth (2005) refer to as a conceptual framework for a systemic change process. This conceptual framework outlines six important facets of system change which can be applied to the COVID-19 crisis. The framework includes (a) broad stakeholder ownership, (b) learning organization, (c) understanding the systemic change process, (d) evolving mindsets about education, (e) systems view of education, and (f) systems design (p. 99).

Broad Stakeholder Ownership

Every decision made during the crisis would impact all vested stakeholders directly. If students were participating in learning virtually, this would impact the parents and the teachers who were expected to provide the lesson. Therefore, involvement of parents and staff were vital as their sought-after feedback assisted to gain their active participation and sense of ownership in the change process (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005; Naiker & Mestry, 2016). This was uncharted territory for much of the public K-12 educational system as a whole, so support was highly regarded which is why teacher and parent advisory teams were created by some of the participating superintendents and communication to these groups became more frequent and transparent with regard to organizational decision-making.

Learning Organization

The traditional learning environment of a public school classroom was altered and forced to expand when COVID-19 first impacted society. The traditional vision that superintendents had pursued for their respective school systems had to be put on pause and the objective became centrally focused on establishing and developing a shared value of virtual and hybrid learning models. Changes that needed to be made were identified and communicated to stakeholder groups, but in order for the shift to successfully take hold, the organization had to at first adapt and then transform (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005; Senge, 1990).

Adaptation was the initial response as school leaders and their stakeholders were not given much notice before buildings were closed and students found themselves learning at home. However, the implementation of active learning, such as seeking online platforms to provide instruction and leading workshops to educate teachers in their delivery of virtual instruction through these purchased platforms, enhanced organizational capacity to transform the learning system to better serve the needs of its students given the surrounding circumstances (Anderson, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990). This change required a reflection of each school system's strategic priorities and norms as stakeholders who were well aware of their utility within the organization prior found themselves having to forgo some of their preconceptions and assumptions in order to find success in this new organizational paradigm (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005; Morgan, 2006).

Understanding the Systematic Change Process

With the change toward virtual teaching and learning came the need to assist the expansion of teacher mental models so that they could shift their mindset to effectively take on the endeavor of providing instruction in a new way (Caine & Caine, 1997; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). Superintendents first met in their leadership teams to design the new educational

curriculum that could be adapted to a virtual environment. The implementation of this new curriculum came about through communication and dialogue between district leadership teams and their building leaders and then between building leaders and their staff. In smaller districts, participating superintendents attested to speaking with staff directly. The purpose was to assist staff in the development of the new systemic model and to help them to grow during this change process. Staff ability to succeed was predicated on how well they as a stakeholder group did their part to implement the new paradigm shift that came with the onset of COVID-19 (Caine & Caine, 1997).

Evolving Mindsets About Education

The transition required a challenge to the previously held assumptions that all stakeholder groups had toward what schooling looked like (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). Every stakeholder to a school system held a common understanding of what a school day resembled, at least on the basis of showing up to the building and following the master schedule to guide the conduct of the day. However, with the COVID-19 crisis, mental models were tested as the fundamental aspect of going to a school building and sitting in a physical classroom had to be forgone in favor of a virtual environment where students and staff would participate in live synchronous and occasional asynchronous learning (Senge, 2000). Stakeholder dispositions toward schooling had to be changed through a communicated process from district and building level leaders (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). Mass communications were sent out about resources that could be picked up at designated locations at given windows of time which included technology and food distribution. Staff had to be trained to use the technology needed to instruct students through virtual means. Furthermore, districts made sure to provide virtual workshops in the preparation for the 2020–2021 school year for parents and students so that they could also learn to navigate

their learning in a virtual environment before the year began. Communication was the primary means of developing the mindset of all stakeholders so that they could successfully function in the new school environment (Caine & Caine, 1997; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005).

Systems View of Education

According to Banathy (1992), having a systems view “helps us to understand the true nature of education as a complex, open, and dynamic human activity system that operates in ever-changing multiple environments and interacts with a variety of societal systems” (p. 17). Superintendents were placed in a position where their entire system was forced to change and their ability to sustain the system was based upon how well they maintained the interrelationships that exist within the school structure (Banathy, 1992; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). Superintendents supported their school as a system by considering how each aspect of the organization needed to be reframed to fundamentally change during the crisis. Different aspects of the organization had to be given equal attention in the way that they were to operate as a means to address the whole district and not just a few independent aspects of the organization’s operations. To ensure that a systems view was emphasized, superintendents spoke about having a minimum of weekly district leadership meetings where the lead of each department participated in discussing how the crisis impacted them specifically and plans were established with all major departments given consideration. Furthermore, building leaders were made aware of the conversations that were taking place and informed on changes that would affect the system at the building level. Building leaders could then communicate this information to their individual staffs and preparations could be made at all levels based on the responsibility each department had toward ensuring the system continued to support an interrelated operation relationship so

that an environment could be created and sustained to support this new means for teaching and learning (Banathy, 1992; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005).

Systems Design

A peculiar aspect of the COVID-19 crisis was that the system had to continue to adapt. At the beginning of the crisis, school buildings were closed and the 2019–2020 school year was completed virtually from March until the end of the school year. However, as more knowledge was gained from health and government agencies and then disseminated within the school organization, superintendents and their teams had to examine the systems change while making needed adjustments to meet the goals of a system that wanted to support stakeholder groups through what they found to be most important (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Superintendents had the option to open schools the following school year and determined that feedback loops to parents would assist in making that decision. The input received by parents and the surrounding community provided input data for the superintendent and their staff to assess and apply to again change the system's dynamics (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005). Some systems supported hybrid models of learning which began to incorporate students returning to school a few days a week and using mitigation strategies to support health and wellness while staff and students engaged in the teaching and learning process. The complexity of the crisis deemed it necessary that superintendents and their school system sustained flexibility as the design continued to change based on growing knowledge and understanding of COVID-19 and how stakeholder groups responded to this growing understanding by expressing their preference in the way teaching and learning occurred over time. The interdependence of the system and its feedback provided superintendents with informed data in which they would allow their school districts and its design to be influenced by (Banathy, 1992; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Implications for Practice

The COVID-19 crisis brought change that practitioners have never experienced before. This change was primarily due to what began as a mandate for school closure and later turned into superintendents using feedback loops to empower stakeholders to have a voice. With stakeholder voice came the power in the value of choice. As the pandemic progressed and more became known in the ways it affected society, choice became a part of the educational process. Parents could decide whether they preferred for their children to return to their school building to learn or if their children were better served by remaining online. This section identifies the implications for practice for school districts to continue to find ways to allow stakeholders to exercise their choice in how to access their children's education.

It is important for practitioners to consider how the value of choice provides parent stakeholders more accessibility to their students' learning. There are parents who had an unrealized preference for online learning once they had the opportunity to experience their children in such a setting. Parents who prefer this option might state this preference because it gives them the chance to be more involved with their children's learning. More parents are being afforded the chance to work from home and can accommodate their children being home as well. Parents who keep their students in a virtual setting can monitor the child's progress and their individualized need for support throughout the learning process. COVID-19 forced school districts to establish a separate system for teaching and learning by allowing a virtually accessible component. However, some families have benefited greatly from their students learning through such a format. I implore practitioners to exercise the value of choice in the ways students and parents can access their learning. Options can provide students with new ways to engage with their education while simultaneously giving parents more meaningful ways to

support their children academically should they choose to. Some students thrived in their virtual learning environments while others required the brick-and-mortar classroom to perform at their best. It is the value of choice, when exercised by school systems, that may provide greater learning outcomes with consideration of all students and the environments in which they learn best. It would benefit practitioners to continue to use the same feedback loops that were given precedence at the onset of COVID-19 so to know the preferred method of learning that is desired and whether or not a virtual learning component must be maintained to support that group of stakeholders.

Another implication for practice is to consider the ways in which educational leaders develop an understanding of frameworks that can be applied to their decision-making process. The framework design found in the literature by Joseph and Reigeluth (2005) provided insightful means from which superintendents could have referenced in their decision-making process to align their values and guide their actionable steps to serve their respective school system and stakeholder groups through crisis. Although each participant did provide a detailed response to the COVID-19 crisis, understanding how a crisis response framework could be applied to practice may have contributed to response preparedness even given a circumstance that is not typical for a school organization to be faced with. Frameworks are systematic in practice, examine the organization as a whole, and offer thoughtful reflection in the interconnectedness of organizational structures and their subsystems. Frameworks can offer a conceptual means to guide superintendents through decisions given various circumstances. It is recommended that leaders familiarize themselves with frameworks and that leadership preparation programs place emphasis on training school leaders to incorporate frameworks into their decisions-making processes.

Implications for Research

This study was conducted in one mid-Atlantic state in the northeastern region of the United States. Although districts did handle the mitigation of COVID-19 in some ways that varied, all of the participating superintendents and their districts made decisions in a systematic way where stakeholder choice was the driving force in leadership decision making. However, further study may benefit a researcher who expands into different states and conducts a comparative study to determine what values took precedence for school superintendents in different parts of the country at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the study may benefit from determining how much organizational values were credited with guiding decision making and how much was due to political oversight. From a political standpoint, some states did have more parameters for school leaders to operate within than did the state which each participating superintendent from this study. Therefore, future research can delineate what values guided organizational structures during the initial months of COVID-19 and whether the values were organically derived from district leadership decision making or if those leaders had to make decisions within set restrictions imposed by their state and local governments.

Conclusions

With the processes and procedures that school systems had been accustomed to now being challenged, it required a prompt shift in the way members approached their thinking and actionable delivery of their instruction (Jaaron et al., 2017; Kaplan & Owings, 2017). With the constant change in conditions and circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, the most appropriate way to approach teaching and learning while also prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of all stakeholders was a task which required reflection and a heightened means of transparent communication (Jaaron et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Superintendents systematically implemented feedback loops to discern the stakeholder response that warranted attention in order to determine what aspects of the organization needed correction so as to maintain the core values of teaching and learning while also ensuring safety and wellness during the onset of COVID-19 (Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Shoup & Studer, 2010). A conceptual framework toward systems change was incorporated to guide the process of transitioning from the underlying assumption of what schooling was to a virtual and hybrid learning model. Superintendents who carried out the transition successfully considered how their decisions would affect every stakeholder group as well as every aspect of their organizational structure, therefore prompting feedback loops to gain parent and staff participation and sense of ownership in the change process (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2005; Naiker & Mestry, 2016). Successful superintendents in this change process understood their organization's interrelationships and implemented a systematic design to support change processes while seeking support and two-way communication with stakeholders throughout the crisis.

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Appendix

Table 2

Strategic approach to leadership

Name	Needs	Outcomes
Anthony	<p>Lacked technologic resources to deliver instruction</p> <p>More communication and feedback from external stakeholders.</p> <p>Layered mitigation strategies</p>	<p>Anticipated long term change</p> <p>Became more collaboratively driven with other school division leaders</p> <p>Cites collaboration as “a positive byproduct that I will take into the future [as] we now network a lot better than we did prior to COVID-19 at all levels.”</p> <p>Development of a task force consisting of internal and external community members (parents, staff at various levels) to gauge community perception of the crisis.</p> <p>Hybrid model instruction to begin 2020-2021 SY.</p>
Shannon	<p>Lacked technologic resources to deliver instruction</p> <p>More communication to external stakeholders.</p> <p>Healthcare mitigation</p> <p>Design of hybrid instructional platform</p>	<p>Developed a strong leadership team that was inclusive of all members in decision making.</p> <p>Delegated responsibilities involving COVID-19 research and responsiveness.</p> <p>Communications audit surveying community before COVID-19 - an outside professional provided recommendations on how to communicate better with all stakeholders. Implemented communications team using recommendations that were tailored to COVID-19 response.</p>
Sean	<p>Needed to apply continuity of learning plans from a previous crisis toward COVID-19.</p> <p>Maintained core value of quick and effective communication</p>	<p>An electrical fire occurred that destroyed two schools in the district prior to COVID-19. As a result, plans were created to continue learning in the absence of a school building.</p> <p>These continuity of learning plans were effective plans to apply toward the COVID-19 crisis as criteria and alternatives to learning from a traditional building</p>

Name	Needs	Outcomes
		<p>model were already being established before COVID-19 began.</p> <p>Known for being responsive to stakeholders. Important to get in front of an issue and to communicate with all necessary and impacted stakeholders.</p>
William	<p>Lacked technologic resources to deliver instruction for all students.</p> <p>Some of the student population lacked resources to be connected online at home.</p> <p>Some instructional staff lacked skills to teach in a virtual learning environment.</p>	<p>Prioritized secondary students to take chromebooks home to finish their school year using a third-party online learning platform. Elementary students focused on mastery of skills with learning packets while the technology team ordered as many chromebooks and active boards as possible to provide for elementary students in preparation for the beginning of the 2020 - 2021 SY.</p> <p>Conversion of parking lots in some schools to WIFI hotspots.</p> <p>Google certified training for all instructional and support staff. Utilization of more proficient staff to serve as an instructional technology resource who assisted struggling staff in becoming Google certified.</p>
Martina	<p>Lacked technologic resources to deliver instruction for all students.</p> <p>Development of a virtual academy to support online learning.</p>	<p>Ensured that every student received a one-to-one device in preparation for the shift toward virtual learning.</p> <p>Established a curriculum that was framed around digital learning.</p> <p>Created a virtual academy to support online learning at the direction of the state; a large population in the district remained reluctant to return to in-person learning, even when the option was available.</p>
Heather	<p>Reframe, reallocate, review of every way business was conducted.</p> <p>Lacked technologic resources to deliver instruction for all students.</p>	<p>Constant communication among the district leadership team and development of a more collaborative environment.</p> <p>Began purchasing licenses for numerous online learning platforms and select teaching staff collaborated with the district curriculum team to</p>

Name	Needs	Outcomes
	Some of the student population lacked resources to be connected online at home.	<p>rewrite the entire curriculum to accommodate a digital learning format.</p> <p>Superintendent approached county and city leadership to request funds in order to assist the district in becoming fully one-to-one for student technology use. This was accomplished in time for the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.</p> <p>Provided hotspots and buses equipped with WIFI to assist with student connectivity throughout the district.</p>
Nicholas	Some of the student population lacked resources to be connected online at home.	<p>Parked mobile hotspot buses throughout the district for students to be able to use their already provided one-to-one device at home.</p> <p>The need to take action compelled district leadership to take action on agenda items that were previously discussed, sometimes for years, but were not acted upon.</p>
Spencer	<p>Systems in place prior to the pandemic were being overwhelmed.</p> <p>Strategically, a second system of learning that is done at school.</p>	<p>Transactional leadership - making decisions that get the district to tomorrow.</p> <p>Systems in place remained - collaborative and distributive leadership. Transition to virtual instruction was not as daunting with every student already one-to-one and staff trained in delivering virtual instruction on inclement weather days in past school years.</p> <p>40 staff members from throughout the district who serve in various capacities met daily to solve the new problems being faced.</p>
Vance	<p>Reprioritization of values during onset of COVID-19.</p> <p>Change in communication.</p> <p>Enhanced collaboration.</p>	<p>Focus shifted solely to training teachers to lesson plan and deliver quality instruction through a digital medium.</p> <p>Communication was needed early and often. More awareness was given to communication being more sincere, assertive, and compassionate given the circumstances that everyone may have been going through.</p>

Name	Needs	Outcomes
		<p>Teacher advisory group that met weekly to maintain open communication with staff and to assure them of the safety measures that were being taken.</p> <p>Completely in-person to begin the 2020-21SY.</p>
James	<p>Maintain digital systems in place with accommodations to an all-virtual learning environment.</p> <p>More communication.</p>	<p>District already had a robust digital learning initiative in place which included one-to-one devices for students and training of staff in using and being certified in Google Suites. A website was prepared to streamline teaching and learning for staff and students once news seemed to suggest that school closures might happen. The website was released the day school closures were announced.</p> <p>“Check & connect” meetings were held biweekly to hold brief 15-minute virtual conferences to ensure that all departments were staying on top of their required tasks in service to the district.</p>

Interview Protocols

Thank you for participating in this interview for my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my study seeks to understand how a superintendent aligns resources and implements change during a crisis. The aim of this research is to understand how you specifically did this during the era of COVID. Our interview today will last about forty-five minutes to an hour.. [review aspects of consent form] You previously completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording our conversation today? ___ Yes ___ No

(Thank participant if a *yes*) Please let me know if at any point you would like for me to turn off the recorder or to keep something you said off the record.

(If participant says *no*) Thank you for letting me know. I will be sure to only take notes during our interview.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

If you have any questions during the interview, please feel free to ask them at any time.

Superintendent Background

- Can you tell me briefly about your work background and your pathway to the superintendency? (I will probe depending on how forthcoming the participant is)
- How long have you been in the position of a superintendent? How long have you served your current school district as a superintendent?
- How does leading as a superintendent differ from leading in other roles you have served in?

Leading Through Crisis

- How do you define a crisis? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your understanding of leading in a time of crisis?
- Has this crisis situation been different from others that you have led your district through?
 - If so, how? If not, tell me about the similarities.
- Has leading your division during covid affected how you perceive the role of a superintendent?
 - In what ways has Covid affected your strategic approach to leadership?

Complexity Theory

- In leading a school division, superintendents interact with different internal and external groups. Can you talk to me about how covid has affected the way you make decisions in terms of weighing competing interest groups? Can you provide an example?
- How has covid affected your strategic priorities for the division? -
 - What are the division priorities now and how has covid affected them?
 - What makes something a priority?

- What role has politics played to impact what is deemed a priority to address within the district?
- Talk to me about what influenced your decision-making. Did you speak with other superintendents, school board members or community members at the onset of Covid? What was the feedback from those conversations?

Organization as Organism

- Talk to me about how you have pushed back against undesirable influences to gain better outcomes for the district's initiatives.
- Has anything surprised you in the way people responded to the way you were leading when Covid first began?
- What adjustments have needed to be made in order to navigate leading through a pandemic?
- Can you explain efforts you have implemented to achieve the intended purpose of the school system you serve given the complication that Covid adds to effectively running a school district?

Leadership Legacy

- Are there specific values that your district seeks to be known for? What are they? **(it can be identified as what the district is known for and what you seek for the district to be known for? How do you know that this is what the district is known for?)**
- In what ways can desired values influence your leadership approach to system-wide change?
- Does the thought of leaving a legacy influence your approach to district change processes? How?

Before we conclude the interview, is there anything unique about your experience as a superintendent that you believe influences your decision-making through the COVID19 pandemic that we have not had a chance to discuss?

VITA

Jarad C. Munroe

PROGRAM OF STUDY

Old Dominion University
 Department of Education Foundations and Leadership
 120 Education Building
 4301 Hampton Boulevard, Suite 2300
 Norfolk, VA 23529

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership <i>Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA</i>	December 2022
Master's Degree in Educational Leadership <i>Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA</i>	August 2018
Bachelor of Arts in History <i>Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA</i>	May 2011

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Principal <i>Hampton City Schools, Hampton, VA</i>	2020 – Present
Dean of Students <i>Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, VA</i>	2018 – 2020
History Teacher <i>Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, VA</i>	2016 – 2018
History Teacher <i>Richmond City Public Schools, Richmond, VA</i>	2011 – 2015