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THE SELECTION, ORGANIZATION, AND ROLE OF SENIOR EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAMS IN THREE URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN A SOUTHWESTERN STATE: A PHENOMENOLOGY

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by

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say he had been accepted to Yale, my alma mater. I also remember that phone call four years later when he let me know that he'd be moving to Houston to pursue his passion to teach, just as I had years before him. It was in that moment that I realized that you don't have to analyze survey data or meet a KPI to know that you've made a difference. Sometimes you can see it in unexpected, more profound ways. I want to acknowledge both those who propelled me to succeed, and those who continue to inspire me with their own achievements.

The Selection, Organization, and Role of Senior Executive Leadership Teams in Three Urban School Systems in a Southwestern State: A Phenomenology

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Under the direction of a superintendent, senior executive leaders of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, defined as having an enrollment of at least 10,000 students and being located 25 miles from a major city, share a common challenge of leading essential operations, including the human resources, operations, finance, and academic functions. Superintendents across the nation are tasked with hiring and organizing their leadership teams in order to maximize the effectiveness of the school system. There is a need to further explore the role that politics, human capital, and symbolism play as the superintendent decides how to hire for and distribute the responsibilities of his or her senior executive leadership team. This study shared the perspectives of retired superintendents as they reflected upon the individuals and realities that impacted their decisions to hire and organize the members of their senior executive leadership teams. This study may benefit urban school superintendents who will encounter similar challenges and opportunities during their careers. Aspiring and current superintendents will be able to use these findings to make informed decisions regarding

how to engage stakeholders and approach obstacles to organizing and selecting their senior

executive leadership teams how they see fit to lead complex school systems.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The urban school district superintendent serves as both the instructional leader of a public school system and the chief executive officer responsible for leading the non-instructional functions of the district. Across all major school systems, senior executive leadership team members, that is, those reporting directly to the superintendent, lead functions including academics, human resources, operations, and finance. The superintendent is also tasked with balancing the pressures and priorities of local, state and federal mandates, making it essential for the superintendent to depend upon a team of senior executive leaders to assist in decision-making (Elmore, 2004; Fusarelli & Peterson, 2014; Hoegh, 2008) The typical superintendent has professional experience engaging with a variety of operations but usually is not a functional expert across all of them; therefore selecting those who will lead the essential functions of the district is an important decision that is left to the superintendent and to varying degrees the district's board of education (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Kowalski, 2005).

The superintendent has many considerations to make when selecting and hiring the executive leadership of the district, including the competence and track records of candidates for executive roles, internal politics and dynamics, diversity, and the superintendent's past experiences. The superintendent makes decisions based on the information and talent pool within his or her current district, while also considering the interests and opinions of stakeholders such as the school board, mentors, colleagues, and students (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendent may also consider organizational

fit when hiring his or her senior leadership team. Particularly since the majority of urban superintendents inherit a large number of employees from their predecessors, including their cabinet, the superintendent may consider the dynamics of his or her existing teams when making hiring and organizational decisions.

The priorities of the school district are subject to change with the dynamics of the legislature, media, and public perception, all of which can also impact a superintendent's organizational decisions (Hoyle, 2002). In response to pressures to meet specific metrics or combat negative perceptions about the school district's effectiveness, a superintendent may make hiring and organizational decisions through a political lens, in order to display publicly a commitment to improvement and efforts to succeed in spite of changing dynamics (Elmore, 2000; Hsieh & Shen, 1998). The purpose of this study is to explore the current research and literature on the hiring and organizational design decisions of the school superintendent, exploring the extent to which the factors previously described impact the decision-making process.

This chapter outlines the proposed rationale and methodology for exploring the factors that influence how and whom the superintendent selects for his or her leadership team. Given the superintendent's complex role of managing engagement with stakeholders such as the school board and community, as well as being responsible for the oversight of the district's operations, it is hypothesized that the superintendent will make his or her hiring and organizational decisions based on a variety of factors (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2004). This study seeks to explore the specific considerations the superintendent

makes when selecting those who will comprise his or her district's senior executive leadership team.

Statement of the Problem

The senior executive leadership team of the superintendent of schools guides essential operations of the district including the human resources, operations, finance, and academic functions. Prior research suggests that the organizational priorities of the school district and school board, as well as the composition of the senior leadership team, influence the ways in which the superintendent approaches the responsibility of forming his or her cabinet (Crum, 1991; Hoyle et al, 2004; Sevak, 2012). There is a need to further explore the considerations that a superintendent makes when choosing how to hire and organize members of his or her senior executive leadership team. These considerations will be described and analyzed through the theoretical framework outlined in Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames of an organization. In their work, Bolman and Deal (2013) categorize the ways in which organizations operate into the political, symbolic, human capital, and structural frames. In the context of the school superintendency, the Four Frames encompass the complex considerations the superintendent makes when selecting his or her senior executive leadership teams. As a public figure held accountable by a publicly elected board of education, the superintendent weighs political interests when making major decisions for the district, which could include major hiring decisions (Kowalski, 2011). Structurally, the ways in which the superintendent organizes the central office of a school system can impact the

effectiveness of the enterprise (Chrispeels & Martin, 2002; Honig, 2008). The superintendent is also tasked with ensuring strong leaders are developed and recruited into the system, introducing human capital challenges that can factor into decision-making (Normore, 2004; Normore, 2006). As a symbolic leader of the school district, the superintendent makes decisions based on how they will be perceived or to signal a commitment to change by reorganization, reframing goals, or restating the organizational priorities (Bryman, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2007; Kowalski, 2005). Collectively, numerous types of factors can play into the superintendent's decision-making process when selecting members of his or her senior executive leadership team.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify the considerations that a superintendent weighs when hiring and organizing his or her senior executive leadership team. Current literature on management suggests that a number of factors contribute to the makeup of a senior executive leadership team, including the opinions of external stakeholders, attributes of candidates for these leadership positions, and perspective of the superintendent (Carver, 2000; Blount, 2000; Sevak, 2012; Wong, 2007). Using Bolman and Deal's (2013) four organizational frames as a conceptual framework, the considerations that factor into the superintendent's decisions regarding his most senior leadership team will be analyzed through the political, structural, human resources, and symbolic lenses. The political lens is defined as relating to the management of relationships with stakeholders such as board members when making organizational

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decisions. The structural lens is defined as the ways in which the system, including current operational realities, policies and finances, factors into the decisions made regarding senior executive leadership teams. The human resources frame in the context of this study includes the talent pipeline and leeway to organize, promote and recruit leaders into the organization. The symbolic lens is how the superintendent weighs his role as a public figure whose decisions are open to interpretation by the community. The individuals whom the superintendent selects for senior leadership positions are viewed as opportunities for the superintendent to communicate greater priorities.

The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, what factors influence superintendents to select an individual for a senior executive leadership position?

2. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, what influences superintendents in making decisions related to the organization of his or her senior executive leadership team?

Overview of Methodology

This investigation was a qualitative, phenomenological study that explored the perceptions and experiences of three recently retired superintendents, as defined by having retired fewer than 10 years ago, of urban school districts with enrollment of greater than 10,000 students. The retired superintendents were interviewed regarding their experiences when making hiring and organizational decisions about their senior

executive team. By interviewing retired superintendents, the investigator gathered first-hand information about the experiences of superintendents that influenced their decision-making when hiring and organizing the school district's most senior staff. Presuming that the superintendent is chiefly responsible for staffing and organizing the district's senior leadership, former superintendents' perspectives were intended to provide insight into how structures, politics, human capital and symbolism factor into the decision-making process. Retired, as opposed to sitting, superintendents were interviewed to maintain the reliability of the data. It was assumed retired superintendents no longer working in the school system would be less hesitant to provide information on sensitive topics than if it could impact their professional careers. The phenomenology methodology "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, pg. 57). This study explored multiple superintendents' experiences with selecting candidates for senior positions and organizing their senior leadership teams, reducing the process to themes that may be applicable to the decisions of other superintendents. The interviews asked for the specifics of the superintendents' district context, school board member relations, and existing staff, among other factors. A phenomenological investigation can describe the ways in which an individual perceives, feels, describes, and makes sense of a situation or process (Marshall, 2007). This methodology investigated how the superintendents perceived the process of making hiring decisions about the senior staff who would collectively oversee the major functions of the district – such as human resources, finance and academics – providing descriptions and themes that could apply to other districts. Due to high turnover in urban school

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systems, many superintendents are faced with the situation of having to hire a staff member who reports directly to the superintendent (Boyne, 2011; Grissom, 2016), so this investigation could offer themes that might mirror those faced by other district leaders. To a greater extent than a single experience, an analysis of multiple experiences provides more data and potentially a more generalizable theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Each school district and superintendent experience described in the study will capture the phenomena described by comparing similarities and differences between the various contexts.

Purposeful sampling of participants was used to identify the superintendents and school districts selected in the study. This method allowed the researcher to conduct an investigation based on criteria identified as essential to understanding the theory or phenomena being studied (Maxwell, 2005). The retired superintendents who were selected for the study had led a school district with enrollment of more than 10,000 students and located within 25 miles of a major city. Large school districts are more likely to have defined senior executive leadership teams and multiple layers of management between the superintendent and building principals and teachers, which was also a criterion for this investigation.

The role of the superintendent is complex, consisting of stakeholder relations with elected school boards and the greater community as well as balancing the operations of the school district. This requires school districts to have a superintendent who not only serves as an instructional leader, but also the leader of other functional specialists who oversee operations, including the human capital management, finance, and facilities

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operations dimensions of running a school system (Brown-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2004). The complexity of the superintendent's responsibilities underscores the need to hire effective senior executive leaders, and therefore the processes behind hiring and organizing these individuals should be studied.

Significance of Study

This study was intended to provide an understanding of the degree to which different factors impact two of the superintendents' major decisions as a system-level leader: the people who will lead the core functions of the district and how the roles and responsibilities to lead these functions are allocated amongst the senior executive leadership team. The factors were examined through Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames, which include structural, political, human capital and symbolic classifications of factors. For example, the extent to which the political dynamic of the superintendents' relationship with their school board, to which they report directly, impacts hiring decisions was examined. By examining the experiences of multiple superintendents of urban districts, this study was intended to benefit those in similar positions who might have to weigh similar factors in their decision-making. Additionally, for those seeking to enter senior executive leadership positions in school districts, this study will shed light on ways in which a superintendent approaches the task of hiring his or her direct-reports.

The topic of this study is relevant to the field of education administration because, due to high levels of turnover in urban school districts, many superintendents are tasked with appointing senior staff members and must weigh a variety of factors ranging from

board governance, funding constraints, and the district's culture when promoting or hiring senior staff members. Reorganizations are common in large organizations, and consequently, superintendents of large urban districts are faced with the responsibility of organizing roles and responsibilities within their district. This study intends to provide an examination of the experiences, constructions and perceptions of multiple retired superintendents, which can provide relevant information to current school system leaders.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms that will be used regularly throughout this treatise will be defined as such:

Senior Executive Leadership Team. This term refers to the most senior members of the school district who report directly to the superintendent. This term will be used interchangeably with *senior leadership team*, *senior executives*, and *cabinet,* as these terms used interchangeably among school district leaders. These individuals are also known as the direct-reports of the superintendent. The actual titles of senior executive leadership teams vary between school systems, ranging from titles starting with the word "chief" to associate or assistant superintendent. Broadly speaking, these team members lead the functions the superintendent deems most essential to the district, commonly including finance, human resources, and academics. While this study will examine the decision-making of the superintendent on matters related to his or her senior leadership team broadly speaking, an additional area of research could focus more specific on the factors that contribute to how a superintendent makes decisions related to

specific positions, such as the deputy superintendent or chief of staff, positions that are commonly seen among the organizational structures of large urban school districts. The chief of staff and deputy superintendent, in particular, are roles that are commonly viewed as being the number-two position to the superintendent in terms of leading daily operations and affairs in the absence of the superintendent. This study does not focus on the specifics of how a chief of staff or deputy superintendent impacts the dynamics of a superintendent's leadership team, though future investigations could focus on these unique roles specifically.

Large Urban School District. According to the US Department of Education (2008), 850 of the 16,330 school districts known in operation have enrollments greater than 10,000 students, representing just five percent of all districts. Additionally, 13 percent of school districts are located within a city, and 34 percent are located in either a suburban area or city. For the purposes of this study, a large urban school district is defined as having an enrollment of greater than 10,000 students and being located within 25 miles of a major city.

Limitations

While the phenomenological methodology allows for the analysis of results across experiences of individuals and the data gathered is considered more robust and reliable than a single experience, studies across multiple individuals can be expensive and time consuming (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Gustafsson, 2017). Because interviews describe an experience from the perspective of the participant, they are subject to biases.

Additionally, because the investigator serves as a school administrator, it is possible that the straightforwardness of responses could be compromised; this limitation was addressed by selecting participants who were retired from the superintendent profession. Former superintendents might also choose to withhold details that they deem confidential or pressing to individuals who currently work in education administration. Inherent to the phenomenological methodology, because the phenomena being investigated are being analyzed in specific and few contexts, the data gathered is less generalizable across other types of circumstances (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The themes drawn from a limited number of superintendents can potentially be open to other conclusions and interpretations.

Delimitations

This study focused specifically on the political, structural, human resource, and symbolic factors that influence how superintendents select, organize, and lead their teams of senior leaders. This study chose to examine decision-making processes for selecting and organizing senior executive leadership teams, as opposed to the process for selecting principals because in the large school districts being investigated, there are multiple layers of management between campus staff and the superintendent, potentially creating a buffer between the superintendent's thought processes and action.

This study focused on the superintendents' decision-making process as they considered hiring and organizing senior leaders from a number of angles. The superintendents were asked, generally speaking, how they made decisions to hire senior

leaders, and the investigation did not focus on the process for hiring for a specific position, such as the chief financial officer or chief academic officer because the specific structures vary between districts, even those of similar sizes. Instead, this study focused on the general phenomena and experiences of the superintendent in deciding how to organize and select a leadership team. The dynamics between the superintendent and the de facto or de jure number two of the organization, such as the deputy superintendent and chief of staff respectively, were not focused on in this study as these specific dynamics are believed to be less generalizable between districts, and these roles are not consistently common across large school districts, while the cabinet structure is common.

This study intentionally examined large, urban school superintendents in order to control for some variables that could be different from superintendents in rural areas or within charter districts. Charter management organizations, for example, are governed by appointed boards, whereas many traditional school systems are led by publicly elected boards that represent distinct geographic regions. The majority of rural districts are much smaller than urban districts (Department of Education, 2008) and are therefore less likely to have comparable amounts of funding that could sustain a robust and comprehensive cabinet.

Assumptions

It was assumed in this study that participants answered questions to the best of their knowledge, though, potentially, not all would be equally able to articulate their perspective for research purposes (Creswell, 2009). Because some of the former

superintendents interviewed made hiring and organizational decisions across multiple school districts in their careers, it was assumed that their reflection on past experiences could evolve over time and be different than when they initially had that experience. Conversely, a superintendent's experience heading a team of senior leaders could have evolved throughout their tenure as it was based solely on what the superintendent had perceived in retrospect. It was also assumed that the former superintendents being interviewed have had to fill vacancies on their senior leadership teams.

Significance of Study

This study contributed to the existing understanding of how superintendents make decisions regarding their cabinet across numerous factors, and it illustrates the extent to which politics, human capital, structures, and symbolism influence these actions. Aspiring and current superintendents might use these findings to make informed decisions on engaging stakeholders and approaching obstacles to organizing and selecting their cabinet the way they see fit to lead complex school systems. As a result, superintendents might be equipped to select senior leadership teams based on the most salient factors. Based on the factors that superintendents most frequently cite as presenting obstacles to their decision-making processes, superintendent mentors and institutions that train aspiring superintendents can generate plans of action and curricula to prepare leaders to navigate these issues. Because this study explored the qualities that superintendents look for in candidates when selecting for positions on their senior

leadership teams, aspiring senior education executives can create plans of action to make themselves competitive and desirable for these types of roles.

Summary

As the leader of a complex enterprise, the school superintendent can influence the achievement of students through the organization and management of his or her senior leadership team, as these individuals lead essential operations of the district. A number of factors that span multiple dimensions – including the political influence of stakeholders such as the school board, the human capital constraints of finding competitive talent, and the symbolic role that the superintendent needs to play as a public figure in the community and school district – could influence the superintendent's decision-making process to hire and organize the senior leadership team. This study underscored the critical role that senior executive leaders play in leading the school system and provides insight into how the superintendent makes decisions on hiring and organizing the most senior leadership team in the school district.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As the instructional and operational leader of the school district, the superintendent holds a highly complex and demanding position that requires effective oversight of academics, human resources, and finance, among other dimensions (Hoyle, 2002; Kowalski, 2005). The sheer amount of expertise needed to lead these functions requires not only an effective superintendent, but also a team of leaders who will assist the superintendent in heading the organization. Much of the literature focuses on the role of effective teachers in educating students, as well as the roles of campus principals in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In addition to these roles, other functional leaders are also necessary to effectively lead the school district as a complex enterprise; this literature review will focus on the definition, responsibilities, and role of the school district's senior executive leadership team. These individuals report directly to the superintendent in the organizational structure of the district and most commonly manage the human resources, operations, academics, and finance functions of the district, among others (Hoegh, 2008; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier & Glass, 2004; Sevak 2014). Collectively, these individuals assist the superintendent with managing the internal operations of the district, allowing the superintendent to devote attention to the dual role of being an instructional leader to students and a public figure in the community who reports to an elected board of trustees (Fusarelli, 2014; Gomes, 2011).

Defining Senior Leadership Teams

The senior leadership team for the purposes of this review is defined as those who report directly to the superintendent (direct-reports), which includes positions typically denoted by a chief-level title and in some districts an assistant or associate superintendent role over a defined function of the organization. Some common titles of senior executive leadership team members in large urban districts include the chief human resources officer, the chief financial officer, and the chief operating officer. Collectively, these chief officers, directly reporting to the superintendent, are referred to as the superintendent's cabinet, and represent the most senior executives of the organization.

While additional studies on senior executive leadership teams can be done in the education sector, the literature provides a variety of definitions for senior leadership teams within the private sector, commonly defining them as the top level of management of the organization (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Nielsen, 2010). Others define senior leadership as those at the vice-president level and above (Wageman, 2008; Wagner, Pfeffer, & O'Reilly, 1984), or those who are the most highly compensated in the organization (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001). Though senior leadership teams can vary, particularly in large organizations with multiple levels of management, this review focuses on those who report directly to the superintendent, as these individuals are the most likely to have been selected by the superintendent and represent leadership across the functions essential to leading a school district.

Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella (2009) found that organizational success can be better predicted by the effectiveness of the most senior executives of the company than just by its chief executive. This suggested that the school superintendent is in a position to greatly impact the school system by selecting a cabinet that will work in synergy and complement the skills and vision of the superintendent. While the superintendent is the leader of the organization, his or her leadership team possesses functional expertise and sometimes a greater knowledge of internal relationships and dynamics, which underscores the importance of selecting a cabinet based on a variety of different factors.

Wageman et al. (2008), Katzenbach (1998), and Hackman (2002) suggested that at the senior executive level, teams smaller than ten individuals are likely to be successful at meeting organizational goals. Smaller teams were more conducive to setting discrete roles and ownership over specific functions and resources of the organization; while large teams were successful at meeting organization outcomes by instituting norms and procedures, the follow-through of enforcing expectations and team norms was more challenging with larger numbers of people (Wagner, 2006). Curtis and City (2008) studied the organizational structure of large school systems and found that organizational effectiveness at the senior-level is correlated with leadership teams of fewer than ten members.

The structure of the senior leadership team can also be influenced by ways in which the superintendent tasks members of his team to implement strategy and challenges. Roberto (2003) studied executive teams in the private sector and found that at the senior executive level, many strategic decisions were not being made and instead

delegated to smaller groups that included members from multiple layers of the organization, which he referred to as ad hoc committees. These types of ad hoc groups could made decisions spanning multiple functions, ranging from compensation review to employee termination grievances to decisions regarding office space. While not closely studied in education, superintendents can staff their cabinet according their vision for solving problems. If the superintendent envisions his or her leadership team as those who monitor and oversee the creation of internal strategy and decision-making of others, then the decision-making process for organization and selecting the senior team could differ from a scenario where the cabinet is the main vehicle for creating organizational strategies. Roberto (2003) described a scenario in which the core of decision-making could exist outside of the senior leadership team, depending on how the chief executive officer organizes his or her teams. A superintendent might feel the need to include the perspectives of other stakeholders outside of the senior team when making decisions, especially in large school districts where there are multiple layers of management between the superintendent and campus-based staff. For example, when hiring a principal, a superintendent might delegate some influence to those in the community or staff members who will be greatly impacted by the decision.

The ways in which the superintendent structures his or her cabinet also can play a role into the decision-making process for organizing and hiring his or her team. Based on the organizational charts of the nation's top ten largest school districts, all the systems possessed a head of legal counsel, chief of human resources, and chief of facilities (Sevak, 2012). Also common amongst large school systems was a chief academic officer

and chief communications officer. Additionally, districts also have unique roles, such as chiefs of major projects, innovation, or equity, seeming to reflect the organizational priorities of the superintendent. The ways in which a superintendent prioritizes staffing his senior leadership team will impact the types of individuals who will be considered for the positions. While presumably a chief finance officer, as an example, will have extensive functional expertise in finance, other roles might lend themselves to more flexibility for the superintendent to select a leader based on other factors, such as an individual's rapport with other members of the organization or fit within the greater leadership team.

While this review focuses on the role of the cabinet as a senior governing body of the school district, it is also important to note that, according to organizational charts of various large urban districts, the deputy superintendent is not directly managing members of the superintendent's cabinet, but he or she may be leading other influential leaders in the district. For example, in the Houston Independent School District, the structure and power dynamics within the senior leadership team could vary with presence or absence of a "number two," commonly referred to as a deputy superintendent (HISD Senior Staff, 2018). The majority of large urban districts are staffed with a deputy superintendent, though the ways in which they are used varies from district to district (Sevak, 2012). The deputy superintendent might not formally manage members of the superintendent's cabinet, but sometimes the position is charged with leading the chiefs of the schools, creating a critical sub-cabinet group that also possesses influence and decision-making power outside of the formal cabinet of the superintendent. While this review focuses on

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the mechanisms that influence the superintendent's organizational decisions, the presence of a deputy superintendent could play a role in how the superintendent makes decisions, and the superintendent might make particular choices on how to fill that position based on his or her own experiences and vision for the organization. For example, Sevak (2012) found that the deputy superintendent position served superintendents effectively by managing the internal affairs of the district, allowing the superintendent to focus on the external relationships needed to lead the organization.

Background and Desired Qualities of Cabinet Members

The career path to the superintendent's cabinet varies, though the literature has uncovered trends regarding those most likely to ascend into those senior executive positions. Kimbrough and Nunnery (1976) found that those most commonly appointed to senior positions in school districts had common paths, including roles such serving as a central office supervisor, assistant principal, and principal, and these findings have been supported by more recent studies. For example, it was found that former elementary school principals do not frequently serve in the superintendent's cabinet. High school principalships were found to provide the greatest level of access to the superintendent and were more common previously held positions of superintendents and members of senior leadership teams (Ortiz, 1982; Tallerico, 2000). Nationally, fewer than 15 percent of superintendents are female, though nearly half of general administration roles, including assistant and associate superintendent, are held by women (Judd, 1988; American Association of School Superintendents, 2016). While the senior-levels of management in

school systems are predominantly male, there are a number of other career paths and considerations that are common amongst those seeking cabinet-level positions. Crum (1991) surveyed superintendents to gather the factors considered most relevant to promote principals to the district office and found that the most desirable candidates performed well as principals and also had broader experiences beyond that. Some examples of ways in which principals have stood out to superintendents for cabinet-level positions include participation in district-wide committees, experience leading a variety of types of campuses spanning from elementary to secondary, and taking on other responsibilities that serve the greater district. Crum found that, above all, the qualities most important to the superintendent are being trustworthy, ethical, and competent in the role that they currently hold. It was found that female superintendents value years of experience more than their male counterparts. Accounting for size of district and experience of the superintendent, these factors were commonly cited as being important for advancement. In an open-ended question about other important factors that superintendents consider when selecting members of their cabinet, 24% of superintendents used the word 'loyalty' to describe an ideal candidate.

Hickman and Silva (1984) studied the differences in desired qualities between middle and executive management. While some traits, such as organization and attention to detail were valuable in lower and middle management, the qualities that emerged as most useful for an executive were the abilities to be creative, sensitive, prepared for change, focused, and patient. A superintendent's leadership team represents discrete functions of the school district, such as human resources and finance, but he or she is also

selecting individuals who will need to operate successfully in the midst of change and shifting priorities. From being able to navigate the political landscape to being able to problem solve across functions with other senior leadership team members, the qualities that the superintendent could find desirable in members of his or her cabinet go beyond expertise and tenure within the school district.

The Selection of Senior Executive Leaders

There is a wide range of criteria for the superintendent to consider when selecting members of the senior executive leadership team, ranging from credentials to the diversity of thought, experience or background that they bring to the greater team. Ortiz (1982) studied the competitiveness of specific professional experiences for being considered for cabinet-level positions. The least likely positions to be considered for cabinet-level positions were elementary school principals, a position held disproportionately by females. It was extremely common for the superintendent's cabinet to have had teaching experience in their careers, although the career trajectories to those positions differ on the lines of gender (Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000; Severns & Combs, 2013). It was observed that men are overrepresented in the superintendency and cabinet-level positions, and men often had career experiences that were more likely to include secondary administration and coaching roles and fewer experiences in content specialist roles at the central office.

At the senior executive level of the organization, an ability to influence an entire organization through the lens of an individual's function has been attributed to success

(Cutis & City, 2009; Wager et al., 2006). In less ideal scenarios, leaders of specific organizational functions operate in isolation from one another or even feel compelled to suggest more relevance and importance than other functions and departments within the organization (Wagner, 2006). Curtis and City (2006) find that superintendents benefit from members of their cabinet who can address organizational issues through a variety of lenses, ranging from the financial to human capital to political dimensions of a school system. A strategic recommendation that is grounded by a variety of considerations is valuable to the superintendent's decision-making process, and conversely, solutions that do not take into account the complexity of the dimensions of a large organization such as a school district are not useful to progressing towards meeting goals (Doz & Kosonen, 2007). Wageman (2008) refers to this skill set as empathy, which is being able to recognize situations and opportunities from the perspective of another individual and being able to manage responses and implement solutions based on that information. Within any leadership team there are ample opportunities for conflict and disagreement as well as empathy, and big-picture thinking around problem solving can generate solutions that can impact large, complex systems such as a school system.

Hirsch (1987) studied the success of 12 pairs of executives, comparing one set with successful track records of being selected for promotion to a set with moderate success, who had been passed over for cabinet-level positions. A key finding was that the successful group of executives was more likely to change positions or responsibilities every two to three years, with distinct jumps into high-profile responsibility early on in their careers. Those in the moderately successful group of leaders were less likely to

pursue frequent changes in responsibilities and believed that their ascent was less within their control than the highly successful group. The moderate group also more frequently cited their integrity, moral judgement, and willingness to work hard as a justification for their success.

Carlson and Schmuck (1981) found that specific actions and career paths led to a greater likelihood of being considered for cabinet-level posts. Based on a study of the career paths of high-level administrators, men in particular were likely to have been advocated for by professors in education administration to sitting superintendents for consideration for senior-level positions. While women were less likely to be considered for a cabinet-level position based on relationships with education administration professors, they were connected to superintendents for consideration through executive search firms and through involvement in professional organizations in which superintendents are also members. The role of the superintendent's network and the social capital of those seeking senior executive positions has an impact on career outcomes. In a more recent study on the qualities of effective leaders, Parylo and Zepeda (2014) interviewed senior school district executives on the quality of effective principals. They found that superintendent and assistant superintendents in two school systems valued team orientation, communication skills, and interpersonal effectiveness with others to be characteristics of effective leaders. Additional research could shed light on the desired qualities of senior education executives, though the traits found desirable in effective principals could serve as a proxy for effective cabinet members, especially for

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secondary principals, who are commonly considered to be in the superintendent talent pipeline (Glass, 2000; Kelsey, Allen, Coke, & Ballard, 2014).

Chief executives of organizations are likely to promote leaders that operate similarly to themselves and consistently maintained rapport with and the support of their superior (Slezak, 1984). Across numerous sectors, Carlson and Schmuck (1981) found that leaders of organizations consider personal attributes as well as factors such as education, seniority and experience. In the superintendency, as in other organizations, the superintendent must consider state and federal policies when basing decisions off personal attributes. Discrimination based on disability status, race, age, and gender are barred under law, and candidates must be evaluated accordingly.

A common decision that is made by the superintendent is whether to promote internally for a cabinet decision, or to hire from outside of the district. The superintendent's view on the merits of promoting internally can greatly influence his decision-making process on selecting and organizing staff. If the superintendent was selected externally to lead a school district, he or she might value the insight of someone who understands the context and history of different relationships and dynamics. Conversely, if a superintendent is tasked with overhauling a function or a specific initiative, it might be valuable to seek the perspective of an individual who brings a unique insight, untethered by history, politics, and habit of operating in a particular way. A superintendent might be familiar with individuals in other districts who have led successful initiatives that he or she would like to replicate, and therefore he or she could consider recruiting that specific individual to enter the organization.

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The Role of Bias in Selecting Leadership Teams

Gender and other characteristics of an individual being considered for a cabinet-level position can impact a superintendent's hiring decision. Kanter (1977) found male managers were more likely to select men for positions over women, even when qualifications were accounted for; this is attributed to both unconscious and conscious biases about the qualifications of women for specific positions. The majority of urban school superintendents are men, and therefore bias is one area that a superintendent can combat when making objective decisions that will benefit the organization. In spite of the underrepresentation of women in senior administration positions, Dopp's (1986) survey of superintendents' perceptions found that the majority of them cited gender as only being a barrier for women early in their careers and maintained that they are objectively considered for senior positions after gaining the appropriate experience.

A commonly cited pressure of system leaders is to ensure that their leadership teams are diverse, as a variety of perspectives on an executive team has been attributed to greater success and preparedness to solve a variety of issues (Page, 2007). However, the research on the impact of diversity is mixed, and often teams can be diverse in a number of ways, not limited to race and gender. Page offers cognitive diversity as another lens through which system leaders can view selecting different perspectives for their leadership team. According to his research, diversity that is based on outside characteristics adds a layer of diversity at the surface, though additionally the ways in which one solves and perceives problems is also a form of diversity, and the two are not

mutually exclusive. A number of sectors, including education, have an overrepresentation of males at the top of the organization, so in addition to seeking gender diversity, hiring managers should seek diverse professional experiences and identities. The ways in which this impacts the superintendent's cabinet hiring decisions can be that they seek out qualified individuals of diverse backgrounds that could also offer new perspectives. For example, a superintendent might have the opportunity to hire senior executives from a different type of district, or the charter or private school space, or even consider hiring individuals with experience outside of the realm of education, particularly when the majority of cabinet members have traditional public school teacher and administrator experiences. Because the product of an effective school system is an educated community, Curtis & City (2009) caution that a background in instruction adds value to district leadership teams. Additionally, when too few members of a team hold a specialized perspective or expertise, they can become too essential to the operations of a system if a succession or cross-training plan is not in place. While diverse perspectives are valuable, the superintendent should identify the area of expertise that is most critical to the organization and ensure that it is appropriately utilized for district operations.

Bray, Campbell, and Grant (1974) studied the factors that make candidates most desirable for promotion into executive leadership and compared that information to the outcomes of candidates after eight years. The four factors determined to be most essential for promotion include communication skills, being adept with human relations, organizing skills, and the ability to be creative. Additionally, other non-skill traits were predictors for promotion, including ability to handle stress and uncertain situations.

Kanter (1977) found that acceptance by peers was another critical component of being competitive for promotion into senior management. Based on the study by Bray et al, the majority of candidates rated highly on these factors held positions in higher management within eight years. A challenge for superintendents is that their interaction with candidates for cabinet-level positions may be too limited to gauge effectively their competitiveness for such positions, particularly for external candidates that might not possess a rapport or reputation with the superintendent and other stakeholders. The superintendent might need to rely on a more comprehensive interview process, or the opinions of those who have worked closely with cabinet candidates in order to best assess their candidacy for a senior leadership position. Executive search firms place 54% of candidates whose incomes range over $150,000, and this industry has more than doubled in size since 2004 (Hamori, 2004). Because of the higher levels of compensation received by senior executive leadership teams in school districts, executive search firms provide another avenue for superintendents to be exposed to talent, though Khurana (2002) found that candidates that are successfully identified by search firms are more likely to come from organizations with strong reputations rather than possessing particular qualities or being more likely to perform at an above-average level. While a superintendent might desire particular characteristics in a senior leadership team, the limited exposure to information on prospective candidates, as well as bias, could impact his or her ultimate decision.

The Role of Turnover and Interpersonal Dynamics in Selection

As a superintendent gains particular experiences or realizes new priorities, the structure and membership of the cabinet is subject to change, and changes are common especially early on when an individual assumes the superintendency (Chapman 1997). As such, the superintendent needs to assess the value of his or her existing team members and prepare for opportunities to select new individuals for cabinet positions. Concurrently, along with the onboarding of new team members, the superintendent must prepare for how this can alter the dynamics of the existing team (Wageman, 2008). Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) suggest that an effective leadership team will experience conflict, but the conflict will be centered on substantive issues and interpretation of facts, as opposed to being rooted in interpersonal dissent and misalignment with the organization's values. While the superintendent should expect conflict to surface at the executive level and should select individuals who will work collaboratively, it is especially prudent that the leadership team operates with minimal conflict rooted in personal differences. One strategy to address this is to select individuals for cabinet positions after observing an extended number of interactions with members of the existing senior leadership team, and an alternative approach is to regularly build in exercises that reinforce the importance of building trust and a safe space between colleagues (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edmondson, 1999).

Curtis & City (2009) identified five pillars of effective teams, including accountability, capacity, structures, people, and purpose. As the superintendent manages

a senior leadership team through team transitions, being mindful of the building blocks of effective teams can lead to strong onboarding and management of the leadership team. When faced with the decision of selecting a new member of cabinet, a superintendent might consider the people aspect of this framework, weighing the candidate's credentials and experiences against the needs of the organization. Another consideration will be the structure and purpose of the team itself; as priorities shift, a superintendent could have an opportunity to onboard an individual who fills new needs, and a broader reorganization of roles might be necessary. In light of the high turnover rates of senior leaders (Wageman, 2008), a superintendent can set incoming members of cabinet up for success by defining the metrics of accountability clearly and appropriately.

The Role of the School Board and Cabinet Member Selection

The American Association of School Superintendents in a decennial study conducted on the superintendent talent pipeline and the barriers to entering senior-level positions in school districts found that resistance from members of the community, including members of the board of trustees, was cited as a reason that one has been removed from considerations for senior positions (Kowalski, 2011). In the AASA study, 44% of respondents cited board member challenges as a disincentive from pursuing leadership positions, and there were no significant differences between demographic groups such as women and men or racial background.

Carver (2000) discusses the role of the school board in the selection of members of the senior executive leadership team with a policy governance model. According to

Carver's model, the school board and superintendent have distinct roles and responsibilities; the school board is the policy producing body of the organization, and the superintendent is tasked with implementing the policies in the schools. Using this framework, it would make sense that the superintendent has the latitude to make decisions for his or her leadership team without the input from the board, although in reality, the school board might have greater levels of influence on the selection process. Additionally, the superintendent may have to manage, exit, and onboard leadership team members who have existing relationships with members of the school board, which may factor into the superintendent's approach to these situations.

Through exposure at board meetings and workshops, members of the school board will inevitably have contact and develop impressions of the superintendent's cabinet. Because the superintendent's cabinet manage high-profile, mission-critical functions such as finance and human capital, the information and insight that these individuals possess are valuable to the board. As such, it seems possible that the school board could have an interest in influencing the selection process for these positions for a number of reasons that could be structural, operational, or political. The superintendent needs to navigate his or her relationship with board members and influence accordingly in order to make the hiring and organizational decisions that are best for the school district.

Sevak (2012) found that school board members were frequently cited by superintendents as playing a role in the decision-making process of hiring and organization of senior staff. The superintendents interviewed in Sevak's study cited

having to consider the board's involvement, as well as create a vision for how the school board should interact with the superintendent's cabinet. In one example, a superintendent cited resistance from the board to creating a deputy superintendent position, claiming that the superintendent had enough members on his or her team to fulfil his or her duties. The superintendent reminded the board of the agreement the board had made with him when he entered the district, delineating governance and policy making to the board and operations to the superintendent. After providing this rationale, he was able to influence their approval of the role. In another example, a superintendent created a chief equity officer role, which had not previously existed. This superintendent was able to successfully do so by engaging the board in the interview process and by introducing the idea shortly after the board had made a commitment to ensure equity in resources across the schools. As the leader of the school system, the superintendent needs to navigate the dynamics with the school board and weigh his or her priorities accordingly. While each dynamic between the school board and superintendent will vary, when organizing the district's senior leadership team, the superintendent will need to effectively influence and communicate norms to the board in order to successfully implement decisions. Strategies such as involving the school board in the interview and vetting process as well as strategically timing reorganization decisions will aid the superintendent in accomplishing his or her agenda.

Complementing the Superintendent's Strengths Through Hiring

The selection of cabinet members provides the superintendent with an opportunity to complement or tactfully challenge his or her strengths and areas of growth. A large number of superintendents enter the role with experiences that are specific to one or a few functions of the organization, most commonly the principalship, with earlier experiences as a teacher and other administrative roles. While the vast majority of positions in a school district are teachers and principals, large school systems in particular require functional expertise that is not gained through holding these positions. For example, a principal might not be well versed in laws related to procurement using public revenue, the nuances of creating financial projections for major bonds, or government relations. For this reason, the superintendent should select leadership team members who provide him or her this information and should also be aware of which areas of expertise would be valuable in his or her senior leadership team.

While the superintendent is the instructional leader of the school district, he or she is also the leader of the supporting functions of heading a school system, such as finance, human resources, and facilities (Chapman, 1997). The superintendent will not be an expert in many of these supporting functions, and his or her senior executive leadership team can provide the expertise to aid the superintendent in leading the organization. Subsequently, while the superintendent may not be well versed in the skill sets needed to effectively manage a supporting function of the organization, his or her leadership team will be able to seek and manage talent that will aid the district in its operations.

In addition to complementing the functional expertise of the superintendent, his or her leadership team can complement his or her knowledge of the internal politics and dynamics of the organization. Particularly if the superintendent was hired externally, the context of relationships between individuals, teams, and external stakeholders will prove valuable in governing the organization. When the superintendent is tasked with hiring for vacancies in his or her cabinet, he or she will be presented with the decision to hire internally or to seek talent from outside of the organization. The superintendent's decisions might be influenced by a desire to hire individuals who possess a knowledge of internal dynamics and politics that would otherwise be difficult to gather (Bolman and Deal, 2013).

While not extensively studied in the literature, the superintendent's cabinet also presents an opportunity for the superintendent to complement his or her lack of expertise in a variety of functions, especially if the superintendent comes from a non-education background. In instances where the head of a school system comes from the business community, which has occurred in the Washington, DC and New York City public school systems, among others, cabinet members can be appointed to provide the education expertise to complement the superintendent. As the leader of the school system, the superintendent must balance his or her external and internal responsibilities and consequently could organize his or her staff to optimize effectiveness. A superintendent of a non-traditional background might have been selected to address particular needs of the school district, such as more critical oversight over business or

legal affairs, for example, and therefore will need to staff his cabinet accordingly to execute the other functions of the school system (Eisinger and Hula, 2004).

In addition to complementing the superintendent's functional and political strengths, the cabinet can also be used to create other types of diversity within the school district executive leadership team. Superintendents are predominantly white and male, compared to the largely female teacher workforce (Carter, Glass, & Hord, 1993; Kelsey, Allen, Coke, & Ballard, 2014). The cabinet could serve as a tool to add to the diversity of perspective at the executive level of the school district, adding individuals of different educational, racial, national origin, and gender backgrounds. While not thoroughly investigated, the makeup of a school district's leadership team compared to the demographics of the greater school community could also play a role in a superintendent's decision-making process when organizing his or her senior leadership team, particularly because the school board members represent and advocate for the needs of their communities, and might feel particular perspectives and backgrounds are valuable to the school district (Banks, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Theoretical Framework

The Four Frames of Leadership, as discussed by Bolman and Deal (2013), are a lens through which the organizational and hiring decisions of superintendents can be understood. The superintendent must weigh his or her decision-making process for selecting and organizing school district executives along the symbolic, structural, political, and human resources frames. The Four Frames as discussed by Bolman and

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Deal are lenses through which one can understand the underlying considerations and tradeoffs when organizing a senior leadership team. As opposed to viewing the selection of a member of cabinet as simply screening, meeting, and selecting the candidate perceived as the best fit, the Four Frames more thoroughly describe the competing factors that could impact a superintendent's decisions. From promoting internally to selecting an individual with strong ties to a stakeholder who possesses influence, a superintendent can consider a multitude of factors before decisions are made. As the organizational leader of the district, the superintendent makes decisions that are influenced by relationships with stakeholders within and outside of the organization (Fusarelli & Peterson, 2014; Kanter, 1983).

The superintendent has to balance the selection of his or her most senior staff against a number of factors that influence the decision-making process. Members of the executive cabinet are functional and strategic leaders of the organization, and they can be selected along the lines of the expertise they possess as well as based on political, symbolic, and structural factors. Due to turnover of board members, staff, and changing priorities, each hiring and organizational decision that the superintendent makes is unique and intertwined with the experiences and perceptions of the superintendent.

While much of the literature focuses on the role that the teacher and principal play in student achievement, there are opportunities to expand the research on the impact that the district's senior most leaders have on the school district's operations. Collectively, the senior leadership team of a school district creates the structures by which the district at large executes the policies of the school board, impacting student achievement. Both poor

and intentional decisions to hire and organize the superintendent's cabinet could impact the quality of instruction in the schools. The literature suggests that expertise alone is not enough to foster an effective leadership team, and an ability to think at an enterprise level, across functions, and with empathy are correlated with success at the executive level (Hambrick, 1995; Wageman et al., 2008; Doz & Kosonen, 2007). An effective superintendent is not simply tasked with selecting an individual based on credentials, but also with forecasting an individual's success at forging strong interpersonal relationships and a collaborative spirit.

From the symbolic frame, the superintendent is tasked with making decisions to showcase his or her values and agenda, especially at critical points in his or her superintendency, such as early on or in response to a crisis. While a superintendent might have an initial preference to select individuals with a known track record of success, he or she can consider other factors such as an individual who has rapport and trust with the community. A superintendent might have to consider promoting from within the organization as a strategy to communicate valuing the internal capacity of the system and recognizing the contributions of internal candidates (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Similarly, because a superintendent must lead an organizational response to crises such as budget shortfalls or internal scandals, he or she might be faced with removing individuals from the senior staff to symbolically suggest dissatisfaction with current structures and to catalyze change. As a public figure and the leader of the organization, a superintendent is faced with making decisions to organize his or her staff based on internal metrics that can

be clearly defined, as well as a public perception by the constituents of the school board that ultimately impact the superintendent.

Concepts from Bolman and Deal's human resources frame can be applied to the process of organization and selecting members of the school district's executive leadership team. Much of the success of a superintendent's cabinet rests on an ability to work effectively as a group. The superintendent is in a position to form a group that will offer perspectives, expertise, and synergy that can complement the superintendent's strengths. A group structure offers both opportunities and challenges for operating effectively; while groups can potentially offer diversity of thought, at their worst, they can slow down efficiency to act and are susceptible to being disproportionately influenced by political pressures and individuals (Bolman and Deal, 2013; Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Maier, 1967).

Using Bolman and Deal's group framework, we can understand the dynamics of a superintendent's cabinet as consisting of: informal roles, informal norms, informal networks, interpersonal conflict, and decision-making. A superintendent, whether intentionally or not, can establish informal roles based on the dynamics of the cabinet, with some individuals acting as big-picture thinkers, others as challengers to the status quo, and others as consensus builders. A school district with a limited supply of talent may be faced with having a senior leadership team that is dominated by one type of contributor and a dearth of others. In selecting and organizing his or her leadership team, the superintendent can base decisions off of the type of roles that are perceived to be needed in the organization.

The role of professional networks in the superintendent's cabinet can potentially play a role in the mechanism by which a superintendent makes hiring and organizational decisions. Balkundi and Harrison (2006) found that the number of informal relationships and interactions members of a team have with one another are related to increased likelihood to be satisfied with being on a team. Beyond the transactional problems that members of a cabinet can discuss collectively, such as internal protocols and strategies, an understanding of one another's values and character outside of the formal setting contribute to building trust and rapport. A superintendent can use this to his or her advantage by strategically appointing individuals to cabinet positions knowing that an individual already possesses informal networks and rapport and will thereby serve as a bridge to connect other executives.

The effectiveness of senior leadership team is also defined by its ability to operate through interpersonal conflict and decision-making. The ability to empathize and listen to the judgement of others is critical in creating an effective leadership team, whether these skills are coached or recruited for by the organizational leader (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Theoharis, 2007). A cause of conflict, and ultimately a cause of organizational ineffectiveness, is the inability to understand the decision-making process from the perspective of another individual. At the cabinet-level, a group of functional specialist and senior organizational leaders might be especially prone to misinterpret a situation because the functions represented in the cabinet can appear complex and not easily understood.

The mechanisms and frameworks discussed by Bolman and Deal (2013) offer an additional perspective on the factors that influence how a superintendent selects and organizes his or her staff. They view organizations as a collection of various coalitions of individuals that seek common goals with limited resources. While policies and cultures can control the way in which politics manifest themselves, a political landscape will still exist (Daly, Finnigan, Jordan, Moolenaar, & Che, 2014; Jackall, 1988). The superintendent and members of his cabinet are inevitably members of various coalitions, both internal and external to the organization, and are therefore commonly motivated by alliances with others. This is compounded by that fact that urban school systems are governed by boards of elected trustees, who have other connections and influences that can impact the superintendent's decision-making process. The superintendent as a leader is tasked with navigating the political landscape by setting an agenda, understanding the political landscape of the organization, building coalitions, and negotiating compromises (Bolman and Deal, 2013). The superintendent, as viewed by the political lens, should set a vision for the organization while also understanding the individuals who are major influencers and have high levels of political capital and rapport. As applied to the selection and organization of an executive team, the superintendent is in a position to balance the credentials of the individual alongside the individual's influence and connections to other key stakeholders. High-profile members of a school district, board members, the community and the greater organization could possess different opinions on who is best fit for the job based on political dynamics, influencing the decision-making process.

School districts exist as part of a large ecosystem of external organizations and competing priorities and are subject to outside pressures that can impact its operations (Bolman and Deal, 2003; Moore 1993). Some external stakeholders could be members of city and state government, outside funders, unions, and other organizations with ties to district leadership. For the superintendent, an aspect of understanding the political landscape involves building connections and being able to negotiate as needed to accomplish a greater agenda. If members of the school board and community were to express dissatisfaction with the operations of the district, the superintendent may be in a position to defend or remove individuals from the organization to acknowledge fault and imminent change. The political dimension of the superintendency entails understanding when to make organizational changes based on external pressures and when to approach others with deals that serve his or her greater agenda (Fusarelli and Peterson, 2014). As an example, a fiscal shortfall could lead to the calling for the removal of the chief financial officer, and the superintendent can organize accordingly or strategically use coalitions to keep his or her staff intact.

The superintendent has a variety of considerations to make across multiple lenses when selecting members of the senior leadership team of the school district. As such, it is important to understand the mechanisms and influences that result in the superintendent's decisions. The members of a school district leadership team oversee critical functions of the school district, ranging from academics to finance, and therefore have a strong influence over the operations of the district. The selection of the superintendent's senior

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executive leadership team takes into account the structural importance of the role, as well

as the human resource, political and symbolic considerations.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 presents an overview of the research methodology that informed the design of this study. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents when they were tasked with hiring members of the most senior leadership team in the district and when they were tasked with organizing the roles and core responsibilities of the organization amongst the senior staff. This was conducted through a phenomenological approach of what these former superintendents experienced during these types of situations. This chapter is organized into the following sections: epistemology, study design, sampling method, data collection, interviews, documentation, data analysis, and validity of the study.

Utilizing Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames of an organization as the theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions guided the investigation:

1. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, what factors influence superintendents to select an individual for a senior executive leadership position?

2. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, how are superintendents influenced to make decisions related to the organization of their senior executive leadership team?

In order to explore these research questions in greater depth, a qualitative, phenomenological research methodology was used.

Epistemology

In this qualitative study, a constructivist epistemological stance was used. According to Maxwell, (2013, pg. 43), constructivism is defined as interpreting an experience as "our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such construction can claim absolute truth." The ways in which a superintendent selects, organizes and leads a senior leadership team are the result of a perspective that is influenced by various contexts and experiences that construct the superintendent's thought process for making decisions. As opposed to assuming an absolute truth about reality, the constructivist approach lends itself to describing the superintendent's decision-making with an understanding of the complexity of the role that experience plays during these processes.

Study Design

In order to address the research questions, a qualitative phenomenological research method was used as the study explored the complex factors of a superintendent's experience that shaped the perception and construction of reality that impacted hiring and organizational decisions. The superintendent's process for selecting, organizing, and leading senior leadership teams was studied within the context of the superintendents' experiences. Given that qualitative research utilizes the researcher as an instrument of the

investigation, the data will provide rich and thick description of the phenomena being examined and will involve the analysis of interviews of those who have experienced the stated phenomena, this approach provided a strong study design. Given the importance of context in this investigation, phenomenological research design is most appropriate. Denzin & Lincoln (2008) state that phenomenological investigations attempt to make sense of and interpret phenomena; the experiences of multiple retired superintendents when hiring and organizing senior staff provide an opportunity to synthesize multiple accounts of the phenomena and potentially create new contributions to what is currently understood (Sousa, 2014).

Lien and Pauleen (2014) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) examine the features of qualitative research as possessing distinct characteristics that lend themselves well to this investigation. These include the researcher serving as the primary instrument of the investigation, gathering data from participants who have experienced the phenomena, and interpreting data gathered from audio and notes from the field investigation. While this dimension of qualitative research raises questions surrounding subjectivity, there are strategies that can protect the integrity and trustworthiness of the data, such as member checks, multiple or lengthy engagements, and peer collaboration (Creswell, 2007).

Additionally, qualitative research is descriptive in nature and can include extensive details of direct quotes from participants and provide details from participants that can be analyzed to form themes and rich, thick details on the phenomena being examined. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) also describe the benefits of inductive analysis of data when analyzing information gathered from an

investigation. After collecting descriptive information from multiple subjects, information can be coded for themes, and patterns can be compared to the theory or phenomena being studied or hypothesized. Lastly, qualitative research, particularly phenomenological investigations, seeks to gather an understanding of situations and occurrences that are described by the participants. From the analysis and interpretation of results, meaning can be gathered and experiences can be described among patterns and themes.

Sampling Method

In this study, purposeful sampling was used in order to gather the data necessary to conduct this investigation. The purposeful sampling technique is used widely in qualitative research and involves selecting individuals who have specific knowledge relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Because this study gathered an understanding of the decision-making process of superintendents when selecting and organizing senior leadership teams, the individuals selected for this study had held the position of superintendent of schools in a district of at least 10,000 students and within 25 miles of a major urban environment. Former superintendents were intentionally chosen as part of the sampling method because it was assumed that superintendents who no longer work in a school system would be more willing to share details candidly that they might not share if they were currently employed by a school district. Retired superintendents possess, on average, a greater number of years of experience, and those targeted for this study had held the superintendent position in at

least two districts, adding to the depth of experience and perspective that they were able to contribute during the interview process. Large and urban districts as defined above were intentionally chosen as it was assumed the experiences and perspectives of a superintendent in an urban environment could differ from those who worked in less populated and more rural environments. This sampling method will allow the investigation to be more targeted and to more easily gather themes by focusing on intentionally selecting superintendents with some similarity in professional background.

School district enrollments vary widely across the United States, with many districts serving fewer than 2,000 students and a much smaller number serving over 100,000. School districts receive funding largely based on the number of students that enroll in the schools, and for this reason, large districts will be the focus of this study. Large districts, defined in this study as well as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) is having an enrollment greater than 10,000 students (Kowalski et al., 2011). Kowalski found that large districts represent fewer than 2% of districts, which makes them different from the vast majority of school districts in the country. This type of district was focused on intentionally, as the greater enrollment provides both a need for senior leaders to manage functions that become more complex at larger scale and typical results in a high number of wider variety of senior administrative positions. This study did not explicitly seek to focus on the role of school finances and budgetary constraints on selecting senior leadership teams, instead focusing on the political, structural, human capital, and symbolic considerations more broadly.

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Participants were selected based on the type of school system they had led, specifically urban districts, which is defined as being located within 25 miles or less from a major US city. Urban districts have defining characteristics that make them unique from districts located very far from major cities, and by studying the processes in different urban districts, comparisons can be made with this one variable in common. Student achievement on standardized tests was not used as a selection criterion.

Participants

Participants in this investigation were selected using the following criteria:

- Was a retired school superintendent;

- Had served in the role of superintendent of at least two school districts;

- Had served as superintendent of a school district with enrollment of at least 10,000 students;

- Had served as superintendent in an urban environment, defined as being located within 25 miles or fewer of a major city.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data was collected in a manner that is consistent with a qualitative phenomenological research design. Semi-structured interviews was used as the primary source of data for this study. The interviews gathered information on the former superintendents' experiences selecting members of his or her senior executive leadership team and experiences re-organizing responsibilities amongst the members of his or her

team. This information was gathered by asking open-ended questions in a conversational manner, as opposed to a strictly scripted or highly structured approach, as is consistent with a phenomenological interview approach (Seidman, 2013). It was the intent of the study to seek an understanding and gather meaning from the former superintendents' experience navigating the situations described, and, as needed, follow-up questions were used to probe for additional information. This study only focused on interviewing retired superintendents and did not include other personnel such as members of a superintendent's cabinet.

The first component the research consisted of bracketing, a strategy that aided the researcher in identifying pre-existing beliefs and assumptions, particularly with regards to the phenomena being examined (Groenewald, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2012). In the case of this research study, the researcher identified beliefs and assumptions around the process of hiring and organizing senior leadership teams and suspended any biases held for gathering and synthesizing data with a minimized amount of bias. Additionally, the bracketing process was discussed the researcher's faculty, and notes were kept to minimize bias. Given the researcher's professional experiences in an urban school district environment in an executive-level position, identifying and suspending assumptions is a strategy that benefitted the data analysis of the study.

An additional component of the research process entailed the initial communication with the superintendents. Upon identifying three to five former superintendents who met the criteria described above, the former superintendents were contacted with an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). Prior to collecting

the data, this study went through the Institutional Review Board approval process, according to protocols at the University of Texas at Austin.

Interviews

Upon receiving approval and the consent of the subject for participation in the study, data was collected through an interview. Interviews with three former superintendents were a critical source of data for this study, each of which was audio recorded and transcribed using a transcription service. Participants were narrowed down based on the criteria previously described, and availability participate in an interview. Each participant in the study participated in one semi-structured interview that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. As a framework for conducting these interviews, Seidman's (2006) strategies for conducting an interview were used. The interviews took place at the location of convenience for the participant, sometimes their place of residence or a different mutually agreed upon location, and phone interviews were considered as well.

During the interview, the superintendents were asked questions related to the factors that they took into consideration when selecting and organizing their senior executive leadership teams and gathered their perspectives on the role these positions played leading the school district (See Appendix C). By virtue of the interviews being semi-structured, follow-up questions and clarifying questions were asked as needed to gather additional information related to the interview questions.

Documentation

In addition to interviews, documents were used to triangulate findings. Past meeting agendas were requested in order to understand the types of decisions that senior executive leadership team members make, which is a primary aspect of their role, as well as relevant board meeting agendas, the district's strategic plans from that period in time, and organizational charts. The organizational charts served to aid in comparing the structure of senior leadership teams in the school districts being discussed, and where possible, historical organizational charts were obtained in order to understand how the organizational design of senior leadership teams changed over time. In the absence of historical organizational charts, the retired superintendent was asked to describe major changes to the senior executive leadership team from his or her perspective during the interview. During the document review process, no inconsistencies were found with the statements of the participants.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis phase of the study, the data produced from the interviews of participants and documents were analyzed. Data was examined multiple times and in conjunction with bracketing strategies; the analysis was intended to produce an understanding of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and constructions as the phenomena took place. The interviews were transcribed and coded using Dedoose coding software. In addition to the analysis of the transcript, memoing and note taking were done

during the process of gathering data. The interviews were analyzed as individual cases and analyzed across cases to create comparisons in findings. Etic codes, which are determined prior to data analysis codes, guided the analysis, and emic codes were used as well, as themes emerged during the analysis (Creswell, 2007). Initially open coding was used to develop broad categories based on the text, followed by axial coding that will be organized according to the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal (2013) used in the study.

The data was analyzed with the Bolman and Deal (2013) Four Frames as a theoretical framework. The data was analyzed specifically for instances when a superintendent made decisions based on human capital, structures, politics, and symbolic considerations, as previously described. The interview text was re-read and axial coding was conducted to categorize according to the Four Frames and other emergent subcodes as needed. A member check component to the data was employed, and therefore each of the participating retired superintendents was given a copy of the interview transcriptions and other written documentation taken during the interview in order to present an opportunity for the participants to make corrections or add clarification to the data that was collected. These documents were delivered to participants via email.

Once the data was reviewed by members, it was analyzed an additional time along the themes that were most salient during the initial data analysis phase. Additionally, during this additional data analysis phase, there was a review for any additional patterns or categories that were not previously documented if they became evident.

Validity

Maxwell (1992) describes five primary threats to validity in qualitative research, including descriptive validity, interpretation validity, researcher bias, theory validity and reactivity. The researcher needed to avoid research bias in particular; being currently employed in a district-level leadership role and having done extensive research on the topic of leadership teams, it was critical for existing beliefs and assumptions not impact the analysis of the data. For this reason, leading questions were avoided and triangulation of the interviews with documents assisted in minimizing researcher bias.

Reactivity is another threat to validity that was noted while conducting this study. The researcher's current position as a senior administrator in a large urban school district had the potential to lead the interviewee to doubt the confidentiality of the interview, thereby compromising the trustworthiness of data. To address this threat to validity, the participants in the study were made aware consistently of the confidential nature of the study and that names and identifying characteristics of the school district, such as the specific location, enrollment, and specific job titles of senior executive team leaders, would be modified. For example, if an Orlando district's enrollment is specifically 112,000 students, it might be reported in this study as having greater than 50,000 and being in the southern US.

Member checking is another strategy that was used to preserve the trustworthiness of the data, which was provided after the interview had been transcribed and notes had been transformed into an electronic format that could be delivered to participants. This

strategy provided participants with an opportunity to address, correct, reflect or expand upon anything that was collected during the data collection phase, thereby adding to the validity of the data. Lastly, the data was analyzed several times after the data collection phase in order to provide a robust examination of the information that adequately captures the themes and patterns that emerged amongst the large amount of data that was collected.

Limitations

There were limitations to the qualitative, phenomenological design of this investigation. First, because only three former superintendents were interviewed, the sample size might not provide enough information to be generalizable across large populations. While all of the former superintendents who participated in the study had some aspects of their careers in common, namely that they had led urban school systems with greater than 10,000 students, it is reasonable to conclude that their experiences did not necessarily represent those of similar superintendents at large. It would also be problematic to compare the experiences of these superintendents to those who might be leading much smaller and rural districts, as the factors that have the strongest influence on the superintendent's decision-making could differ in that context. Because these superintendents are no longer serving in superintendent roles, some of their experiences may be colored by experiences they have had after serving in their positions, or some aspects of the experience that they recall may have altered due to the time that has passed since the initial experience.

Summary

In this chapter, the methods by which the researcher intended to collect and analyze the data were described, and the rationale behind the choice to conduct a qualitative, phenomenological investigation was examined. The ways in which the research intended to select and approach subjects was outlined, and the procedures for conducting this investigation were described. Potential limitations and threats to validity were addressed, as well as measures taken to protect the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of large urban school district superintendents when selecting and organizing their senior executive leadership teams. Specifically, this study sought to understand these phenomena though Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames of an organization: politics, human capital, structural, and symbolism. Three superintendents participated in a semi-structured interview. The participants were asked a variety of probing questions, and, in some situations, follow-up questions in order to obtain responses that comprehensively answered the interview questions needed for this phenomenological investigation. In this chapter, the characteristics of the participants and the school districts for which they served as superintendent are described, as well as their experiences. The findings are described by research question.

The Participants

The participants selected for an interview were chosen based on the following criteria. All participants were retired superintendents and most recently led school districts within 25 miles of a major urban city that had enrollments of greater than 10,000 students. All participants were superintendents in the same state in the southwestern US. The three superintendents who participated in this study were made up of three men, each of whom held a doctoral degree. Three participants had spent the majority of their careers serving as school administrators in a southwestern state and one participant had served as

superintendent in a southwestern state later in his career after previously serving in superintendencies in other parts of the US. Each superintendent had led school systems in a southwestern state that served kindergarten through 12th grade. Additionally, the three superintendents had experience hiring and organizing a senior executive leadership team during their superintendencies. This study focuses on the participants' experiences at the most recent school district for which they served as the superintendent. Their experiences selecting and organizing senior executive leadership teams at three distinct school districts in a southwestern state will be described.

SUPERINTENDENT 1

Superintendent 1 possessed over 20 years of experience in education and had served in roles ranging from teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, and central office leadership positions. In addition to having served on a superintendent's cabinet for two districts with enrollment of fewer thaSupern 10,000 students, he was promoted to the position of superintendent from a deputy superintendent position. After serving as superintendent of a district with fewer than 10,000 students for three years, he served as the superintendent of a school district in the same southwestern state with an enrollment of greater than 10,000, where he served for three years. He later retired from the superintendency to serve in a senior leadership position for a state education agency for approximately two years and then served in a leadership capacity for a professional association.

Superintendent 2 had over 30 years of experience in education and had held positions that include being a teacher, assistant principal, principal, school district leader, and higher education lecturer. After serving as a principal, Superintendent 2 led a school district with an enrollment of fewer than 10,000 students in a southwestern state, and two subsequently larger districts after that. After serving as the interim superintendent of an urban school district with an enrollment of greater than 10,000 students, he served as its permanent superintendent until he retired. After serving as a superintendent, Superintendent 2 served in various capacities in higher education as an instructor.

SUPERINTENDENT 3

Superintendent 3 had over 40 years of experience in education, which included being a teacher and then serving in a leadership capacity for a state education agency for numerous years before pursuing superintendencies for two large urban school districts in a southwestern state for more than 10 years. Additionally, after serving as a superintendent, Superintendent 3 held positions at numerous higher education institutions as an instructor.

Presentation of the Data

Participants were orally presented with a standard set of questions during the interview, and the responses received varied by individuals. Each retired superintendent answered the questions based on the unique circumstances of his school district. The

school districts in which they were last employed all operated in the same southwestern state. As part of the process of answering the research questions, the researcher utilized Dedoose coding software to analyze the data.

Research Question 1

The first research question of this investigation is as follows: From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, what factors influence superintendents to select an individual for a senior executive leadership position? Participants were asked to describe their professional background, the types of positions they feel are most essential to serve on the superintendent's leadership team, and their experiences hiring members of the senior executive leadership team.

Upon collecting and analyzing the data, seven common themes emerged in answer of the first research question of this investigation. The first theme is essential functions, and the second theme that emerged was essential positions on the senior executive leadership team. While these organized as two separate themes, one of the findings was that there is a high degree of overlap between functions and positions; participants would use the terms interchangeably at times. The seven themes are subsequently described in greater detail.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE SUPERINTENDENT'S CABINET.

Superintendent 1 reported having a number of different positions in education during his career before his first superintendency. He stated:

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After undergrad I began teaching and coaching right out of school, and for eight

years I served as a teacher and a coach in both a suburban district and a very rural

district [...] then became an assistant principal in a middle school in my

hometown. I did that for seven years [...] then was promoted to principal [...] And

from there [...] I was an assistant superintendent for one of the feeder patterns in a

different school district. I did that for six years. Serving on a superintendent's

cabinet as an assistant superintendent was really my segue for my initiation into

the world of central office, mentoring directly under a superintendent, etc. So it

helped me start really thinking about the possibilities of actually being a

superintendent.

Superintendent 1 describes his first superintendent position. He stated:

Eventually, when my superintendent decided to leave he said I need to go ahead

and float my resume, see what's available, and I was fortunate enough to become

the superintendent. I did that for three years and then saw an opportunity to

become the [School District A] superintendent, and I was able to get that job and

serve there six and a half years.

Additionally, Superintendent 1 described serving as an administrator with a state-

level agency and then eventually working for a professional association in education.

Through these experiences, Superintendent 1 had made decisions relating to the selection

and organization of his senior leadership team. He makes a point that the cabinet is joined

by a common mission, secondly that the members of the cabinet possess diverse skills,

and thirdly stresses the importance of instructional leaders on the cabinet. When asked

about the purpose of the senior executive leadership team, Superintendent 1 stated: "They define a working group as a group that doesn't necessarily share a common goal as much as they do a group that's together to perform individual roles and responsibilities, and there's a fundamental difference there. So in one sense back to the question, the executive team is in some sense a working group." When asked how the collective responsibilities of the cabinet impact the superintendent's selection decisions, Superintendent 1 stated that members of the senior executive leadership team "don't necessarily share a common goal as much as they do goals and expectations for their particular departments, and that's important because a superintendent is extremely limited in his or her in-depth knowledge of each of these areas, for example, some may be strong in finance while others are strong in curriculum, as is my case."

Superintendent 2 also shared his experience making decisions around the selection of his senior executive leadership team. Superintendent 2 had a variety of teaching and administrative experiences, including serving on a superintendent's cabinet, and has served as the superintendent of two large urban school districts in a southwestern state. Superintendent 2 stated that selection of the senior executive leadership team is important, given the magnitude of the decisions that the team is responsible for. He stated, "In almost any school district, you're going to have it divided – and I know that you've got about 10 functions. That's your framework from those 10 functions, I would say that there's four that are always constant, no matter how many or how large the district is, no matter what the enrollment is."

Regarding the four essential functions of the superintendent's cabinet, Superintendent 2 stated:

> You have your HR person, you have your teaching and learning or curriculum and instruction person, you have your chief financial officer or the business manager, and then you have someone for operations, and that could be planned operations and those kinds of things, so the buses and the textbooks and, as they say, the day-to-day things with facilities, custodians and all that, and food service.

Superintendent 2 also stated that in addition to the four essential positions he described, two positions are also close in importance, though not necessarily essential on the cabinet, which are technology and special education. He states:

> So to me, it's just a real simple way to just break it down into those four quadrants, although I know you have special education, that's very important, you have technology, that of course is on the front burner of everybody right now. So you have these other functions, but you could always break it down to those four. Now on the day-to-day, to me, those folks, those four people, or those four functions that I just mentioned, are critical, because not a day goes by that not one of those is affected.

Superintendent 2 stated that other functions are increasingly important to be represented on the superintendent's cabinet in a large urban system, and made a reference about how board relations impact the organization of the cabinet:

> In a large district, you're going to have someone that's in public relations, for instance, or public information. And you don't want them to be the very last

person to know of something, especially of something urgent, that may hit the newspaper. You want them to be part of your cabinet as well. So they can make or break you. And in a large district you may have someone that has the assignment of school board liaison between the school – in other words, the superintendent doesn't have to always get worn out from the board. So sometimes you have the school board liaison that reports directly to the superintendent. The school board can call them if they have a concern or if they're starting to build the draft of the regular agenda or special call board meetings or whatever.

Because the superintendent leads functions that are critical to the success of the organization, such as finance, he or she is tasked with selecting the best candidates for functions in which he or she may not be a content expert, such as finance. Superintendent 2 stated the magnitude of a cabinet member's position in influencing his strategy for selecting a candidate:

The quickest two ways to get fired is romance and finance. So you got to make sure that you get somebody who is competent that is not on the learning curve and is going to have this learn on-the-job kind of thing. It's got to be somebody who knows the systems, I mean right now. You cannot have someone who's going to grow into that position. And there are people out there with that. And whether it's curriculum and instruction or human resources, so that's what you would do. You get somebody that's experienced.

In addition to experience as a teacher and official for a state education agency, Superintendent 3 had led two school districts in a southwestern state with an enrollment

of greater than 10,000 students. When asked how the purpose of the superintendent's

cabinet drives the superintendent's selection process, Superintendent 3 emphasized the

value of the perspective that they bring to the superintendent:

 I wanted them to tell me what was going on in their area, what some of the

concerns were [...] [what] were there big problems they were dealing with, and so

they had as much to say as I had to say in those [cabinet] meetings. I told them

this, "I didn't hire you to just say, 'Yes, [Superintendent 3], we agree with you.' I

hired you to tell me what I need to do." And if you're in curriculum instruction

and if you don't know more about curriculum instruction than I do – which I

thought I knew quite a bit, and still do – but I said, "You know what's going on

out there. You know what principals are dealing with and so forth, so testing,

accountability, all that's under you. You need to make sure that we're doing the

right thing in our district where we can be successful." Same thing with my

facilities person, assistant superintendent in terms of facilities and construction.

We were growing 4 to 5,000 students a year. We were building schools, so again,

I had to have their expertise and they had to tell me what was going on, what the

problems were, some of the issues, and so my cabinet meetings and my senior

staff meetings were not necessarily me talking to them [...] but a lot of it was them

talking to me because I was one that delegated. I didn't get in their way, but they

had to keep me informed.

Superintendent 3 shared a similar view on cabinet positions that are essential for the superintendent to select to serve on the cabinet, which include finance, curriculum, and operations:

Certainly, a deputy in school finance you have to have because budget of over a billion dollars and so forth, you've got to have some people certainly responsible there. Curriculum instruction, I always told my deputy in curriculum instruction, I said, "That's the heart and soul of the school district, that's what we're about. We're about teaching and learning and we've got to know what to teach kids and then we've got to measure to see whether they learned that. And so that's when I felt like I needed a deputy there. My third deputy was my deputy for administration, and that was basically the area that worked directly with principals, really on operational issues, dealing with policies, dealing with parents and problems they might experience with parents, that kind of thing. So the three deputies, I felt the areas that you had to deal with very strongly were finance, curriculum instruction, and then operations.

PROMOTING INTERNAL CANDIDATES TO THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

In addition to defining the essential positions on the senior executive leadership team, all three superintendents provided examples of how and why they weigh the merits of promoting internal candidates from within the district as opposed to hiring an external candidate when selecting their senior executive leadership teams. All three have had

experience both promoting candidates from within their district into cabinet as well as bringing in someone from outside the organization.

Superintendent 1 expressed a preference for promoting from within the organization, particularly for new superintendents, as well as the importance that the superintendent of a district keep his or her eye open for internal talent:

I mean, if you're a new superintendent, I think it's wise to certainly consider internal candidate. What is our talent pool out there? Who have you all been keeping an eye on? Now if you're an experienced superintendent in that district you've already done your sort of – you got your talent pool of principals begging the central office staff that you recognize as possible candidates, right? And so I think it's wise to, as your first resource, is that you consider internal candidates. I think it's a mistake not to consider them at all. Give them an interview or give them a talk and then maybe see what the possibility might be.

Superintendent 2 also possessed a preference for selecting from within his school district for senior executive positions because the impact that it has on organizational morale:

If you have a very strong internal candidate, to me, I think you have to pretty much go that way, honestly, because of morale. Let's say you're a basketball coach, one of the very best basketball coaches in America. Yes, you can promote from within. If that coach really thinks that this assistant has been with me for 30 years and we have a winning program, then you could probably do that. That said, if they've been in the toilet in basketball, you gotta go outside, or if it's a high-

profile position you gotta go outside. So it just kind of depends on the job

production of that vacant position. In other words, if you're at an exemplary

school district that is just knocking the socks off of AP and sending kids to the

East Coast and different places, tier-one universities, then you know what? You

can move from within because there's nothing wrong. But if you're in a district

where you've got all these [Improvement Required] campuses, then I'm going to

be looking at a profile of someone who has had experience with turnaround

campuses.

Superintendent 3 shared a similar way of thinking as the other participants,

preferring to promote from within the organization when possible:

I always had a philosophy that if you had good people inside, and they moved up

and they're in positions, and they do a good job, they've got good evaluations,

they're well liked, well respected, good people morally and ethically and

everything, I always try to promote within. That was my number one priority, if

we could hire from within, let's do it.

Superintendent 3 acknowledged that while he possessed a preference for

promoting from within the organization, that was not always possible, nor the best

decision:

Now as I said, we didn't always [promote internally]. My deputy for curriculum

instruction came from outside the district. My assistant superintendent for

personnel – or for Human Resources – came from outside the district. But my – I

had one person replace a deputy in my finance when he retired, and we just

moved a person inside the district up, as we did with the assistant superintendent for technology and assistant superintendent for facilities and construction. So, I always tried to promote within, but we didn't always do that.

Superintendent 1 discussed why he preferred selecting candidates from within his current organization, which was largely rooted in his experience that the superintendent has access to robust information on the strengths of candidates in the district:

I've had a lot promoting from within. I think you're a little bit more sure about the current performance and potential of the employee when you do that. So particularly, for example, if you're hiring someone to supervise principals, you want to pick one of your superstar principals who is highly regarded, highly respected by the other principals is key. So I've had good luck with that. I never was one to bring someone, especially on the cabinet, but to central office, if they were a c-player or a low performer or just somewhere to hide them at central office. I particularly never wanted to do that but certainly not going to move up to the cabinet-level.

SELECTING EXTERNAL CANDIDATES FOR THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

The participants of the study recalled experiences hiring candidates who were external to the district, as well as the ways in which they vetted these candidates for positions on the senior executive leadership team.

While the superintendent might be aware of the strengths and areas of growth for employees of his or her current district, a superintendent might not be as familiar with

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external candidates for a cabinet-level position. Superintendent 1 explained ways in which he would identify talent that was external to the organization:

> Rely on your networking. Other superintendents. You might have acquaintances with search firms, for example, that helped you get that job as superintendent. Sometimes they know a talent pool that's a little more broad than the district. Neighboring districts are also important. As you establish relationships with other superintendents, sometimes we swap talent from one district to the other. And so other superintendents are key to that. And just depending on, again, your HR department to be able to vet, and post, and search, and make sure that a lot of people are aware of the opening. Because obviously, the key is to get as many applicants as possible.

Superintendent 2 noted that while selecting candidates who are external to the organization adds value, that decision needs to be made in balance with other considerations:

> It's a careful balance where you don't want to have people that have not been exposed. You want people that have been exposed to other experiences from the outside, but you don't want to exclude people who have been there and had that institutional knowledge of where they have been as well. So, to me, on that selection process for your cabinet, it's vital that you're at least cognizant of the fact that you should not, in my opinion, exclusively move people up from within or especially from outside the school district [...] If you need someone to come in with fresh eyes that is not tainted and not an inbred and not institutionalized, and

you need someone to come in to make major changes, not a good idea to come from within.

The superintendency provides opportunities to meet talent from across different districts at events and while conducting business, some of whom might be strong fits for senior executive level positions. Superintendent 1 described his view on how to seek and vet candidates who are external to the district:

Word of mouth is a good strategy for find external talent. Or maybe you were a coworker with them or you know them really well or they've expressed, "Do you have an opening. I'd like to go do that," et cetera. So you just have a natural resource of just your experience and your connections, and you leverage those. I think your other resources are other superintendents, other central office people that you just know in other districts. And then really just kind of surrounding districts that you maybe knew in that area. You may have bumped into these folks at meetings and things like that and you can tell they're ready to be – they may be, for example, not on the cabinet for a neighboring district but they want to be. They're studying to become superintendent and I keep an eye on those. You sort of keep an unwritten list of folks that if I ever want to bring somebody on the team they're going to be a top candidate. So you begin to develop that talent pool yourself naturally.

Superintendent 3 described trends regarding when he would prefer to select an external candidate over an internal candidate for a senior executive leadership position:

A lot of times we would go we might see someone on application, and they look pretty good. And we'd say, "We want to interview that person," and so forth. So that's really more how we did it, measuring internal and external candidates. Externally, I had to have a pretty good recommendation to go above a person that was inside. Sometimes the person inside that probably thought they should be moved into that position, sometimes there were reasons that I felt like they would not be a good – they'd be a good person, but not the person for that particular position. Kind of like a principal. There are a lot of people that can be principals, but there are people who are vice principals that are great vice principals that will never make good principals.

SELECTING FORMER EMPLOYEES FOR CABINET-LEVEL POSITIONS

In addition to selecting candidates from within the superintendent's current organization and selecting cabinets from outside of the district, superintendents also consider selecting individuals with whom they've worked in the past for senior executive level positions. Superintendent 1 elaborated upon his experience hiring his former employees into his new district, as well the advantages of this practice:

You may bring someone, too, from your past district and recruit them to come with you, or, once you've been there a while, recruit them to fill that spot knowing that they may be from a smaller district as well. By the way, that's how you lose them. You bring them in. That's a real advantage because they know your system. They know your playbook. And so the learning curve is not as steep.

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You know it'd be a good fit. But also, you can overdo that, and again, by not

considering inside. So I think it's a balance. It's just being aware, being mindful.

But it's key.

In contrast to Superintendent 1, Superintendent 2 said to be cautious about

selecting external candidates who have been previously associated with the

superintendent for senior positions. To do so would be politically disadvantageous,

according to his statement:

I teach the superintendents, though not everybody may agree with me, one of the

lectures that I give is that be very careful that you don't select everybody from the

outside and previous districts when you become a superintendent. Because when

you bring everyone from your previous administrations, to the locals that is

considered an outsider. You have now essentially created an inner circle. And in

the massive outer circle where you have everyone else, they're going to feel

disenfranchised, disconnected, and actually, morale is going to be negatively

affected because they don't think that they can move up within the school district

unless you are an outsider with this superintendent.

While hesitant to saturate his cabinet with candidates external to the district,

Superintendent 2 also reflects upon his experience hiring a former subordinate to serve on

his senior executive leadership team:

My curriculum and instruction lady, in [my two previous districts] was an

example of a great external hire. It's kind of like a football coach takes his first

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assistant with him, you know what I mean? And the offensive coordinator, so sometimes you have that. If someone that has a good reputation, and either you've got to go approach them and recruit them [...] you just do your homework [...] I would confide in people that I trusted, or this person had worked in my prior district [...] it's not your normal vetting process, frankly. It's phone calls with people that you know and trust are going to give you their honest evaluation, and frankly, it's off the record.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT

When selecting members of his or her cabinet, a superintendent has the option of consulting stakeholders to help inform the decision. The strategy for gathering and using outside input to select cabinet members varied by superintendent and was sometimes situational. Superintendent 1 recalled his experience using his cabinet to inform his decision to hire a new member to his senior executive leadership team:

> [The superintendent] looks through their resumes. I will recognize, perhaps, some
> of their references that I would trust, etc. So I think the procedure is you do a
> paper screening, if you will, of their resumes, and create a shortlist. And from
> that, I would put together an interview committee made up of my executive team
> as sort of a first-run preliminary. Depending on the situation, I may not – this is
> just one method of doing this – I may not even be part of that committee. What I
> would instruct them to do is "You all send me your top three finalists without
> rank, not in order, but these are three that you feel would be successful not only in

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their role but on the team." And so you get that team-feel support of the top three candidates. And from there, I would do a one-on-one, and I would pick the finalist and present it to the board. So that's one way.

Similar to Superintendent 1, Superintendent 2 discussed the process and merits of leveraging a third-party selection committee to inform his hiring decisions, noting that there are limitations to its effectiveness:

A slippery slope a lot of times, superintendents want their cabinet to have input on who they're going to have join their teams, so to speak, and they become part of a committee. The problem with that is, sometimes they can get themselves or paint themselves a corner where they go, "They would be a good fit for what we have," but maybe the superintendent is looking for someone different. Okay, let's just take, I'll just give you a random example. Let's say I go to Humble ISD, and Humble ISD has 30% African American, okay, or Abilene or [inaudible] or one of these school districts. And I feel like we don't have any or not enough African Americans in my cabinet that is truly represented of the community that we're serving. So me as a superintendent, I may come in, and I just described to you what the cabinet looks like. They're not diverse, they have too many let's just say white males, I'm just giving you an example. And as a superintendent, I want to have more of a diverse makeup in my cabinet. So I may come in and look at applicants and, being very careful not to break any laws, may weigh the added value that a double minority brings to our cabinet and brings a different perspective to our cabinet, as opposed to someone who just looks real good on

paper and on their resume. So you have to be aware, I think, of those things, and so you lean on your cabinet-level people to recommend, and a lot of times, you say, "Give me a top two or three you can live with," and then the superintendent now can, they can live with it, these two or these three. And then now, you can make your choice based on what you think, whichever candidate brings that value that you're looking for. And maybe one of those people has set themselves apart from the others.

Superintendent 1 described a situation in which a selection committee was not used to gather input, which happens when the superintendent has a developed opinion on a candidate:

In some situations, I probably would not go through [forming a selection committee]. If I knew the candidate – or, let me put it another way, if I were recruiting someone myself because I would already know that they're going to be a good fit. Again, they know your playbook. They know my expectations. They know the core value that I would've expressed to the executive team, and so I know they're going to be a good fit. I know that they're confident, and in some cases, I would just recruit them, present them to the board, bounce it off the executive team, and generally, they were done with that, obviously, but see if there are any reservations, and then present it to the board, and then hopefully bring them on board.

Similarly, Superintendent 2 stated that there are situations in which the search process does not take a long period of time to conduct or merit extensive third-party input because, "Frankly, a lot of times superintendents have someone, whether they're inside or outside, that they already have in mind. We don't say it very often, but it's the superintendent's job to lose at that cabinet-level. So you have someone already, for the most part, in mind. But occasionally something that is just wide open because you may not have anybody in mind. Or the person that you have in mind is very happy where they are, or you can't pay them enough. So, to me, it seems like if you don't have someone already that you're going to try to recruit for that position, they would take at least two months to do that. And the reason it takes that long is to go through the vetting process. And they also, in the back of your mind, that white noise that is always there with the superintendent, ensuring that this person will be approved by your school board ultimately."

INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

All three superintendents acknowledged the role that the school board played in their selection of their senior executive leadership team. A common theme is that even if the board does not formally have authority over the superintendent's hiring decisions, the superintendents would keep board members informed on their decision-making process and consider their input.

Some of the participants noted examples when some of the district's trustees would play an active role in asking the superintendent to consider particular candidates. Superintendent 1 said:

The school board is not necessarily involved in my selection process. Now, the approval of my recommendation is something different. If a board member presented a possible internal or external candidate to me, I think it would be wise to at least give them an interview and/or certainly look at their paperwork, and then get back to the board member as why I think they're not a strong candidate. Let's put it that way. That's not easy, but that happens. And sometimes a candidate is just reaching out to the board member in hopes to get an interview, and the board member's just saying, "Look, you don't have to hire them. Would you at least interview them?" kind of thing. In that way, they do play a little bit of a role. Some board members would like to play more of a role than others. Some would like to determine who that executive team member is going to be. They have reasons for that. They'd like a male in that role. They'd like a female. They'd like a certain ethnicity. They feel it's their turn; they've been turned down before. So a gamut of reasons of what would motivate a board member to really, kind of, push for a candidate.

Superintendent 2 stated that the authority of the school board over the selection of senior-level selection, "varies because while superintendents have a lot of authority and a lot of power, [cabinet positions] are very high level. [Board involvement] just depends from principal down, it depends on your local policy. I don't have to take these to the

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board. But for anything above a principal's job, in other words, the director, executive director, assistant superintendent, yes, I'll bring them to the board."

By virtue of the superintendent being accountable to the board of education, the members' desire to be involved in the selection of senior executive team members can present challenging situations for the superintendent as hiring decisions are being made. Superintendent 1 recalled some of the challenges associated with the dynamic of the board on selection decisions:

> In the approval stage, I think that when you have a candidate that you're bringing in, and they just – for whatever reason are just upset that you didn't select their candidate, their one choice, or they were looking for particular profile, et cetera. Again, if it's a Hispanic, they would determine that you were going to hire a Hispanic, and you don't. A female that wants a female, and you don't, et cetera. Then yeah, it can be very challenging, and those things usually occur on one-on-one phone calls or meetings with these board members, and then, of course, it manifests in the board meeting when they just vote no. I've been denied my recommendation, my number-one recommendation by boards, and that's a very difficult thing. It's very challenging, but that's part of the job.

Superintendent 3 shared a similar experience to Superintendent 2, where his recommendation for a senior executive team member was challenged because of individual board member's opinion on who would be best suited for the position:

> One time I had a person approved when one person dissented. And that reason is they thought we should move someone inside up instead of hiring someone from

outside. And I had no problem with that. I had no problem with the person that they felt like should be moved into that position. Good person, had no problem. That person had interviewed for the job, and so forth, but after we went through our process we decided that we really wanted to recommend another person. And so I never – nearly all of our personnel recommendations were unanimous, and that's just the way our boards were. Now, they might tell me outside of a board meeting, "Well, I don't know, I might have an issue, let me ask you some questions, and da da da da da." It was pretty much consensus. When we went into the public board meeting, it was pretty much consensus on personnel recommendations.

Superintendent 2 noted that incumbent members of his cabinet who held rapport with the school board were more difficult to remove from the cabinet:

You're going to have some leeway your first year as a superintendent to build your own team...usually that's what happens with your school board. They're going to give you that autonomy. But if there's someone that's been there for a long, long time and they have built a relationship – I mean, it could be your CFO. And they've built this relationship with the school board. And they say, "He has been our CFO for 20 years. He always has a strong fund balance. We do a good job as far as our budget, and his budget presentations are superb, and we trust him with the money," then you just already know you're not going to touch that person, you know? Or let's say that this person has a real close relationship with a

board member, and the board member quizzes you on something. And you go, "Oh, boy. I know where she got her information from."

Superintendent 3 also echoed the sentiment that the board does have a role to play in the selection of cabinet, which in his experience was to approve or reject the superintendent's recommendations. Aside from that, however, he felt that they should not be involved. He said:

I had to get approval of my board for those positions, the people I was recommending, so that was the only involvement they had. I had a philosophy, and, of course, I'm an old-timer, but my philosophy and I told my board this from the get-go when I'd go in there: "You are the board and you have the right to reject any personnel recommendation that I make, but you do not have the right to tell me who to hire. If you reject somebody as a board vote, then that's fine. I'll go back out, and I'll start the process again, and we'll bring someone else to you, but I am the one who will bring a recommendation to you for that. And you will not be involved in the hiring process other than you certainly can then, once I make a recommendation, you certainly can ask questions about that person and everything and I will answer those, I'll send you information about the person before the board meeting ahead of time, everything like that. But that's the way we operate." And every board I worked for, we had that understanding and I never had an issue and they never had an issue.

Superintendent 3 also added that while his board of education had a formal role in approving or rejecting his recommendations as the governing body of the district, as the

superintendent, there are informal ways to work with the board in advance of the board meeting on the topic of selecting members of the executive team. He said:

> I'd pick up the phone, I'd call each board member, and I'd say, "Hey, you know we've gone through the process, and we made a decision that we're going to recommend so-and-so for that particular position, and I want to call and let you know that we'll be on the board at [inaudible], and I want to tell you a little bit about that person and why we're recommending that person. So like any good superintendent you do your preliminaries before the board meeting.

Research Question 2

The second research question of this investigation was as follows: From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, how are superintendents influenced to make decisions related to the organization of their senior executive leadership team? Between the subjects, the common influences for organization that they discussed were the high priority needs of the district and their ability to rely on their relationships with members of their cabinet to achieve the school district's goals. The findings for this second research questions focus on these factors separately.

CHARACTERISTICS MOST VALUED IN MEMBERS OF CABINET

Superintendent 1 listed the qualities he valued most in members of his senior executive leadership team:

In order, trust, professionalism, competency, and vulnerability. In other words, which really is – I don't want to get too philosophical, but if they're not vulnerable, then you can't trust them. Coachable is another way of putting that, open to feedback. […] I've said in priority, but they're all related.

Superintendent 1 elaborated further upon the importance of being able to trust a member of his senior executive leadership team with a specific anecdote:

In both districts that I was in, I removed staff members from the executive team. I explained the first one more than the second, but the second district I did as well, just because I could not trust them. And they proved to me that they couldn't be trusted. One of the cabinet members that I inherited was a candidate for the superintendent's job [that I was offered and accepted]. When I applied, he had applied, and when I was given the job-- I had gotten word by board members who hired me at the time that he was not happy and he was expressing that, and so I took it upon myself to arrange a meeting with him the minute I got to the district. And as a matter of fact, even before I was officially hired, I wanted to meet with him for the purpose of making sure that I could look him in the eye and make sure that (A) that he was in a good place with not getting the job, and (B) that we could work together and that his disappointment, his frustration – possibly at me – could go away. If he could just let it go, basically. And unfortunately, he said that he would and could but that was not the case. And it took me about, oh I don't know, maybe six months of sort of progressive meetings with him, conversations, crucial conversations with him about violations are some of the things that I expected

through them. And once I determined that his intention was not to self-correct, that I started to approach the board about the possibility of demoting him and they began to support that. He was working closely with the board, and unfortunately, that just wasn't something that I allowed. And so he was demoted. So in all, it took about eight to nine months. I would say that I was going to – and this may be important – I was going to do it sooner than that but my mentor advised me not to move too quickly particularly because he was a long-term member of that community, and that was sage advice. So taking my finger off that button to present to the board was wise and it took me about eight months, but he was eventually demoted, then removed from the district.

In response to trust being absent from the relationship between the superintendent and a cabinet member, Superintendent 2 noted that reorganization would be necessary:

Well, I'll tell you this right now. A superintendent hears everything. He knows who is sleeping with who. He knows who has a relationship with a board member. So usually disloyalty, let's put it that way. I'm not talking about loyalty to me, but loyalty to the district and loyalty to the position and knowing when not to break perhaps discussions that are meant to be confidential and people learning things from this one person, let's say, and you go, "Well, this is not good. I can't trust this person." You know? So with that said, yeah, you could reassign that person, protect their salary, and get them off the cabinet so you didn't hurt them in one way. And by the way, that's just one board member. The other six board members may say that employee was a problem too.

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Superintendent 3 also emphasized the importance of trust when selecting who to keep or recruit into his senior executive leadership team:

 If you're superintendent, you have to have confidence in the people that you work very closely with. And you have to trust them and know that they're going to be loyal to you. And I always felt like I had that and so because I emphasized it so much that the confidence level had to be there, the trust level had to be there, the loyalty had to be there. I always told my staff, "You hear the expression, 'you have to earn somebody's trust?'" I said, "I don't agree with that. My philosophy is you trust people till they prove you can't trust them." So I said, "Don't ever prove to me I cannot trust you." By loyalty, I basically meant loyalty to the district, loyalty to the board, loyalty to me, and if they weren't going behind my back, the board's back and doing something that we wouldn't approve of, and so those are the two things I always told.

It was noted that it is more common to reorganize the cabinet by re-assigning individuals to non-cabinet positions than to expel individuals from the district. Superintendent 2 stated:

It all comes down contracts, okay? So it just depends on the contract that you have with that person. Then they have had a two-year contract and they didn't do anything bad enough to terminate them, but yeah you still got to keep them and maybe reassign them or whatever. Or maybe they just didn't work out, but I'll give him help. We once had a high school principal who allegedly was behind the wheel under the influence. Well, that got out into the media and we had to do

something to him because he had really lost his ability to lead because of the

media frenzy. And so we re-assigned him to the central office. He had a two-year

contract, we reassigned him to the central office but later on, he got exonerated.

He had an attorney and he got off, so what do you do about that? He could not be

at that high school, but yet he has to be somewhere in the district and earn a

paycheck, so sometimes that happens that way.

ORGANIZING CABINET TO MEET THE DISTRICT'S NEEDS

The participants noted the rationale and specific examples for organizing their

senior executive leadership teams based on the needs of the district and based on which

perspectives would be the most purposeful to include in executive-level discussions.

Superintendent 1 recalled a particular example of organizing the cabinet based on

business needs:

We were opening two schools a year. And the three years I was there, we were

passing bonds. We were building buildings. We constantly had construction going

on that affected all of the operations and activities going on in the district. We

were having to reestablish attendance zones. Do demographics studies. So that's

an example of bringing in someone who is in charge of operations and facilities.

There's just so much activity going on that you would have to have them on the

campus. Or if you created, for example, a reorganization plan of the district, then

you need the person in charge in all your meetings. I mean, because it's just – too

much of your day-to-day operations and decisions are involved, and you need

their input. You need their feedback, etc. So that's an example. Similarly, with the

chief of police, if discipline and safety were certainly becoming an issue, you

probably would want them, but again, I don't know if that warrants cabinet-level

discussions.

Regarding leveraging the organization of the cabinet to meet the needs of the

district, Superintendent 2 stated:

I mean, no different than the old-fashioned-needs assessment when you walk in.

If a superintendent feels like there's a need or a blank spot, you got to do it. Okay,

let me give you an example. If you go into a school district that is getting

hammered on college readiness, or lack of, then you may want to create a position

that does nothing but work on college readiness, AP, GP, whatever. So it just

depends on what your needs are.

Superintendent 3 discussed an example of adding a new position to his cabinet

based on an emerging business need in his district when he entered:

Technology was becoming more and more important for teachers' use,

administrative use, instructional use. So I did add that person to cabinet and also

at one point, I added the assistant superintendent for – they call them student

services, but actually that person also has special education under it. And that's

primarily why I added the position because I just always felt that with all the legal

issues you run into with special ed and all the rules and regulations and everything

going on there that we needed that person on the cabinet. So again, I think it

depends on who you have on cabinet, and then if you're going to add someone,

what areas do you feel like need to be there to give every input and also your

other discussions from other cabinet members.

In addition to organizing the cabinet based on the business needs of the school

district, some members of cabinet were intentionally included or included or removed

based on how the superintendent wanted them to prioritize their time. Superintendent 1

mentions an example of removing an individual from his cabinet:

A community relations person was on the cabinet. And I got to one of my

districts, and I didn't think she needed to spend her time in those executive

meetings. I wanted her more out in the community and anything that involved her.

Now, you have guests, of course, into your executive team meeting depending on

the circumstances. But that's more of a different type meeting than your cabinet

meeting. If you're trying to pass a bond, you're bringing more people in [...] I

kind of removed that person, not because of any other reason other than I just

didn't think it was worth her time. If I felt that we really needed to have a plan for

improving community relations and strategic planning, if we're going to pass a

bond or something, you may want to pull in him or her to speak to those items. I

think that she was part of the cabinet before I arrived in another district. I told her

that I'd rather her be out supervising her staff than spending three or four hours in

a meeting every Monday, etc. So I removed her just because I thought – the thing

you got to kind of weigh is, is it worth their time to be in those meetings. Are

there enough topics that warrant their input, their feedback, etc. on these

decisions? And I think every superintendent has a different philosophy about that and strategy.

Superintendent 1 based his decision to add principal supervisors to his cabinet as part of his strategy to feel more connected and aware of the needs of his schools:

I once added those supervised principals to report to me. Involved in our cabinet, simply because I – in particular, one of my personal interests was to be very close to the principals. I had 100 campuses in [X District] and I wanted to know it straight from them. And I wanted the cabinet to hear what was essential in the day-to-day challenges and opportunities ahead of our principals and they were allowed to report out et cetera. So any decisions we made, I wanted to know their opinions of what they thought the principals' opinion would be and how we needed to roll things out. And they were key to that.

Superintendent 3 created an organizational layer senior to the cabinet based on his leadership style and preferences, and he additionally added positions based on the needs of the school district:

When I came to [the district], they did not have a senior staff. They just had cabinet. But cabinet was about 18 to 20 people. And I wanted a smaller group of people that really I felt would be a small working group that we could work together and really address the issues need to be addressed. So I'm the one that formed senior staff, and it was those seven people who also served on cabinet. Now, who'd you select for that? I told you why I chose certain people. Were some of the people on cabinet kind of like, "Well, why wasn't I chosen?"

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Probably so, but I explained to them exactly why I put those seven people on, or six people, however many it was, on senior staff. But I said, "We're still going to have cabinet, still have the same expectations for cabinet that we had." And then also on the cabinet-level, I did add a couple of people. Wasn't really a reorganization, but I did add a couple of people as things would happen. For instance, all the testing and accountability and schools possibly going into needs improvement, something like that, which we never had one, but the ones that were borderline ended up with a director for school improvement from cabinet. But other than that, there wasn't much reorganization of the cabinet from the previous superintendent, but I did bring on senior staff which we did not have.

The superintendent might identify opportunities to improve the district's operations by organizing the roles and responsibilities of senior executive leadership team members. Superintendent 1 revised the responsibilities of his area superintendents from supervising feeder patterns to specializing in elementary and secondary campuses, which he believed would improve campus operations.

Those that supervised principals sort of did it in a feeder pattern. For example, in a particular area, you may have three feeder patterns that all feed up to a high school, so the elementary, middle schools. And so they are more what I would call vertical in their supervision. They had one high school. Maybe two or three middle schools. And they supervised eight to ten elementaries, for example. And I reorganized that to have elementary principal specialists – just in other words I flipped it over horizontally. And then middle school supervisors met high school

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supervisors. And then I allowed – not allowed. But then I told them that they were – I didn't want them to lose that sort of feeder because there's some strength in that. And they were able to meet. And then I put those in charge of certain feeders, but they didn't meet regularly as feeder patterns. They met quarterly, for example. And they met regularly in their grade specific what I just, again, what I call the word horizontal meetings. All elementary principals were with the elementary directors. And all middle school, etc.

Though reasons based on organizing the superintendent's senior executive leadership team around the district's most urgent priorities, the participants also noted that more subjective reasons influence the superintendent's organization of his or her cabinet. Superintendent 2 noted:

Let's cut to the chase. Do I think there are superintendents that create a cabinet-level position for their friends? You're damn right they do, and that's wrong. But yes, that happens. It does. It just does. And, I mean, it just does. And it goes back to building a cabinet with people that are trustworthy or that you trust. But that's really internal politics. And some superintendents, unfortunately – hey look, not all superintendents are upstanding citizens. We're no different than doctors, or lawyers, or anything else, any other large group. We're going to have some good ones and some that are not so good.

ORGANIZATION AS A MECHANISM FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

In addition to meeting the business needs of the district, participants in the study noted that the positions that exist at the senior executive level can be adjusted in order to recruit the talent desired by the superintendent. Superintendent 2 recalled an experience creating assistant superintendent positions for recruitment purposes, stating, "A lot of times, just to attract people to certain districts, you make changes. If you look at the pay scale, if you have an associate or an assistant position of the superintendent, if you make them a deputy, that's higher on the pay grade, which can attract, perhaps, more talent. So you might even have more than one deputy."

Superintendent 2 stated that reorganization was also necessary to retain talent, and he reorganized his senior executive leadership team to recognize individuals whose titles were changed due to political optics:

If you're going to go out for a job, and your resume says you're an "instructional education direction" when everybody knows what an assistant or associate superintendent is, we kind of need to reorganize, you have to look at the jobs, the job descriptions, the job titles, which hence will determine their salaries. And so some people are underpaid. Some people are vastly overpaid. And that's when you come in and you try to reorganize and make things not only to address the ten functions but to also the four major functions bring some equity into the structure...there were people perhaps that I felt their pay grade was perhaps too high, that maybe the previous superintendent really liked this person, confided in this person. And this person was not only a cabinet member, but with that

consequently is also getting paid perhaps a little bit too much in my opinion. And so, yeah, if I saw where maybe there was some what I would perceive as favoritism in the past, overpaid in that position at that high a pay grade, then yes, I would remove them. If I felt that there was an issue with trust, I would remove them and reassign them.

FREQUENCY OF TURNOVER

The participants noted that at the senior executive leadership level, levels of turnover can occur for a variety of reasons, and these staffing changes can prompt a reorganization of the senior executive leadership team. This section discusses the reason why the turnover occurs and how it impacts the organization of the senior executive leadership team.

Superintendent 1 discussed some of the causes of turnover at the senior executive level, some of which is caused by the nature of hiring talented people to serve on a superintendent's cabinet, while others stemmed by strained relationships with the superintendent:

> If you're hiring the right people, they can find work just about anywhere. Whether it's personal motive to move to another district or it's a promotion from your district to a larger district. That's one area. That's one reason when they leave. And another, especially when you're a new superintendent, is that, because they are talented and have that opportunity, they just really, in some cases, they get a sense that they weren't hired by that superintendent who – if he or she is new, and

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they decide that their management styles and relationship is just not going to work out. So they choose to move on, and I guess in some extreme examples, and I've had these, that they blatantly violate what's been established by the superintendent. But I was mentioning earlier, team protocols and values of the team, and when they test and or repeatedly violate those they are either demoted or they are asked to move on depending on the circumstances. And so, unfortunately, that's part of it, as well. But yeah, I mean, those are some of the reasons why you may get turnover on your executive team.

Superintendent 2 stated that the very nature of serving on a cabinet of large urban school district means that turnover happens because of the professional ambitions of cabinet members:

Frankly, a lot of times they're leaving for a superintendency, for a promotion. And so a lot of times larger school districts, for instance, that have historically had some of their area superintendents and deputy superintendents move on to superintendencies – not perhaps at a large urban or suburban school district, but to another school district, to get their first superintendency, so to speak. This leads to filling more cabinet positions.

DIVERSITY

When organizing and selecting members of the senior executive leadership team, participants acknowledged that diversity plays a vital part in their decision-making process. The word 'diversity' was intentionally not defined for the participants, and they

interpreted the word in a number of ways that they felt contributed to the strength of their cabinet and success of their school district. Superintendent 1 reflected upon how diversity added value to his executive-level discussions:

It goes without saying if we're all like-minded then we really don't succeed. Essentially if we're like-minded you really don't need them on cabinet. […] They need diversity in their competencies, in their experiences, and in their knowledge of their areas. So that's very diverse. I think diversity in their experiences [is] possible in other districts, in other roles that they've played. So that's also very important. I think that the cabinet – it's important politically that the cabinet be ethnically and both with sex and race be – represent the – especially the ethnicity of the district, I think [that] is important. And the board feels that that's important. I mean, to have an all-Anglo executive team in the district that's primarily minority, well, I don't think that that's necessarily an indication that you're not going to succeed. It can get you politically into some hot water and some troubled times. I think diversity...in the way of internal versus external candidates is important. If you overdo internal you don't get fresh thinking. If you get too many external you sort of lower the morale of "No one here's good enough to serve on the executive team." So I think diversity is very important. Age, experience is important, but you got to be careful with those type of things. I just think you have to be mindful of it. So diversity is key.

Superintendent 3 shared a different opinion on diversity than the other participants, and emphasized that the best candidate for the position aside from demographics should be hired:

> I think certainly you look for diversity, but I never made my decision about hiring someone for senior staff or cabinet position based on ethnicity or race. I hired who I thought would be the best person in that job based on their knowledge and based on their ability to do the job. And several times I would hire people who were Hispanic or African American into positions on senior staff or cabinet but that was not an overriding issue with me. My overriding issue is their competency level.

Summary

In summary, the data gathered from the superintendents who participated in the study show that superintendents share similarities in the factors that are prioritized when selecting and organizing their senior executive leadership teams. Some of the common themes across the superintendents include recognizing which business functions are essential to be represented on the cabinet, and these can change according to the needs of the district and superintendent. Additionally, the superintendents are faced with the decision whether to consider candidates from within the organization or outside of the organization, which can be influenced by stakeholders including the board of education. Regardless of how the cabinet is organized and who holds a position on the superintendent's leadership team, all superintendents cited loyalty and trustworthiness as

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a characteristic they valued and sought in members of their leadership team, and each shared an experience reorganizing the cabinet when this trait was not perceived to be present.

All three superintendents had previously large urban school districts, as defined as having an enrollment of greater than 10,000 students and being located within 25 miles of a major urban city. Common themes across the participants, and potentially related to the characteristics of their districts, included regular turnover at the cabinet-level and the need to have positions that were cited as especially important in large districts, according to the participants, namely a chief of communications or media relations. As these types of districts tend to serve high numbers of low-income and underrepresented minority students, diversity at the cabinet-level was also cited by two superintendents as something that is frequently discussed by superintendents and board members as it relates to the composition of the cabinet. The results of this study will be discussed in connection with the theoretical framework and existing literature in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Problem Statement

The senior executive leadership team of the superintendent of schools leads essential operations of the district, including the human resources, operations, finance, and academic functions. Prior research suggests that the organizational priorities of the school district, the school board, and the composition of the senior leadership team influence the ways in which the superintendent approaches the responsibility of forming his or her cabinet (Crum, 1991; Hoyle et al, 2004; Sevak, 2012). There is a need to further explore the considerations that a superintendent makes when choosing how to hire and organize members of his or her senior executive leadership team. These considerations will be described and analyzed through the theoretical framework outlined in Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames of an organization. In their work, Bolman and Deal (2013) categorize the ways in which organizations operate into the political, symbolic, human capital, and structural frames. In the context of the school superintendency, the Four Frames encompass the complex considerations the superintendent makes when selecting his or her senior executive leadership teams. As a public figure held accountable to a publicly elected board of education, the superintendent weighs political interests when making major decisions for the district, which could include major hiring decisions (Kowalski, 2011). Structurally, the ways in which the superintendent organizes the central office of a school system can impact the effectiveness of the enterprise (Chrispeels & Martin, 2002; Honig, 2008). The

superintendent is also tasked with ensuring strong leaders are developed and recruited into the system, introducing human capital challenges that can factor into decision-making (Normore, 2004; Normore, 2006). As a symbolic leader of the school district, the superintendent makes decisions based on the ways in which they will be perceived or to signal a commitment to change by reorganization, reframing goals, or restating the organizational priorities (Bryman, 2004; Deal & Peterson 2007; Kowalski, 2005). Collectively, numerous types of factors can play into the superintendent's decision-making process when selecting members of his or her senior executive leadership team.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the considerations that a superintendent weighs in decision-making when hiring and organizing his or her senior executive leadership team. Current literature on management suggests that a number of factors contribute to the makeup of a senior executive leadership team, including the opinions of external stakeholders, the attributes of candidates for these leadership positions, and the perspective of the superintendent (Carver, 2000; Blount, 2000; Sevak, 2012; Wong, 2007). Using Bolman and Deal's (2013) four organizational frames as a conceptual framework, the considerations that factor into the superintendent's decisions regarding his or her most senior leadership team were analyzed through the political, structural, human resources, and symbolic lenses. The political lens is defined as relating to the ways in which relationships with stakeholders such as board members are managed when making organizational decisions. The structural lens is defined as the ways in which the

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system, including current operational realities, policies and finances, factor into the decisions made regarding senior executive leadership teams. The human resources frame in the context of this study includes the talent pipeline and leeway to organize, promote and recruit leaders into the organization. The symbolic lens is how the superintendent weighs his or her role as a visible, public figure whose decisions are open to interpretation by the community. The individuals the superintendent selects for senior leadership positions are viewed as opportunities for the superintendent to communicate greater priorities.

The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, what factors influence superintendents to select an individual for a senior executive leadership position?

2. From the perspective of retired school superintendents of large urban school districts in the southwestern United States, how are superintendents influenced to make decisions related to the organization of their senior executive leadership team?

Methodology Overview

This investigation was a qualitative, phenomenological study that explored the perceptions and experiences of three recently retired superintendents, as defined by having retired fewer than 10 years ago, of urban school districts with enrollment of greater than 10,000 students. The retired superintendents were interviewed regarding

their experiences when making hiring and organizational decisions about their senior executive team. By interviewing retired superintendents, the investigator gathered first-hand information about the experiences of a superintendent that influenced his or her decision-making when hiring and organizing the school district's most senior staff. Presuming that the superintendent is chiefly responsible for staffing and organizing the district's senior leadership, a former superintendent's perspective would provide insight into how structures, politics, human capital and symbolism factor into the decision-making process. Retired, as opposed to a sitting, superintendents were interviewed as a strategy to maintain the reliability of the data, as it was assumed that a retired superintendent who no longer works in the school system would provide sensitive information to the investigator with fewer hesitations about it impacting his or her professional career. The phenomenology methodology "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, pg 57). In this study, the experiences of multiple superintendents when making decisions related to whom to select for senior positions and how to organize his or her senior leadership team was explored and reduced to themes that may be applicable to the decisions of other superintendents. The interviews asked for the specifics of the superintendents' district context, school board member relations and existing staff, among other factors. A phenomenological investigation can describe the ways in which an individual perceives, feels, describes, and makes sense of a situation or process (Marshall, 2007). As it related to this investigation, this methodology was used to investigate the ways in which the superintendent perceives the process of making hiring

decisions for senior staff, who collectively lead the major functions of the district such as human resources, finance and academics, and provide descriptions and themes that could apply to other districts. Due to high turnover in urban school systems, many superintendents are faced with the situation of having to hire a staff member who reports directly to the superintendent (Boyne, 2011; Grissom, 2016); this investigation might offer themes that mirror those faced by other district leaders. To a greater extent than a single experience, an analysis of multiple experiences provided more data and potentially a more generalizable theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Each school district and superintendent experience described in the study will capture the phenomena described by comparing similarities and differences between the various contexts.

Purposeful sampling of participants was used to identify the superintendents selected for the study. This method allowed the researcher to conduct an investigation based on criteria identified as essential to understanding the theory or phenomena being studied (Maxwell, 2005). The retired superintendents who were selected for the study led school districts having enrollment of greater than 10,000 students and located within 25 miles of a major city. Large school districts are more likely to have defined senior executive leadership teams and multiple layers or management between the superintendent at building principals and teachers, which was also a criterion for this investigation.

The role of the superintendent is complex, consisting of balancing stakeholder relations with elected school boards and the greater community with the operations of the school district. This requires that the superintendent not only serve as an instructional

leader, but as the leader of other functional specialists who oversee operations, including the management of human capital, finance, and facilities operations dimensions of a school system (Brown-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier & Glass, 2004). The complexity of the superintendent's responsibilities underscores the need to hire effective senior executive leaders, and therefore the processes behind hiring and organizing these individuals should be studied.

Summary of the Findings

In Chapter 4, the two research questions were answered. An examination of the data shows that the retired superintendents interviewed had similarities in their experiences with selecting and organizing members of the senior executive leadership team. All of the retired superintendents shared the experiences of hiring and organizing a senior executive leadership team in an urban area for a district with a student enrollment greater than 10,000 students. All participants stated that particular positions on the senior executive leadership team were essential, with each retired superintendent having a chief human resources, chief financial officer, and chief of facilities on their cabinet.

The first research question sought to gather the perspective of superintendents as they hire members to serve on the senior executive leadership team. A common theme across all participants was the intentionality of selecting participants internally versus externally, recalling specific situations when each can be advantageous to the district. While all participants expressed a preference for promoting from within the organization, citing benefits to organizational morale and retention, it was expressed that candidates are

brought in externally when strong candidates are available to hire or significant change is needed in the district. With regards to how the decisions are made for selecting a senior executive leader, all participants noted that the process varies widely and is unique to each position, ranging from selection committees comprising district leadership to unilateral decisions made by the superintendent him or herself, the latter of which occurs when the superintendent has a specific individual in mind for a position, according to the participants.

One of the most prominent themes that emerged in the study was the degree to which specific character traits influenced a superintendent's decision to hire or remove an individual from the senior executive leadership team. Trust and loyalty were cited by every participant as the most important characteristic that they valued in a member of the cabinet. A consistent rationale for this belief expressed by the participants was that, because members of the cabinet lead the essential business functions of the district, an individual whom the superintendent cannot trust is a great liability to the ability to lead. Similarly, when the superintendents would feel a lack of trust in specific individuals, all participants mentioned that they immediately begin navigating the process to demote, remove from the cabinet, or terminate.

The second research question sought to gather a superintendent's perspective on organizing his or her cabinet, and across all the participants, the makeup of the cabinet was dynamic, changing over the course of the superintendent's tenure. All participants emphasized that the positions that report directly to the superintendent change according to the business needs of the district. One specific example was when a superintendent

created a position specifically to oversee new construction for the district because the

district's enrollment grew dramatically over several years. The positions that would

strategically place the superintendent to be successful in his role reported to the

superintendent. Some positions, such as the chief financial and chief human resources

officers were always present on the superintendent's cabinet. Other positions were placed

on the cabinet situationally, and some examples included a chief of community

engagement, principal supervisors, and technology directors. All participants stated that

in large school districts specifically, chiefs of communication are also essential as cabinet

positions, as the superintendent is frequently engaging with or responding to the media.

Chiefs of Board Relations or a school board liaison was also referenced as a position of

importance on the superintendent's cabinet.

Limitations

This study has limitations. An extremely limited number of superintendents share

the characteristics of those in this study, specifically retired superintendents of an urban

school system of greater than 10,000 students in a southwestern state. Research was

conducted on the large urban districts in a southwestern state as well as the identities of

the former superintendents, and then they were recruited to participate in the study.

Additionally, very few women were present on the list of eligible participants as females

are underrepresented in superintendent positions, and as an indirect result, only male

subjects participated in this study. Ultimately, only three superintendents participated in

the study, which limits the degree to which the data can be applied to the general experience of urban school superintendents.

Additionally, without rapport the participants in the study may have not shared the full degree of their experience with the researcher, though to address this, retired superintendents were recruited for the study because they may be slightly more removed from the politics and operations of school districts and more willing to share information related to personnel. This study was also not conducted by a peer superintendent, so for this reason, participants may have not fully shared their experiences. Participants may have also shared information on their experiences without giving all the context that led to that decision, which could lead to the investigator drawing conclusions without the full scope of details. For this reason, follow-up and probing questions were asked to obtain as much contextual background as possible about decisions made by superintendents on the hiring and organization of their senior executive leadership teams (Creswell, 2009).

Lastly, interviews can be biased because they are capturing a lived experience from the perspective of the participant. Additionally, because the researcher shares a similar experience serving in an executive leadership role in a large urban school system, the responses shared with the participant may have been more or less forthcoming, particularly as their experiences may involve people who currently work in education administration.

Discussion

The data gathered from this study aligned with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. A great deal of considerations are made by the superintendent when hiring for and selecting the senior executive leadership team, as they are the most senior members of a school system. The participants of this investigation each cited the need to sometimes employ shared decision-making strategies when selecting individuals to serve on the cabinet, and also to consider how the individual will be received by board members and by those who currently serve on the senior executive leadership team. Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) discuss that at the senior executive level, while conflict is common, the importance of having a shared alignment on the organization's values and mission is critical for success; all superintendents that participated in this study cited situations in which they sought the input of outside stakeholders, such as the board and cabinet, and this was generally done to create buy-in and to assess that their recommendation for a role would ultimately be successful. Bryk & Schneider (2003) cite the importance of building trust and open communication between members of team, as it can contribute to organizational success, and similarly, all participants who participated in the study singled out trust as the characteristic they value most in members of the cabinet. The absence of this trait was linked to the superintendents' decisions to remove individuals from their cabinets

The superintendent has to manage relationships with stakeholders ranging from the community to senior administration and the school board when making decisions to

hire and organize the senior leadership team. The school board in particular has been found to play a major role in influencing the superintendent's approach to hiring members of his or her cabinet, some of which stems from the high profile of these positions and the role the cabinet plays in informing the school board with information needed to govern (Carver, 2000; Kowalski, 2011; Sevak, 2012). This investigation suggests that the school board plays a prominent role in influencing the ways in which the superintendent approaches staffing his or her cabinet, which range from individually contacting board members to get their perspective on prospective candidates for the cabinet as well as being mindful of board member's preferences for characteristics of cabinet members, which range from particular demographic characteristics to particular internal candidates with a longstanding rapport with members of the school board. This study attempted to identify the degree to which various considerations influenced how superintendents make decisions to hire and organize members of their senior executive leadership teams.

In addition to ensuring the instructional success of the district, a school superintendent is tasked with leading and staffing all of the essential business functions of the district, including academics, finance, operations, human resources and facilities (Chapman, 1997; Eisinger & Hula, 2004). All of the participants in this investigation reflected upon the positions which were always represented on their senior executive leadership teams, which were specifically human resources, academics, and finance, and also adjusted their cabinet to meet emerging business needs in their specific districts. This

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entailed adding new positions to the cabinet, ranging from those who lead on technology to opening new facilities.

Chapter 2 introduced Bolman and Deal's (2008) Four Frames of an organization as the conceptual framework for this study. Using the body of scholarly work by Bolman and Deal, organizational design and operations principles were applied to this research using the Four Frames. This conceptual framework can be applied to the organization and selection of members of a superintendent's senior executive leadership team. Bolman and Deal noted that organizations can be conceptualized in four major frames: structural, human resources, politics and symbolic. The data collected on the selection and organization of members of the superintendent's cabinet can be sorted and understood through the Four Frames.

The structural frame, as described by Bolman and Deal (2008), refers to the ways in which specific responsibilities and roles are distributed within the organization. Each superintendent described the responsibilities and issues that merited the creation of a distinct function that would be represented and led by an individual on the senior executive leadership team. These critical roles and responsibilities had common threads between the participants interviewed, in particular the human resources, finance, academics and operations functions, which were represented on all of the superintendents' senior executive leadership teams during their tenures.

The organizational structure of the superintendent's senior team also evolved over the tenure of the superintendent as new business needs emerged, some of which were due to growth in enrollment or financial troubles. The structural decisions made by the

superintendent in organizing the senior executive leadership team were intertwined with

the perception of what the superintendent felt needed to be prioritized in fulfilling his or

her own job duties. In this study, structure was applied to the understanding of factors

that influence the superintendent to organize and select his or her senior executive

leadership team.

Bolman & Deal's (2013) description of the human resources frame focuses on the

role that human capital and talent acquisition plays in describing and understanding an

organization. In this study, the superintendents who participated in the study described

the qualities, competencies, and other factors needed to recruit, select, and onboard

individuals to serve on the senior executive leadership team. The superintendents stated

that the nature of the roles of senior executive leaders had implications on turnover and

recruitment as well as support for these types of individuals. For example, all cabinet

members described in the study held contracts that had implications for making it more

difficult to remove members of the senior executive leadership team when they did not

perform well, leading to actions such as demotions and/or reorganization of

responsibilities as opposed to termination. In terms of recruitment, superintendents cited

changing job titles and duties to attract the best talent, for example creating deputy

superintendent or assistant superintendent level positions for the explicit purpose of being

able to recruit candidates from surrounding districts at competitive salaries and levels of

responsibility. Similarly, turnover frequently occurred due to senior executive leaders

pursuing similar positions in larger districts. Due to turnover described by participants, it

was not uncommon for neighboring superintendents to purposefully and openly discuss

trading talent when opportunities would arise. In terms of the actual hiring processes used by the superintendent, they varied drastically depending on the superintendent, position being hired for, and depending on the individual being considered for a senior executive leadership team position. These tactics to select candidates ranged from formally or informally gathering input from the district's board of trustees, having an open and transparent process for posting and recruiting for positions, forming selection committees, or the superintendent simply choosing to select a candidate without external input. In addition to making human resources decisions using varying levels of internal or external input, all participants had experiences selecting candidates through the lens of whether the candidate was internal or external to the district. Through the human resources frame, Bolman and Deal (2013) describe the merits of promoting from within as a means to elevate levels of morale, retention, and job satisfaction. This data indicates that the superintendents also felt that there were great advantages to promoting from within the organization that mirror those described by Bolman & Deal. Additionally, superintendents cautioned against hiring too many candidates externally from the district for senior executive leadership positions because it could send an unspoken message that the current staff in the district are not qualified for the roles or could create a perception that the superintendent has a non-transparent inner circle, particularly if the superintendent were to hire many candidates from his or her previous school districts. In sum, numerous dimensions of the human resources frame of an organization were abundant throughout the data.

The data collected also aligns with Bolman and Deal's description of the political frame of an organization. All the participants provided robust experiences with making decisions on the selection and organization through the lens of the political frame, particularly as they pertain to the dynamics between the superintendent and the school board. As the school board is an important stakeholder that the superintendent must work with to fulfil his or her responsibilities, it was expected and observed that all participants would describe the ways in which the school board, elected officials organized by geographic district, had an influence on the organization and selection of the senior executive leadership team. Superintendent 3 had to have his cabinet recommendations formally approved by his board, and therefore his tactics to select members of his cabinet were impacted. These techniques included understanding the qualities sought after in his cabinet, as well as having individual conversations with the school board about his recommendations for the cabinet. While the other two participants did not have to obtain the formal approval of the school board for cabinet positions, they noted that the political dynamics with the school board would influence their cabinet selection and organization decisions in other ways. For example, the participants voiced examples of the school board providing the superintendent with particular recommendations for cabinet positions, some of which the superintendents believed were chosen because of some political gain to be had by the school board member. School boards can also express concerns about specific candidates and push back against the superintendent's recommendations based on a variety of factors, some of which include personal relationships with other members of the administration. All participants referenced

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experiences when they desired to remove an individual from his senior executive leadership team, and political dynamics sometimes impacted their ability to do this quickly. For example, Superintendent 1 was externally hired over the sitting deputy superintendent of the school district, who possessed multi-year relationships with a number of board members, the administration and community. For this reason, the superintendent noted that it took much longer to remove this individual from his leadership team, even when it was abundantly clear that he was not able to trust and confide in his deputy superintendent; it was first prudent to gain the political buy-in to be able to reassign the deputy superintendent in a way that would not greatly upset the board and other important stakeholders. Members of the board, whom the superintendent needs to be able to influence to effectively govern, would also desire specific qualities in members of the senior executive leadership team; all participants noted that diversity, which could entail race/ethnicity, gender, or types of professional experiences, was desired by the school board. The superintendents said they examined and tried to make themselves aware of the dynamics between their staff and the school board, and two noted that it would be perceived negatively by the superintendent when it was clear that his cabinet was preemptively sharing information with school board members, as trust was frequently noted by participants as the most desirable quality in members of their leadership team.

Finally, Bolman and Deal (2013) list the symbolic framework as the fourth frame of an organization. This frame describes how perception, meaning and belief can drive culture and trust in an organization. The data indicates that symbolism impacted the ways

in which superintendents organized and selected members of the senior executive leadership team, primarily through the types of positions that were present on their cabinet, the people who were selected for positions, and the levels to which the superintendent sought feedback on hiring decisions. The positions that were represented on the superintendent's cabinet varied over time, and sometimes represented a superintendent's symbolic commitment to improving the district's operations. Superintendent 1, for example, said, "If you go into a school district that is getting hammered on college readiness, or lack of, then you may want to create a position that does nothing but work on college readiness, AP, GP, whatever." If the superintendent identifies a particular area that is a major priority, creating a dedicated cabinet position and reorganizing departments accordingly sends a clear message to the board and administration that the superintendent is seeking to improve the district's operations. Superintendents also made cabinet selection decisions to symbolically indicate their good faith in their organization's talent pipeline. All participants consistently referenced promoting candidates from within their organization as a good practice. Promoting candidates from within symbolically demonstrates the superintendent's belief that employees of the district are qualified to take on the district's most senior positions, and therefore are more likely to retain talent who feel valued by the organization. The superintendent's practice of gathering outside feedback and forming selection committees to select cabinet members can also be understood through the lens of Bolman and Deal's symbolic frame. All superintendents have used a selection committee, generally comprised of senior executive leaders in the district, in order to hire a new member to the

cabinet. Selection committees, in addition to providing the superintendent with additional insight on the merits of candidates for cabinet positions, are also useful as the practice of gathering outside feedback also can symbolically indicate trust in the superintendent's cabinet to provide recommendations on senior-level positions. This can create a more positive relations and a cabinet that is more informed on the reasons why particular candidates are chosen for positions. Similarly, superintendents noted situations when they gathered the feedback of board members when making cabinet selection and organization, which can symbolically represent the superintendent's desire to gather stakeholders' input, even when it is not required by policies or explicit expectations. Shared decision-making practices played a role in all of the superintendents' approaches to selecting and organizing their senior executive leadership teams. The symbolic lens informs the understanding of the superintendent's experience making these decisions in this context.

The results of this study viewed through the lens of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames are consistent with the literature on the influences that impact a superintendent's decision-making process when organizing and selecting his senior executive leadership teams. Superintendents consider a wide variety of factors when creating the structure and filling vacancies in their cabinet that span appeasing stakeholders, meeting high-priority business needs, and symbolically demonstrating commitment and other messages to the administration, board, and community. While the decision-making process was situational to each superintendent, district, and situation, the evidence gathered can be

understood and analyzed through a common framework and support particular themes between the different participants.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice suggest that superintendents have a variety of factors to consider when making decisions about how to select and organize the senior executive leadership team in a school district. Conversely, school and district leaders who aspire to serve on a superintendent's cabinet should be mindful of how the different frames of an organization can influence the superintendent's decision-making progress and that success in one dimension, such as content-expertise or competence, is not necessarily enough to be selected for or maintained on the cabinet. The superintendent has to manage a variety of stakeholder relationships, including with the school board and senior executive leadership team when making hiring and organizational decisions, as these stakeholders, in addition to students, are either directly or indirectly impacted by these decisions. The decisions made by the superintendent when organizing and selecting his or her senior executive leadership team will not only impact the district's ability to execute the core business units of operating a school district, such as curriculum and instruction, finance, and human resources, it can also impact relationships within the district and its ability to retain and attract talent. Therefore, the decisions on whom to hire and how to organize the cabinet are essential to the district's operations and should be made with these factors in mind.

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All the participating superintendents noted that they had sought the input of external stakeholders when making their hiring and organizational decisions. These stakeholders included the school board, which can have varying levels of formal and informal influence over the selection of the cabinet, as well as existing members of the cabinet, who are impacted by the decisions as well. A superintendent who is selecting a senior executive leadership team member should reflect upon which stakeholders should have input in the decision and create systems for how that feedback will be gathered and used in practice. All superintendents experienced situations in which some board members or stakeholders expressed dissent about the superintendent's recommendation for a cabinet position, and therefore aspiring and sitting superintendents should also consider the ways in which these situations will be addressed and navigated in their particular contexts.

The participants noted that the composition of the senior executive leadership team should reflect the highest-priority business needs of the district, and these change over time. In order to make the best decisions, superintendents should consider how their districts are changing and in which areas the administration and board want the district to improve. With the growing prominence of technology, for example, superintendents were more likely to have the technology function represented on the cabinet than earlier on in their careers. Based on the changing state accountability systems or demographics of urban school districts, the superintendent can leverage the composition of the cabinet to meet these emerging business needs; for example, in the face of rapid enrollment increases, Superintendent 3 ensured that a senior executive dedicated to the growth, bond,

and facilities needs was represented on the cabinet. Superintendents need to identify the most pressing needs to ensure the district's success and then organize the cabinet accordingly.

As the senior executive leadership team in a large urban school system can experience turnover in light of team members being tapped for jobs in larger districts, retirement, or being removed by the superintendent, the superintendent needs to have a talent acquisition and succession strategy in place. Participants in this study voiced that networking and relationships with other superintendents were useful in quickly identifying talent when vacancies on the cabinet emerged. Superintendents and aspiring cabinet members should consider opportunities that would position them for exposure to talent pools for future vacancies through professional associations and other events. As all participants cited a preference for promoting candidates from within the school district for positions on the senior executive leadership team, superintendents should develop strategies for becoming aware of the high-potential junior talent in the district, particularly in large urban district where the superintendent has limited capacity to work closely with a large number of employees. Conversely, aspiring cabinet members should consider ways in which they can demonstrate to senior leadership their ability to be successful in a cabinet position in the context of the position that they currently have.

Members of the superintendent's senior executive leadership team possess expertise in a functional area that is critical for the operation of the school district. These functions range from academics to human resources to finance, among others. While content expertise and ability to lead content experts are critical for success on a cabinet,

all participants of this study recognize trust and loyalty are some of the most important characteristics for senior leaders on their team. Superintendents who are considering hiring members for their cabinet should consider the ways in which they can screen and monitor for loyalty and organize their cabinet accordingly. Similarly, those serving on senior executive leadership teams can consider the number of ways in which trust can be exhibited and broken in the context of the relationship with the superintendent. With regards to trust, all of the participants of this study placed a premium on the flow of information between the superintendent, cabinet and board. In situations when superintendents did not perceive there to be trust, most commonly information was prematurely shared between members of the board and cabinet. Superintendents can consider the ways in which they set expectations for communication between their leadership team and cabinet. Similarly, members of the cabinet can become cognizant of how they approach their dynamics with the district's board of trustees, particularly when members of cabinet and school board members might have pre-existing informal relationships that could present a liability in how they are perceived by the superintendent.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this research, a number of recommendations emerge. This study focused on the experience of retired superintendents of large urban school districts in a southwestern state with hiring and organizing members of their senior leadership team. While the nation's largest school districts serve millions of students, the

vast majority of districts in the United States serve fewer than 10,000 students, and therefore most superintendents in the United States work in rural areas that will generate less revenue than their larger counterparts. In addition, rural districts might serve different demographics of students and communities than urban districts. Future research could include an investigation of how superintendents of small, rural districts select and organize members of the senior executive leadership teams. By virtue of being smaller, there are fewer layers of management between the senior executive team and those who work on campuses, and it is possible that different criteria are considered. While urban districts might be housed in areas with a great variety of surrounding traditional and charter districts from which to attract talent, rural districts with less physical proximity to talent pools might implement different strategies for staffing the cabinet.

In this investigation, the role of the school board was identified by all participants as having an influence on the superintendent's decision-making on the selection and organization of the senior executive leadership team. The school board sometimes held a formal role in approving the superintendent's recommendations for cabinet appointees, or they informally had influence over the superintendent's decision-making process. All of the superintendents interviewed worked solely in traditional public school systems, with democratically elected trustees, each of whom represented a constituency in a geographic region. An area of future research could investigate how leaders of charter systems select and organize the executive leadership team. While the superintendent of a traditional school system has a limited sphere of influence on who is elected to serve on a school board, the governance structure in independent charter systems differs greatly, and

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charter leadership has much more influence in selecting the members of his or her board, all of whom are not publicly elected. The difference in governance between the two types of school systems could have an impact on the ways in members of cabinet are selected and organized. Additionally, it is worth noting that the superintendents who participated in this study led school systems in a southwestern state in which the district was governed independently from the city in which they were housed. Some urban school systems, such as Chicago Public Schools and the District of Columbia Public Schools are governed by the city, and superintendents are accountable to the office of the mayor, as opposed to an elected school board. Further investigations could examine whether differences in governance structures impact those selected for senior executive leadership positions.

Lastly, future researchers could examine on a more granular level the strategies that superintendents employ to hire for specific positions on the cabinet. Many school superintendents have experience serving as teachers and campus administrators prior to assuming the superintendency, which results in many superintendents having areas of expertise in some functional areas, namely school administration and curriculum and instruction, more so than finance and facilities. Therefore, the strategies the superintendent uses to hire for functional areas that he or she has expertise in may differ from leaders of areas with which he or she is less familiar. Some differences in senior executive leadership team positions may influence the ways in which the superintendent makes hiring decisions. While some positions might require a deep, functional expertise in a specific area, such as chief financial officer positions, other positions might be more cross functional and require non-technical skill sets. It was stated by two participants that

there is sometimes a need to have a position dedicated to board member relations and making operational decisions in the absence of the superintendent. These positions are sometimes called deputy superintendent or chief of staff. Because the skill sets needed to be successful in these roles may be harder to discern by specific certifications or majors, the ways in which the superintendent selects individuals for these types of positions might differ from other cabinet positions, which could merit future investigation. In summary, there is scant literature on these types of key decisions made by school superintendents. Students and other stakeholders may benefit from additional research.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Dear [Superintendent's name],

I am currently working on my treatise for my doctorate in the Cooperative Superintendency Program at the University of Texas at Austin. The focus of my study is to understand how superintendents select and organize their senior leadership teams in urban school districts.

I hope to collect data for this study by interviewing you once for 60-90 minutes. The attached information sheet provides more information about the study. Your participation in this study will be confidential, and identifying information about the school district in which you work will be removed.

Let me know if there is some time in the coming week when we can discuss further over the phone.

Sincerely,
Jharrett Bryantt
Doctoral Candidate in the Cooperative Superintendency Program
University of Texas at Austin

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

• Request permission to audio-record

• Review information sheet & Invite questions

• Give context for the study and define key terms, including senior executive leadership team

Warm-up

Tell me a little bit about your background as an educator and why you chose to become a superintendent.

Questions

1. In your experience, what role does the senior leadership team play in helping a superintendent achieve his or her vision?

2. Are there senior positions that are particularly essential to report to the superintendent?

3. What are some reasons why a vacancy on a superintendent's senior executive leadership team might occur?

- Can you describe an experience where you have had a vacancy on your leadership team that had to be filled?

- How long did that process take?

- Why might that process take that amount of time?

4. Are there individuals who you would regularly consult with when you had to fill a senior leadership team position?

5. What strategies did you use to identify candidates for these types of positions?

- Is there a standard interview or selection process for these types of positions?

- In your experiences how have other individuals played a role in helping you identify candidates for these positions

- Have there been experiences when a board member has played a role in the selection process for these types of positions?

- What has been your experience with promoting from within versus seeking external candidates? When seeking external candidates, how do you gather information about their candidacy?

6. Recall an experience where you reorganized departments or personnel between members of your leadership team. What influenced you to make that decision? Did the outcome go as expected?

7. Why might a superintendent create a new cabinet-level position that hasn't previously existed in the district?

8. What qualities do you value most in those who report directly to you?

9. Have you had to fill a vacancy unexpectedly? Did that impact your decision-making process for selecting a replacement?

10. Has your strategy and considerations for hiring members of your leadership team changed over your career? Why is that?

Wrap-up

Is there anything else I haven't asked you that you would like to add about organizing

and selecting your senior team?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: THE SELECTION, ORGANIZATION, AND ROLE OF SENIOR EXECUTIVE
LEADERSHIP TEAMS IN THREE URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN A
SOUTHWESTERN STATE: A PHENOMENOLOGY

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to
whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will
answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have
before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form
will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study
You have been asked to participate in a research study about how school district superintendents
select and organize members of their senior executive leadership team. The purpose of this study
is to understand how superintendents create and lead the senior leadership team. One of the
intentions of this research will be to inform the work of superintendents and their senior staff, as
well as be of interest to those who intend to become district leaders.

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
· Participate in an in-depth interview
· Review transcribed data from the interviews
This study will take place in a face-to-face or telephone interview of approximately 90-minutes in
length. The study will include up to 5 participants.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, this is a
chance for you to share your experiences hiring and organizing your senior leadership
team during your career.
Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate, please sign and return this form to the researcher. You may reach out to him by emailing or calling him (jharrett.bryantt@gmail.com, 832-291-7966) and he will pick it up from you at a convenient time. Alternatively, you may mail it to him at Jharrett Bryantt, 1111 Rusk St #1306., Houston, TX 77002. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?
You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?
Your privacy and the confidentiality of your data will be protected by the researcher referring to you with a neutral alias, not disclosing any information you share to other participants, ensuring the details of the data cannot be traced to participants, and all data will be locked in a secure location.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your data will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data, which will be masked, resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you, or with your participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for 2 years and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?
Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher **Jharrett Bryantt** at **832-291-7966** or send an email to **jharrett.bryantt@gmail.com** for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is **2017-11-0005.**

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?
For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

_____   _____
Print Name of Person obtaining consent   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Person obtaining consent   Date

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Vita

Jharrett Bryantt received a Bachelor of Science from Yale University in 2011. Shortly after, he moved to Houston, Texas to serve in the Teach for America corps. During this time, he taught high school geometry at YES Prep Public Schools and held a variety of campus and district-level leadership roles. Since leaving the classroom, he has held a variety of positions within the Houston Independent School District, and he currently serves as an assistant superintendent, overseeing all college readiness and advising initiatives in the district. In June 2015, he enrolled in the Cooperative Superintendency Program at the University of Texas at Austin, and he received a Master of Education in December 2016.

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