

Hamline University

DigitalCommons@Hamline

School of Education and Leadership Student
Capstone Theses and Dissertations

School of Education and Leadership

Spring 2023

Measuring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minnesota Superintendents: “We did our best while we weren’t at our best”

Ann Ertl

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_all



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ertl, Ann, "Measuring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minnesota Superintendents: “We did our best while we weren’t at our best”" (2023). *School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Theses and Dissertations*. 4576.

https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_all/4576

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education and Leadership at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu.

Measuring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minnesota Superintendents:
“We did our best while we weren’t at our best”

by

Ann Ertl

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of
Doctorate in Education

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2023

Dissertation Chair: Linnette Werner

Reader: Jinger Gustafson

Reader: Leanne Kampfe

To Siddharth for the space, time and support to help me reach my academic dream. I love you. Thank you so much.

To Keshav and Veda, do not stop going to school or learning ever. Dad and I are so proud of you. You both are the greatest of gifts to us.

To my Mom, Dad and sister Beth for instilling in me the drive and belief in myself that made all of this possible and being my biggest cheerleaders. This is for you, Dad!

To Staci, I knew from the beginning that you and I were going to be each other's people.

To Dr. Linnette Werner for pushing me and making this process attainable!

To my "pseudonyms" writing group, and Drs. Rhoda, Tiffany, Abby, Leanne, and Katie and my entire amazing IDL team! Thanks for all you've done to support me through this, from the technical to the emotional. You are amazing and I am proud to count you as colleagues and friends.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	5
Table of Figures	6
CHAPTER ONE	7
Introduction	7
Research Questions & Purpose	8
Relevance	9
Personal Relevance	11
Summary	12
CHAPTER TWO	14
Introduction	14
Superintendency	15
History and Changing Role of the Superintendency	15
The Current Work of the Superintendent: The 2020 AASA Decennial Survey	19
Time Consuming Issues	21
Problems Facing Superintendents	26
Summary	29
Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Superintendency	29
Attrition Data	29
Reasons for Attrition	32
Summary	34
CHAPTER THREE	36
Methodology	36
Introduction	36
Theoretical Framework	37
Instrumentation Survey	38
Data Analysis	40
Institutional Research Approval	41
Conclusion	41
CHAPTER FOUR	42

Data Analysis and Results	42
Introduction	42
Survey Results	43
Survey Data Analysis	44
CHAPTER FIVE	71
Conclusion	71
Introduction	71
Findings	72
Lived Experiences of Superintendents in Minnesota	72
School Board Relationships	74
Superintendent Attrition	75
Future Evolution of the Modern Superintendency	76
Limitations	78
Future Research	78
Conclusion	79
REFERENCES	81
Appendix A	86
Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey	86
Appendix B	91
Survey Recruitment Communications	91
Appendix C	94
Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey Codebook	94

List of Tables

Table 1.	Discursive Stages of the Role of the Superintendency	16
Table 2.	Post-COVID Survey: Themes Related to Most Time Consuming Activities	49
Table 3.	Post-COVID Survey: Themes Related to Most Pressing Problems	54
Table 4.	Themes Related to Intent to Leave Superintendent Positions	62
Table 5.	Possible Loss of Superintendents in the State	65
Table 6.	Themes Across all Open-Ended Questions	67
Table 7.	The Lived Experiences of Minnesota Superintendents After the COVID-19 Pandemic	71

Table of Figures

Figure 1.	Superintendent Vacancies in Minnesota	30
Figure 2.	Racial and Gender Identification of Respondents	44
Figure 3.	School District Type Disaggregated by Gender	45
Figure 4.	Most Time-Consuming Activities of Superintendents By Gender	47
Figure 5.	Most Time-Consuming Activities of Superintendents by School District Type	48
Figure 6.	Most Pressing Issues of Superintendents by Gender	51
Figure 7.	Most Pressing Issues of Superintendents by School District type	52
Figure 8.	Support From School Board Related to Most Pressing Issues by Gender	55
Figure 9.	Superintendents Indication of Whether They Will Leave Their Positions at the End of the 2022-23 School Year	57
Figure 10.	Superintendents Next Plans	58
Figure 11.	Superintendents Who Intend to or May Leave Their Current Position Disaggregated by District Type	58

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On a cold March day in 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz announced that schools would close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing educators to take unprecedented steps to plan for a learning model with which few of us had any experience. The COVID-19 pandemic thrust district leaders like me into operating in a new and uncertain reality. I felt like the professional knowledge and skills I had thus far relied upon were inadequate in this startling reality we were now really facing.

Together, as a district leadership team and as a teaching and learning team, we made it through the triage-teaching of spring 2020, but more challenges were right around the corner. Leading a district is complex work during non-pandemic times and was further compounded by the experience of the pandemic. This was evident in our budgeting processes. Already, we had experienced two years of budget reductions resulting from stagnant enrollment. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this even further as families made choices like keeping their young child home an extra year rather than sending them to kindergarten or opting for private schools with less restrictive masking requirements. While our district did receive an influx of federal-relief funding, the mechanization of these funds to support personal protective equipment, air-system upgrades took time, effort and human capital in planning and execution.

It was also evident in our reform efforts. While we worked to manage the nonstop changes brought forth by the pandemic conditions, we simultaneously worked to innovate, recognizing that this set of circumstances was laying bare some desperately needed changes for public schools. Using federal-relief funding, we developed an

accredited online school focused on project-based learning and social justice. As staff and students began returning to school, we recognized more staff and student mental health needs than we could have predicted or planned for, which encumbered our entire system with additional stress. These variables, sometimes exciting and often stressful, further burdened district leaders, particularly superintendents, to whom the system looked for guidance and answers.

Despite the outward expectation for superintendents to use more collaborative and shared leadership models, much of our cultural context still relies upon the heroic leader at the top of the organization to guide us through uncertainty (Kersten, 2012; Kowalski, 2013). While we have actively tried to disrupt these old, top-down leadership tropes in my district, it quickly became apparent that in times of stress, many people in the system wanted a more autocratic leader. As a new leader in our superintendent's cabinet, I had a unique opportunity to be this close to our superintendent and watch the trials and tribulations she faced, as well as witness some of the toll that this period of time took on her.

Research Questions & Purpose

The research question was *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* This question was borne out of the desire to understand how two years of COVID-19 pandemic leadership impacted their lived experiences as superintendents.

This research sought to further our understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents. I used a qualitative study approach with a survey, and then applied a grounded theory approach to

answer my research question. I felt that by gathering data from superintendents across Minnesota, thematic data analysis would lead me toward the development of a new theory of the impact or ways the COVID-19 pandemic changed the role of superintendents.

Relevance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents made decisions in even more complex environments not likely to change once the pandemic eases (Cohn, 2021). School system leaders continuously found themselves in lose-lose situations; they faced unprecedented dilemmas that required them to make undesirable choices between competing demands, knowing that some principals, teachers, parents, students, and community members would be in alignment with their decisions, and others would not (Miller, Nuzzi & Wyttenbach, 2020).

In addition to the public health threat of COVID-19 pandemic, other local crises occurred that further fractured and devastated the community and added to feelings of stress and uncertainty felt by the public and within school districts. In the Twin Cities metro-area, the trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbated by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. School district superintendents worked to respond to the fear, hurt and anxiety felt by our students as a result of this tragedy. Almost simultaneously came a new and well-organized movement from conservative media and political advocates to conflate any discussion of race or embrace of equity with support for Critical Race Theory (Cohn, 2021). School superintendents' handling of race-related incidents, equity work, and addressing anti-racism and the murder of George Floyd in

their school systems was put under a public microscope. This racial uncertainty, coupled with job-uncertainty and discomfort, created difficult relationships with school staff.

Superintendents faced highly charged personnel issues. Pandemic-school conditions put superintendents in the middle of opposite viewpoints; parents advocating for schools to open, and staff concerned with their safety and working conditions (Bushweller, 2021). Superintendents across our state and country attempted to make decisions based on what was best for students while maintaining positive relationships with their teachers' unions; such decision-points frequently created conflict. This was apparent locally. In Minneapolis, after failed negotiations attempts, teachers went on strike in early March 2022 while the St. Paul district narrowly averted a strike. Minneapolis teachers had not authorized a strike since 1970, and schools were closed for more than two weeks as a result. Even in my district, teachers protested outside of the district office when we announced that they would be required to come back to school five days per week. Emotions ran high as teachers told us that they would be self-quarantining in their basements, away from their children, outwardly castigating the people they held responsible for the decision that was made on behalf of what was considered best for students.

Superintendents became the face of public health for their district, despite most likely having no expertise in this area. Debates, both among staff and with the public, about mask-wearing and vaccines also became common for superintendents. As the COVID-19 pandemic public health information and guidance changed, superintendents had to make decisions and create localized guidance for all of the students and staff in

their district (Fung, 2021). Some superintendents faced written and in-person threats over the decisions they made (Taylor & Nierenberg, 2021).

School district superintendents faced dilemmas and decision-making challenges from all directions that have not subsided and continue to evolve (Cohn, 2021; Fung, 2021; Taylor & Nierenberg, 2021). The role of superintendent has continually grown over time, yet the pressures that school district superintendents have faced over the last several years have been unmatched in history (Cohn, 2021). Exploration of the impact of this time on the job experiences of superintendents adds to the literature about how the COVID-19 pandemic has overall impacted public education, and more specifically the superintendency.

Personal Relevance

This research was important to me both personally and professionally. School district leadership, in particular the superintendency, was a personal career aspiration. During my time as an EdD student, I also did the coursework and other requirements to complete my superintendent's license. As such, I was an attentive spectator of the work of my superintendent and the work of other superintendents with whom she interacted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, metro-area superintendents began meeting weekly to discuss issues and support one another, and I was fortunate to join them on several occasions. While the Minnesota Department of Education was issuing guidance in broad sweeps, the collaboration among the superintendents represented more on the ground support and assistance. All of the school district superintendents were faced with new and complex problems and relied upon one another to collaborate on solutions.

I saw the toll that my superintendent paid during this time and began to question my aspirations. She worked even longer hours than normal, navigated unprecedented issues related to health and safety of staff and students, and was questioned and doubted on every side for each decision that we made as a district. Despite my superintendents' public commitment to shared and collaborative decision making, she was still viewed, and blamed, as the leader at the top of the system. I began to wonder whether there would be a return to "normal" and what "normal" even meant for a modern superintendent. This led me to the research question: *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* I decided to pursue this topic of research in part so I could learn whether it was a role that I was willing to step into.

Summary

In asking the research question *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* I had multiple goals. My first goal was to document the impact of this unprecedented time on superintendents. I also desired my research and findings to be an asset to the educational leadership field and to provide some sense-making from this time that could support future leaders facing crises and challenges.

In chapter two, I described the historical and current contexts for the role of the school district superintendent. I also examined the emergent literature specific to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school district leadership. In chapter three I discussed the qualitative methodology I used in surveying and interviewing superintendents and my data analysis process. The data is analyzed in chapter four.

Chapter five discusses my findings and how they might point to building a superintendency model that is sustainable for leaders within those roles.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

This chapter consists of two parts and contextualizes the role of the modern superintendent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The section on the superintendency positions this study within modern research of the field of educational leadership, with a focus on the superintendent. A review of the historical context of the superintendency and description of the historical phases of the superintendency arrive at the current context in which the superintendent leads their school system. This section also includes an overview of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA)'s decennial study of the role of the superintendent published in 2020, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The AASA is considered the national professional association for school superintendents.

The second section examines literature on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lived experiences of school district superintendents. This literature is significantly limited; adding to the literature is a central purpose for this study. However, there is some research, including periodical articles and professional organization surveys, focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of superintendents, specifically.

This literature review provides the foundation for the primary research question, *“How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents’ day-to-day work?”* The purpose of this research is to add to the literature related to superintendent leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as uncover any changes in the lived experiences of superintendents as a result of the pandemic.

Superintendency

Modern research of the superintendency can be categorized into several domains: (a) career paths, training programs, and leadership standards, (b) the ascendancy of women and people of color to the role, (c) superintendents as chief officers of change and reform, (d) analysis of the lived experiences of superintendents, (e) the superintendent as a community leader and collaborator, and recently, (f) superintendents responding to crises (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002; Grogan, 2000; Grogan & Nash, 2020; Epps, 2022; Hutchings & Brown, 2021, Kersten, 2012; Kowalski, 2013; Riley, Conley & Glasman, 2002; Senge, et.al., 2012; Tienken, 2021). While the breadth of research on the role of the superintendent is vast, the body of research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lived experiences of superintendents is still in its infancy. The next section provides an overview of the beginnings of the role and how the role has evolved.

History and Changing Role of the Superintendency

The role of the superintendent has changed over time in terms of actual work, as well as with regard to public perception (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002). From school manager to system manager, educational CEO, and inspirational leader, district leadership continues to evolve alongside all other aspects of our culture. To understand the current lived experience of the modern superintendent, it is important to understand the earliest conceptions of the role.

There is a multitude of research that supports general agreement on the origins of the superintendency (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002; Grogan, 2000; Tienken, 2021).

Philemon Pormort was likely the first person to hold the role that would evolve into the modern superintendency (Tienken, 2021). Pormort was a teacher at Boston Latin School, considered the first American public school, in the early 1600s. He held the title “master of schools,” and performed some tasks that are similar to a modern-day superintendent. His responsibilities ranged from facilities management, curriculum and instruction, management of staff and oversight of scheduling and finance. He also served as spokesperson for the school with town leadership and the community at large (Tienken, 2021).

According to Tienken’s summary of the history of the superintendency (2021), the community of Buffalo, New York formalized the role of superintendent in 1837. The creation of the role was in response to the community’s concern over the lack of a coherent school system, which were leading to inequalities and inefficiencies among the city’s youth. Oliver Gray Steele was named to the post after two others resigned before him, and the structures he set about building sound familiar even within our modern context of schooling and the superintendency. Steele was charged with gathering data on the landscape of schooling in Buffalo’s schools and developing a strategic improvement plan. He recommended creating enrollment zones to assign students to specific schools, as well as local taxation models, both of which are still common today. Steele is also credited with encouraging city leaders to offer school free of charge for all children under the age of 16, making Buffalo one of the first cities in the United States to do so. As a result, enrollment in Buffalo schools went from under 200 students to 1,500 students in one year.

In its earliest conception, the position of school superintendent was primarily clerical. Superintendents had little authority and were mostly responsible for completing routine managerial tasks, such as hiring teachers and maintaining the school building (Andrews & Grogan, 2001; Kowalski, 2006). Brunner, Grogan & Bjork (2002) characterized seven distinct stages of the superintendency role in a meta-analysis of the literature of the history of the superintendency, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1

Discursive Stages of the Role of the Superintendency

Stage	Date Range	Description
One	1820-1850	Superintendents were to be concerned with the development of Protestant citizens who would prosper economically and serve by accommodating practical educational needs, views and wishes of the local community.
Two	1850 - 1900	Superintendents as harbingers of patriotism and nationalist agendas in schools, as well as managerial; directed by local school boards.
Three	1900 -1954	Superintendents as businessmen, not scholars; embracing the values and beliefs of industry: efficiency and efficacy.
Four	1954-1970	Superintendents as communicators; responsive to community members and legislation.
Five	1970-1980	Superintendents were accountable; became a political position with less authority.
Six	1980-1990	Superintendents as political strategists focused on excellence; efficiency, corporate leadership with political maneuvering, important for sups to know how to improve learning, teaching and student performance; losing political clout as legislators took more control of public education.
Seven	1990-early 2000	Superintendents as collaborators; shared / distributed leadership; engaged with the community.

Note. Adapted from Brunner, Grogan & Bjork (2002). Shifts in the discourse defining the superintendency: Historical and current foundations of the position. *The Teachers College Record*, 104(9), 211-238.

Each of these stages has been influenced by the era's political, economic, and demographic trends reflected in public education. However, as Kowalski (2013) noted, while new roles for the superintendent evolved, previous expectations did not disappear, but merely became less consequential.

The role of the superintendent, thus, has evolved significantly over time and continues to do so in response to cultural, political, and economic circumstances (Arar &

Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Grogan, 2000; Kowalski, 2013). However, it is important to note that each discursive stage of the superintendency as described in Table 1 is not discrete; rather the expectations of the superintendent tend to blend from stage to stage. For example, mid-twentieth century superintendents shifted from scholar-leaders toward an industrialist business model in which they sat at the top of a highly centralized and hierarchical structure (Grogan, 2000). While the literature increasingly recognizes the importance of the superintendent as collaborative, sharing leadership, and engaged with the community, there are many school districts that continue to operate with hierarchical and centralized structures (Kersten, 2012, Kowalski, 2013, Senge, et. al., 2012). Furthermore, these desired qualities may require leadership skills in which superintendents have not been trained (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020).

The expectations of superintendents are ever-growing and complex. As Arar and Avidov-Ungar (2020) noted:

In the United States, in addition to their responsibility for students' achievements, enlistment of appropriate staff, construction of suitable regional learning programs, assimilation of educational policies, and enlistment of technological and other resources, the superintendent also ensures that the schools and regional services act to develop means for the continual improvement of schools and also develop optimal conditions and promote initiatives for school improvement (p. 464).

Thus, superintendents have a wide breadth of responsibilities and must know which to focus on and prioritize in a multitude of situations (Kowalski, 2013). As such, many researchers continue to describe the role as highly political while current

superintendents engage with their community in a fraught political environment (Grogan, 2000; Kersten, 2012; Kowalski, et. al, 2010). In fact, the current economic and political climate create a contradictory set of expectations for superintendents (Arar and Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Kowalski, 2013). For example, as Grogan (2000) noted, "...the superintendent must be an astute politician as they engage with the community, but the focus of these efforts must be on garnering much-needed resources to accomplish district goals and objectives. Superintendents must put the interest of the district's children first, whilst likely spending nearly 60 hours a week away from his or her own family" (p. 125). Additionally, superintendents believe they are charged with reforming the district and face considerable conflict when the collaborative approaches they use to make change are contrary to the authoritarian manner in which school boards, principals and teachers may expect them to behave (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020, Kowalski, 2013). The following section provides a current snapshot of the lived experience of the modern superintendent using data collected by the American Association of School Administrators in 2019.

The Current Work of the Superintendent: The 2020 AASA Decennial Survey

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Decennial Survey serves as a window into the varied experiences of superintendents across the country and provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive snapshot of the current day to day work of a superintendent. The AASA began researching the role of the superintendent in 1923 and has repeated and refined the study nearly every ten years since. The purpose of the research is to document the superintendent's role in current society, as well as to analyze the changes in the role.

The AASA Decennial Survey was delivered digitally to all members of the organization and all active superintendents, and was available for respondents from April 21, 2019, through June 1, 2019. During this survey window, superintendents, school-systems and our country in general did not know that we would be facing a global pandemic in less than a year. Therefore, the AASA Decennial Survey provides a unique opportunity to review data on the superintendency prior to what Cohn (2021) called a “once-in-a-century catastrophe” for public education.

The 2020 survey was unique among the AASA surveys in that the results, for the first time, were disaggregated by race and gender. This provided a window into the albeit small gains in demographic diversity among surveyed superintendents. According to the 2020 survey, 26.7 % of respondents identified as female, up from 24.1% in 2010, and 13.1% in 2000 (Grogan & Nash, 2020; Kowalski, et. al., 2011). The literature did not specify whether there was a non-binary gender demographic option for respondents to select.

There have also been small yet consistent gains in the number of superintendents who do not identify as White. In 2020, 8.2% of respondents identified as superintendents of color, compared to 6% in 2010 and 5% in 2000 (Grogan & Nash, 2020, Kowalski, et. al, 2011). Additionally, of all superintendents of color, 42% identified as women, comprising 12.9% of female superintendents overall. Men of color accounted for almost 7% of male superintendents overall (Grogan & Nash, 2020). While this data suggests that there are gains in people of color filling the top role in school districts, the percentages are still significantly lower than the numbers of students of color served by school systems (Grogan & Nash, 2020).

In at least the last decade, there has been mounting criticism that managerial tasks consume too much of the superintendent's time rather than instructional leadership (Kowalski, 2013). However, despite this rebuke, the results of the 2020 Decennial study have shown that the issues consuming the most time for superintendents are managerial in nature, including financial management, personnel management, conflict management and board member relationships (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). Respondents to the survey also identified job-related stress, often borne out of excessive time requirements and social media as the top three most pressing problems facing superintendents. The following sections provide an overview of research in each of these areas.

Time Consuming Issues

Financial management. Dating back to the conception of the role, financial management is one of the most visible management roles of the superintendent, and often one of the top responsibilities the public places on superintendents and school boards (Kowalski, 2013). According to the AASA Decennial Survey published in 2021, responding superintendents across the United States reported financial management as consuming 46% of their time (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). This percentage is likely influenced by the number of superintendent respondents from districts with fewer than 1500 students, which are the norm across the United States. These small districts often have fewer support staff, which results in superintendents operating as the district business manager (Kowalski, 2013).

Financial management consists of a myriad of tasks, including but not limited to: planning and budgeting, accounting and auditing, debt management, risk management, purchasing and inventory management, salary and wage management, facility planning

and management, transportation and food services (Kersten, 2012; Kowalski, 2013). Additionally, superintendents must have knowledge of state laws in relation to these functions as they are often the lead decision maker on how resources are allocated within the district (Kowalski, 2013).

Publicly balancing the wants and needs of students, staff and communities has become increasingly difficult for superintendents. AASA survey respondents indicated their belief that the public's academic and social expectations for schools were increasing, while adequate funding from local, state and federal sources was not responding to the level of need (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). Demographic changes and the reform of educational systems in the United States have required superintendents to focus on funding new efforts; simultaneously garnering the political and economic support for the reforms needed has become more difficult. As Kowalski (2012) noted, "Pressures to reconfigure public schools or to make them compete with private schools come at a time when many taxpayers no longer have family members attending elementary and secondary education. Under these circumstances, it is not uncommon for communities to paradoxically support reform ideas but to oppose the tax increases necessary to implement them" (p. 309).

Personnel management. Today's superintendent requires finely tuned human relation skills to understand, serve, and build relationships with the often divisive internal and external groups they serve (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Grogan, 2000; Kowalski, 2013). Following financial management, responding superintendents reported personnel management, including collective bargaining, as the second-most time-consuming aspect of their job at 42% (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). Personnel management refers to the

management of the physical or mental labor of individuals relevant to the services provided by a school district and includes activities such as: planning for staffing needs, personnel recruitment, personnel selection, orientation, defining position requirements, performance evaluation, staff development, compensation programs, wellness programs, and employee relations (Kowalski, 2013).

Similar to financial management, larger districts are more likely to have more staff to support these functions. In highly decentralized districts, principals often support many personnel management responsibilities. However, superintendents are ultimately responsible for the quality of the employees within their organization, a critical factor in the education that is delivered (Kowalski, 2013).

Collective bargaining is an intersection for superintendents between financial and personnel management, forcing them to balance their own interests, the school board's interests, and the union's interests (Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Riley, Conley & Glasman, 2002). Attention to collective bargaining and union-related issues became prevalent for superintendents in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to be today in states with collective bargaining, with some districts negotiating numerous contracts among several different employee groups (Kowalski, 2013).

Superintendents, particularly those in smaller districts where they act as board representatives or board negotiators, must spend a lot of time on collective bargaining efforts, all the while maintaining positive relationships with both sides of the negotiations. For this reason, critics argue both for superintendents to be removed from this process as well as a new, collaborative bargaining process (Kowalski, 2013; Riley, Conley & Glasman, 2002).

Conflict management. Change and improvement are central to the modern superintendency, and both of these efforts result in change and conflict management. As Grogan (2000) noted, the modern superintendency is centered around change activities and stated: “Indeed, it is apparently the activity itself, rather than the result, that determines the success for the superintendent” (p. 124). These changes may be at the micro or macro levels; superintendents must be skilled at both recognizing the areas where change is needed, and then facilitating the lengthy process each, often interconnected, change takes to occur and become enculturated (Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Kowalski, 2013). The AASA surveyed superintendents on the amount of time spent on conflict management and reported it as the third most time-consuming activity, using 37% of their time (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). The tasks associated with conflict management included relationship building efforts with numerous constituencies and individuals, facilitating problem solving and decision-making processes, and managing diverse personalities and conflicting perspectives (Hutchings & Brown, 2021).

There is a fundamental tension in the superintendency between change management and the time-consuming nature of managing it effectively. As Kowalski (2013) noted, superintendents’ positional power affords them the opportunity to act as change agents, however changing the organizational culture needed to enact change requires long-term stability in the role. Hutchings & Brown summarized this dilemma, “Frequently, the turnover process among board members and within the superintendency results in school districts failing to get traction in attaining strategic planning goals or ensuring continual improvement toward the process of achieving designated performance targets” (p. 43). In other words, superintendents must be credible and root the changes

they seek in trusting relationships with their staff, community and the school board so that they can remain in the role long enough for change to occur.

Board member relationships. If superintendents must be able to maintain their position long enough to enact change for the district, then there must be a strong emphasis on the relationship between the superintendent and the school board members, a relationship which superintendents report is time consuming to build and maintain (Kowalski, 2013). According to the 2020 AASA survey, superintendent and board member relationships was the fourth most time-consuming aspect of the superintendent's job at 35% (Hutchings & Brown, 2021).

School board members are elected by different constituencies within the district boundaries. In most school systems, school boards are responsible for hiring the superintendent. This means that the superintendent's role is inherently political, because politics is the process by which diverse perspectives within communities reconcile their differences (Hurst, 2017). For superintendents and boards to work constructively together, the superintendent must spend time establishing consensus between themselves and their boards to present as a united front to the community (Keedy & Bjork, 2002; Kowalski, 2013). Kowalski (2013) warned that if the relationship between the superintendent and the board was weak, time and effort would be wasted with interpersonal issues and the resulting public relations issues rather than addressing the district's real needs.

Superintendents must also manage personal interests within their school boards and board members' understanding of the purpose of the board itself. Board members often have or recently had children within the school system or represent a specific subset

of schools within the district, which may limit their view or scope of the district as a whole (Sawchuk, 2020). Board members often need to be educated by superintendents on the varied functions within a district, because the superintendent functions as the K-12 public education expert (Sawchuk, 2020). At the same time, boards may need to gain an understanding that their role is not to manage those functions. School boards often struggle to understand their role as a governing body, sometimes overreaching into areas of day-to-day operations or instructional management (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). Each of these perspectives leads to a myopic approach rather than a systems approach, and superintendents must support their board members in continuing to focus on the system of schools. As Hutchings & Brown noted, “The most effective school districts have superintendents who understand their role as the chief executive officer and boards who understand their role as the governing body of the school district” (p. 43). In other words, there is no confusion between the roles of the superintendent as the leader of the district and the school board as the oversight body. The next section details the most commonly reported problems superintendents faced in their job roles.

Problems Facing Superintendents

Job-related stress. Upper management and executive level roles often come with an expectation of stress as part of the job (Hawk & Martin, 2011). This is also true of superintendents. The most pressing problem facing superintendents, according to the survey data, is job-related stress (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). In fact, 56% of respondents reported they felt “very great” or “considerable” stress and 36% of respondents stated they felt “moderate” degrees of stress.

A number of studies have been conducted in which superintendents have identified the sources of their job-related stress. These include time requirements and workload, lack of sufficient resources, lack of support from the public, lack of support from superiors, isolation, high self-expectations, collective bargaining, lack of strategic direction, and gaining public support / making controversial public decisions (Hawk & Martin, 2011; Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Kowalski, 2013).

It is logical that some of the issues superintendents report spending the most time on are also top stressors. Refining personal capacity and skill to effectively manage the change process among various stakeholders can take an emotional toll on superintendents, particularly in polarized communities (Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Kowalski, 2013). As the top executive of the school district, superintendents reported feeling that they are responsible for creating the conditions through their change efforts for positive systemic outcomes and results (Hutchings & Brown, 2021).

While it is not the purpose of this research, there is emergent research on both the effects of stress on superintendents, particularly superintendents who identify as female and superintendents of color, as well as the physical impacts of stress on superintendents.

Unhealthy and unsustainable job-related time requirements. According to the 2020 AASA survey data, the second most important problem involves the time requirements placed on the superintendents, with some superintendents indicating that the role is a 24-hour-a-day-job (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). While the AASA survey did not ask how many hours superintendents were spending on job-related activities each week, Kowalski (2013) reported on a 1995 study that indicated that large-district superintendents averaged approximately 75 hours per week. In a more recent study

conducted for the Rand Corporation, superintendents reported that their typical work weeks averaged about 59 hours (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

In addition to effectively managing and overseeing the operational and instructional aspects of the school district, superintendents are also public figures. As the top executive of the district, superintendents are expected to spend several evenings a week attending a wide range of public and private meetings, participate on various boards (other than their own school board), attend athletic events and student performances, and interact with community groups (Hutchings & Brown, 2021, Kowalski, 2013). Similar to superintendents serving many different central office roles, this likely impacts superintendents in smaller districts even more significantly because there are fewer support staff or surrogates to participate on their behalf (Kowalski, 2013). Kowalski (2013) also noted that unlike most other positions within a school district, superintendents do have more autonomy to create their own daily schedules. However, if a work-day averages between 10-11 hours, that point may be moot.

Social Media. The use of social media has had widespread impact on many aspects of our modern lived experience, including the superintendency. In fact, monitoring and responding to social media ranked as the third most pressing problem facing superintendents (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). Social media is no longer an optional practice for modern school superintendents. Whereas, as Hurst (2017) stated, superintendents had traditionally been removed or protected from public discourse, social media has created conditions where even minor incidents can become part of a public conversation, forcing superintendents to monitor and respond. To avoid negative attention in what may already be a polarized community, superintendents and their

communications staff, if they are fortunate enough to have them, must be media-ready at all times (Hutchings & Brown, 2021).

Summary

This section of the literature review grounded this study in the history of the role of superintendents and provided an overview of the changes in that role over the last decades. This was followed by a description of the research conducted by the AASA in 2019 as the most comprehensive data set of the modern superintendent and their lived experiences. Finally, this section of the literature review explored the areas from the AASA survey that superintendents reported were most time consuming and issues that were most pressing. The following section of the literature review explores the limited body of research that has been conducted on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lived experiences of superintendents.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Superintendency

The impacts of COVID-19 on the superintendency have been documented mostly through surveys conducted by superintendent professional groups and through articles in news media. Overwhelmingly, the focus has been on attrition rates among superintendents. This section of the literature review provides an overview of available superintendent attrition data, as well some of the documented experiences of school district superintendents that contribute to superintendents leaving their posts.

Attrition Data

Studying attrition rates among superintendents is not cut and dried. As Sawchuk noted in his May 6, 2021 *Education Week* article, most available data may be flawed: “There is no longitudinal, nationally representative sample that tracks how long

superintendents stay in their posts and can help pinpoint just how this year's hiring cycle might compare with a normal one. Most estimates are based on superintendents' current, rather than their completed tenure." According to the AASA's website, the typical tenure for superintendents is 5-6 years, with an annual turnover rate between 14 and 16 percent. In the pre-pandemic data collected for AASA's Decennial Report, superintendents were asked where they intended to be professionally in the year 2025, with 59.5 percent reporting that they intended to remain as superintendents. In contrast to post-pandemic data collected, the AASA survey did not specifically ask superintendents why they might consider leaving their job, although these reasons are likely linked to the job-related problems and issues highlighted in the previous section.

The National Superintendents Roundtable conducted a 10-question superintendent survey in June 2021 and forwarded it to approximately 7,000 school superintendents nationwide. Approximately 400 superintendents responded to the survey, which asked whether or not they planned to stay in their jobs and had they considered leaving the superintendency during or at the end of the 2020-21 school year. According to the respondents, 63 percent of superintendents indicated that they had considered leaving the role.

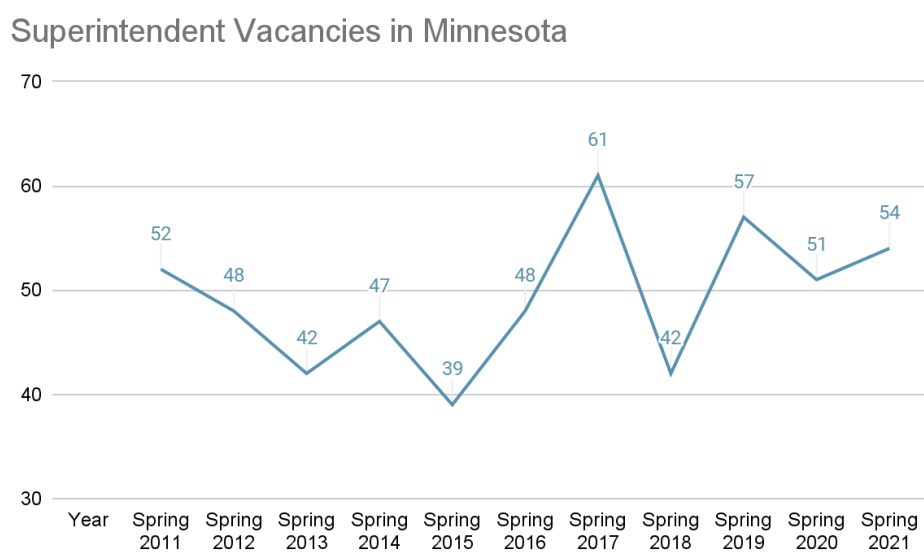
Superintendent attrition data was also collected in a nationwide 2022 Rand Corporation survey of school superintendents and indicated that 13 percent of superintendents planned to leave their job after the 2021-22 school year. Longer term, half of surveyed superintendents noted that they either planned to leave their position in the next few years or were not sure how long they would remain in their position. The Rand survey also noted that turnover rates among superintendents were consistent for

rural, urban and suburban districts with one exception. Superintendents serving districts which served a majority of students of color were statistically significantly more likely to leave their positions than superintendents in districts serving mostly White students.

Locally, the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) also tracked data on superintendent vacancies. On April 7, 2022, MASA Executive Director Deb Henton wrote in her blog, *The Henton Headlines*, that MASA staff had identified 56 superintendent openings across the state since September 2021. As a state, Minnesota has 331 school districts, meaning that approximately 17 percent were experiencing a superintendent turnover. Figure 1 provides an historical overview of superintendent turnover in Minnesota, according to data published by Henton (2022).

Figure 1

Superintendent Vacancies in Minnesota



Note. Adapted from Henton (2022). *The Henton Headlines*. MNASA.

Understanding COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the attrition rates among superintendents is difficult, with researchers and reporters having to rely on anecdotal

reports from search firms, former superintendents, and varied superintendent organizations (Sawchuk, 2021). This is particularly striking given that the U.S. Department of Education collects longitudinal data on students, teachers, and principals, though there is no national collection for superintendents (Sawchuk, 2021).

Reasons for Attrition

The reasons superintendents are leaving their jobs, on the other hand, are well documented in the literature and are similar, yet exacerbated by COVID-19 conditions, to the stressors and problems detailed in the previous section of this literature review: conflict management, community relations, job-related stress and time requirements rated as the reasons superintendents cited they were leaving their jobs (Fung, 2021; Morton & Valley, 2022; The National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021).

Conflict management and community relations. Superintendents are no strangers to managing conflict, however the COVID-19 pandemic brought considerably new and public conflict to their lived experiences. As Fung (2021) described:

Superintendents have become one of the most accessible figures in local levels of government and with all the pent-up frustrations brought on by the pandemic, they have become the easiest touchpoint for many in a community.

Superintendents have been forced to juggle many demanding tasks over the pandemic: addressing concerns from parents, looking out for the health and safety of students and school staff and working with the continually-changing school boards—a relationship many stressed are critical to the success of a superintendent. And superintendents have, for the most part, had to shoulder this burden alone.

Superintendents expressed feeling as though they were in no-win situations (The National Superintendent's Roundtable, 2021). Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, stated to The New York Times, "It's been incredibly difficult for superintendents. They're in communities where half the parents want schools open, half the parents want the schools' shut. Whatever you decide, it's a no-win situation, because you're going to have people mad at you" (Taylor & Nierenberg, 2021). Superintendents faced numerous leadership dilemmas and were often left with only undesirable choices that sometimes even seemed to put the well-being of children at odds with the desires of their staff (Bushweller, 2021; Cohn, 2021; Miller, Nuzzi & Wyttenbach, 2020).

Additionally, as the phases of the COVID-19 pandemic changed, new challenges continued to present themselves. Superintendents had to publicly work through vaccine and mask mandates and decisions over disciplinary actions for those not complying with mandates. As the face of many of these polarizing decisions, superintendents reported being physically threatened by community members, and in some cases requiring extra security at school board meetings and even at their personal residences (Cohn, 2021; Morton & Valley, 2022; Taylor & Nierenberg, 2021; The National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021).

In addition to controversial decisions about the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents in some districts were also responding to a well-organized conservative political campaign decrying Critical Race Theory (Cohn, 2021). According to the survey conducted by The National Superintendents Roundtable (2021), female superintendents and superintendents of color faced particularly racist and misogynistic

assaults from local and non-local people. As the Rand survey (2022) noted, job-related stress and community politics were the two top reasons that superintendents stated as they considered leaving their positions.

Job-related stress and time requirements. The Rand survey (2022) stated that of the superintendents who were considering leaving their jobs, 32% cited job-related stress. As one superintendent in The National Superintendents Roundtable shared, “What caused me the greatest distress last year? Union polarization. Politics during the pandemic. Too much reporting, planning, accountability, and change to do meaningful work for kids.” To stave off some of the polarization noted by this superintendent, district leaders increased the degree and frequency of their communications with internal and external audiences (Bushweller, 2021; Miller, Nuzzi & Wyttenbach, 2020).

Summary

The second section of the literature review explored the body of research that has been conducted on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lived experiences of superintendents with specific attention to role attrition and reasons for the attrition of superintendents.

The lived experiences of superintendents were stressful and time consuming before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the things that superintendents reported as issues pre-pandemic were amplified. This research focused on finding the degree to which the lived experiences of superintendents had changed post-pandemic. The existing literature and data collection did not provide a current or comprehensive view of the extent to which any of these factors continue to exist for superintendents or have changed.

Chapter three describes the two-part methodology of this research. My study included both a survey and an expert interview to garner localized Minnesota data as well as qualitative descriptive data from acting Minnesota superintendents and a local expert on the context of the Minnesota superintendency.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

There was a substantial existing body of research related to the role of the superintendent, and limited, somewhat anecdotal, research about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the superintendency. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Minnesota school superintendents in the current post-COVID era.

One year prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, from April 21, 2019, through June 1, 2019, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) conducted a decennial survey, which was sent to approximately thirteen thousand acting superintendents (Tienken, 2021). With 1,218 respondents and a response rate of 17%, the data from that survey provided a snapshot of the lived experience of the modern superintendent, pre-COVID. Interestingly, Minnesota had the second highest response numbers in the sample, at 6.45% (Tienken, 2021).

As noted in chapter two, during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, from June - August 2021, The National Superintendents Roundtable, a professional organization, sent a survey to seven thousand superintendents (The National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021). The purpose of this survey was to ask superintendents whether they had considered quitting their jobs and to ascertain the conditions leading to that consideration. This survey also asked superintendents how they coped with job-related stress during the previous school year. Additionally, the Rand Corporation conducted a survey of 222 superintendents to gauge their job satisfaction and

intent to remain in their position during the pandemic (The Rand Corporation, 2022). This data collection took place from February - April 2022.

The research question: *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* and study sought to build upon these superintendent surveys and add to the empirical body of research describing the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the lived experiences of superintendents. Chapter 3 includes the methodology used to conduct the study.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents, I chose a grounded theory approach to my research, as explained by Creswell (2013). A grounded theory approach was applicable for my research because I wanted to understand and develop a theory on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on superintendents based on data collected from them and contextualized within previous survey data collected by other organizations. For my research to produce adequate data, I needed a survey tool that I could distribute to superintendents across the state of Minnesota.

Participants & Setting

The identified population for this study included all superintendents in the state of Minnesota who served in that role, both pre- and post-COVID. According to the Minnesota Department of Education website, there are 331 superintendents in the state, and four interim superintendents (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022). The population excluded state officials and Assistant or Associate superintendents. The population also excluded current superintendents who had not served in the role, in any

district, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants answered a screening question at the beginning of the survey which ended the survey if they had not been a superintendent both pre- and post-COVID. All Minnesota superintendents and interim superintendents were sent the survey via email using the email addresses listed on the Minnesota Department of Education website. The initial email was sent on March 5, 2023. A second email was sent on March 19, 2023. Additionally, the Minnesota Association of School Administrators provided a link to the survey and a brief description of the survey's purpose in their March newsletter.

Instrumentation Survey

The survey tool (see Appendix A) consisted of 20 questions and included three parts: (1) current work, (2), intent to leave the job, and (3) district and personal demographics. The survey was developed and distributed using the Qualtrics survey platform. The questions were derived from the published results of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Rand Corporation, and The National Superintendents Roundtable surveys. However, as none of those survey instruments were available in their entirety to the researcher, the survey instrument used for this research was developed specifically for this study based on the results of those survey instruments. Participants responded online to both open-ended and closed items in the survey via Qualtrics survey software.

The first section of the survey was designed to determine whether the functions and problems identified by superintendents before and during COVID have changed in the post-COVID era. Superintendents were asked to select from a list the top three most time-consuming activities in which they participated. There was also an opportunity to

write-in responses if the respondents wanted to provide more context for their multiple-choice selections. From this list of three, superintendents then chose their topmost time-consuming activity, and were given an open-ended opportunity to provide narrative descriptions of the activity. Conversely, superintendents were also asked about their least time-consuming activities in this section.

Section one also asked superintendents to identify the three most pressing problems they face in their job roles. Similarly, they were then prompted to select the top pressing problem and were asked to provide a narrative describing their experience with this problem. Finally, section one asked questions about the level of school board support superintendents experienced in relation to this pressing problem as well as in general. This data was important to collect, as school board support for superintendents was a common theme from the literature. From this section of questions, the researcher was able to explore the themes of the lived experiences of superintendents as related to how they spend their time and what they consider the most pressing issues related to their job.

The second section of the survey was designed to gather current insight into how Minnesota superintendents were thinking about their career plans. Literature is mixed and inconclusive as to whether there is an exodus among superintendents, so questions were designed to ask superintendents whether they intended to leave their positions. For those indicating they were planning to leave, they were asked to provide a brief explanation of their rationale for leaving. Section two of the survey also provided an open-ended opportunity for superintendents to share any thoughts they had related to how the role of the superintendent has changed since COVID-19 and about the possible loss of superintendents in the state. These data were also analyzed thematically.

The third section of the survey collected demographics of the superintendents and the school districts in which they served. This data was used to sort subjects into groups by district size, which the literature indicated was a factor in how superintendents experienced their job roles. Additionally, the researcher was able to analyze responses and themes by gender in keeping with the American Association of School Administrator's 2020 decennial survey. Overall, the survey tool allowed the researcher to garner a deeper understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on serving superintendents across the state of Minnesota by building upon responses collected by other survey tools used by other organizations.

Data Analysis

The researcher gathered data in which superintendents selected from a fixed set of responses. The data was then analyzed and presented graphically and disaggregated by gender. The researcher did not disaggregate the responses by race because there were not enough non-white identifying respondents to report in a disaggregated manner. Chapter four describes the participants in greater detail.

The open-ended survey data that was collected was analyzed for themes using an open coding analysis to develop a story or proposition about the data collected (Creswell, 2013). Analysis was supported using the Text IQ feature of the Qualtrics survey platform, which allowed the researcher to assign codes to each of the qualitative comments captured by the survey. To organize the data and maintain the integrity of each of the data codes, the researcher developed a codebook (see Appendix B). This was a critical step to provide definitions for each code and maximize coherence among the codes. The codebook created an organized framework to identify, categorize, and analyze recurring

themes. The codebook served as a reference guide during the coding process and standardized the labeling of data collected from superintendents' open comments (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Demographic and thematic data were presented in graphs and discussed with quotations to provide insight into the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents.

Institutional Research Approval

Prior to starting research, the researcher followed Hamline's required protocols to obtain Institutional Research Board Approval. Consent for participation was embedded in the survey tool (see Appendix A). It was the second section of text a participant saw after a brief introduction to the study and survey. In order to complete the survey, a participant acknowledged that they have read and agreed to the terms.

Conclusion

The development of a survey tool based on several previous superintendent surveys grounded this research in the lived experiences of superintendents both before and during COVID-19 pandemic. The participants for the survey focused the research on Minnesota superintendents who served in this role both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research adds to the body of knowledge of the impact of this time period on educators, specifically superintendents. Chapter four provides an overview of the data analysis from the completed surveys, and chapter five summarizes the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

The research question, *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* sought to add to the empirical body of research describing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the lived experiences of superintendents. This research built upon previously administered superintendent surveys where data collection took place just prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this research was to understand what, if any, impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on superintendent's activities, most pressing issues, and intent to stay in a superintendent position.

The research was a grounded theory study based on survey responses from Minnesota superintendents who served in that role both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I chose a grounded theory approach because I wanted to develop a theory of the impact on the COVID-19 pandemic on superintendents based on their survey responses.

I developed a survey tool (see Appendix A) using qualitative data collected by other organizations both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from those surveys provided the basis for the survey questions and themes. This chapter contains the survey results and an analysis of the themes that emerged from the superintendent responses.

Survey Results

An initial email containing an explanation of the research and a link to the survey was sent on March 5, 2023, to 331 Minnesota superintendents using a contact list obtained on the Minnesota Department of Education's website (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022). A second email was sent on March 19, 2023. Additionally, the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MNASA) provided a link to the survey and a brief description of the survey's purpose in their March newsletter (See Appendix B). The survey was closed on April 5, 2023.

Of the 331 superintendents to receive the survey, 114 responded. Of the 114 responses, 28 respondents had not served as a superintendent in any district both prior to and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which concluded their participation in the survey. This meant that there were 86 full surveys completed, or a 26% response rate, which was higher than expected and supported the validity of the research. Additionally, five superintendents sent an email request to the researcher requesting a digital copy of the results of this research, further indicating the interest and importance to the field. The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of 20 questions and included three parts: (1) current work, (2) intent to leave the job, and (3) district and personal demographics. Though the district and personal demographic data was at the end of the survey tool, it will be presented first to create the context for the other two sections.

As part of section one, participants were asked an open-ended question: *Is there anything you would like to say about how the role of the superintendent has changed since COVID-19 and/or about the possible loss of superintendents in the state?* The responses for this question are at the center of this study and therefore will be

thematically coded and analyzed by gender and district type at the end of the survey results section.

Because the vast majority of respondents identified as white, the data from sections one and two will not be disaggregated by race. However, the data will be disaggregated by gender and district type, which the literature has indicated also have an impact on the lived experience of superintendents. One survey respondent preferred not to share their gender identity. These results will not be included in the data that is disaggregated by gender. Additionally, related to context, it is important to note that only three superintendent respondents reported being from an “urban” school district and there were no qualitative comments from those superintendents.

Survey Data Analysis

District and Personal Demographics

Overall, as indicated in Figure 2, Minnesota superintendent survey respondents mostly identified as white and male at a rate of 72%, which is aligned with nationally collected data. One male respondent identified as Black or African American. Twenty-one percent of female respondents identified as white. Three, or 3% of female respondents identified as Black or African American. One female respondent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and one female respondent identified as bi- or multi-racial. No respondents identified as having Hispanic, Latino or Spanish heritage. One respondent declined to identify as male or female.

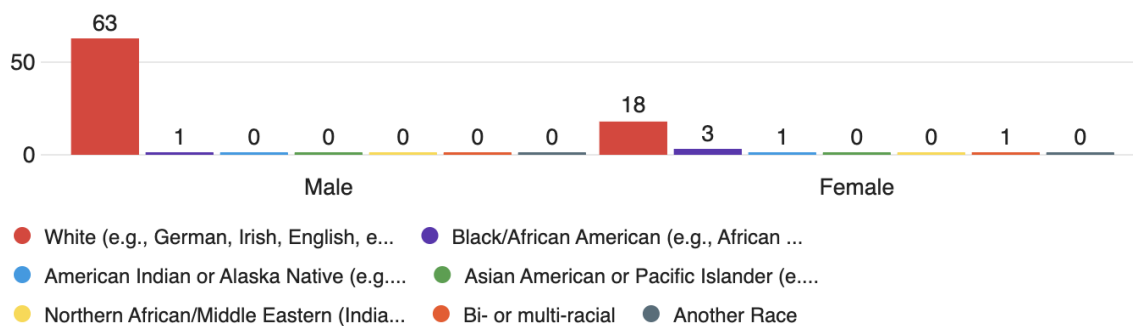
This data is similar to national superintendent data collected using the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which reported a gender breakdown of 26.7% female and 72.9% male (Tienken, 2021).

Additionally, the AASA survey reported 8.2% of respondents identified as superintendents of color.

Additionally, the number of Minnesota female superintendents of color respondents is higher than male superintendents of color at a rate of 6%, whereas male superintendents of color respondents represented only 1% of the total responses. This higher rate is similar to national data collected by AASA, which found 12.9% of all female superintendents identified as a woman of color and 7% of all male superintendents identified as a man of color.

Figure 2

Racial and Gender Identification of Respondents

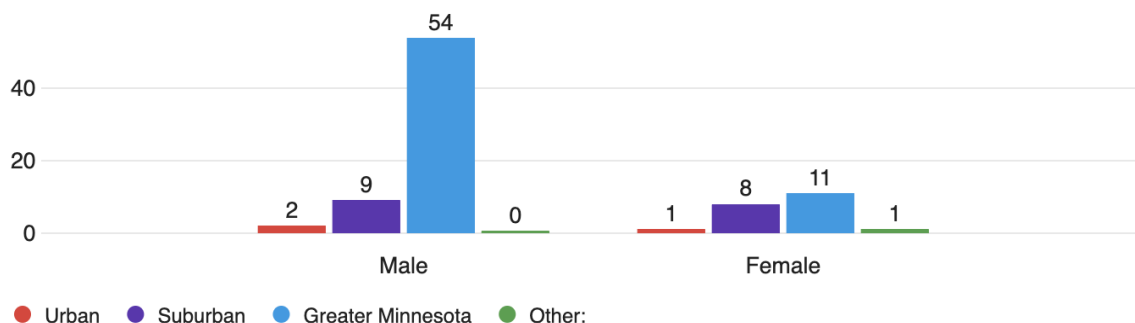


Literature suggested that the majority of superintendents serve in their roles in rural areas (Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Kowalski, 2013). The data collected for this study also reflects this (see Figure 3) as the number of respondents from greater Minnesota was much higher than urban or suburban superintendents. 75% of all respondents, male and female, reported that they work in greater Minnesota. This was important data to collect as the literature also suggested that superintendents serving in more rural areas often have more varied roles resulting from fewer support staff in their districts, which could have an impact on their overall job satisfaction and outlook (Kowalski, 2013). Figure 3 also

indicated that, of the respondents, there are more men serving as superintendents in greater Minnesota than women, while the number of women in a superintendent position in suburban Minnesota is very similar to the number of male suburban superintendents.

Figure 3

School District Type Disaggregated by Gender



Current Work

The second part of the survey was designed to get a glimpse into the daily lived experiences of the superintendent through a series of questions based upon the data collected by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in their decennial survey (Tienken, 2021). First, superintendents were asked to select the three most time-consuming activities that they engage in. Then, they were asked of those three activities to choose the most time-consuming activity they engaged in. The results are shown below in Figure 4 by choice counts and are disaggregated by gender. This data was also analyzed by school-district type in Figure 5.

In the Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey, financial management and staffing shortages both were selected often as the most time-consuming activities that male superintendents and superintendents in greater Minnesota engaged in. Female superintendents engaged in school reform and improvement and school district and community relations as their most time-consuming activities. Both analyses indicate that,

in general, superintendents spend the least amount of time on policy development and management and educational equity and diversity.

These results had some similarities and some differences with the data collected by the AASA 2020 Decennial Survey (Tienken, 2021). The superintendents responding to that survey indicated that financial management did consume the most amount of their time, followed by personnel management, including collective bargaining. However, the results of this post-COVID survey indicated that collective bargaining was not as time consuming as staffing issues related to staff shortages. One male respondent from greater Minnesota remarked that, “We are constantly promoting our openings on a variety of avenues,” in reference to how much time he spent on trying to recruit new staff due to staffing shortages.

These current survey data as well as the AASA 2020 Decennial Survey data indicated that superintendents, regardless of gender or location, spent the least amount of their time dealing with issues of educational equity and diversity (Tienken, 2021). Both surveys also indicated that policy development and management were tasks not chosen by superintendents as most time consuming.

Figure 4

Post-COVID Survey: Most Time-Consuming Activities of Superintendents by Gender



Figure 5

Post-COVID Survey: Most Time-Consuming Activities of Superintendents by School District Type



Superintendents were then prompted in an open response to describe the activities they engaged in as related to the most time-consuming activity that they identified. Their responses were analyzed thematically and broken down by gender and district type. The numbers in the table represent the number of times respondents named that theme as a most time-consuming activity. This data is represented in Table 2.

Table 2*Post-COVID Survey: Themes Related to Most Time-Consuming Activities.*

Theme	Description	Male	Female	Greater MN	Suburban	Urban
Management and operations tasks	Comment refers to activities such as meetings and communications, purchasing, insurance.	2	3	2	1	-
Grant management	Comment refers to activities related to the financial management of grants.	3	-	3	-	-
Staffing	Comment refers to activities related to staffing such as recruitment.	2	-	2	-	-
Community Engagement	Comment refers to activities related to working with community stakeholders.	1	2	2	1	-
Strategic Planning	Comment refers to activities related to goal setting and strategic planning.	2	2	1	3	-
Social Media	Comment refers to responding to social media issues.	1	-	1	-	-
Budgeting	Comment refers to tasks related to budgeting processes.	3	2	4	1	-
State Accountability	Comment refers to tasks related to state reporting requirements.	1	-	1	-	-
Learning and Teaching	Comment refers to tasks related to learning and teaching.	1	1	-	2	-
School Board Relationships	Comment refers to tasks related to building and maintaining school board relationships.	-	2	-	2	-

Theme	Description	Male	Female	Greater MN	Suburban	Urban
Referendum Planning	Comment refers to tasks related to planning or executing a referendum.	-	1	-	1	-
Lack of Funding	Comment refers to the lack of educational funding as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	1	-	1	-	-

Financial management was a concern among male and greater Minnesota superintendents. For the purposes of the thematic analysis, grant management was coded separately. This was done because the COVID-19 pandemic brought large amounts of state and federal funding to school districts, which were accompanied by applications and accountability measurements. In districts that had not previously received this kind of state or federal funding, such as Title I or Achievement and Integration, these new grant requirements may have been new tasks that the superintendent had not previously done.

The next series of questions asked superintendents to think about their most pressing problems. Superintendents were asked to select the three most pressing issues facing them in their job roles. Then, they were asked of those three issues to choose the most pressing issue. The results are shown in Figure 6 by choice counts and are disaggregated by gender. This data was also analyzed by school district type in Figure 7.

Job-related stress and time requirements of the position were selected most often as the most pressing issues for superintendents regardless of gender or school district type. This is mirrored in the AASA decennial superintendent survey, in which Hutchings & Brown (2021) noted that there was “almost universal agreement that the job of a superintendent is stressful” (p. 44).

Figure 6

Post-COVID Survey: Most Pressing Problems of Superintendents by Gender

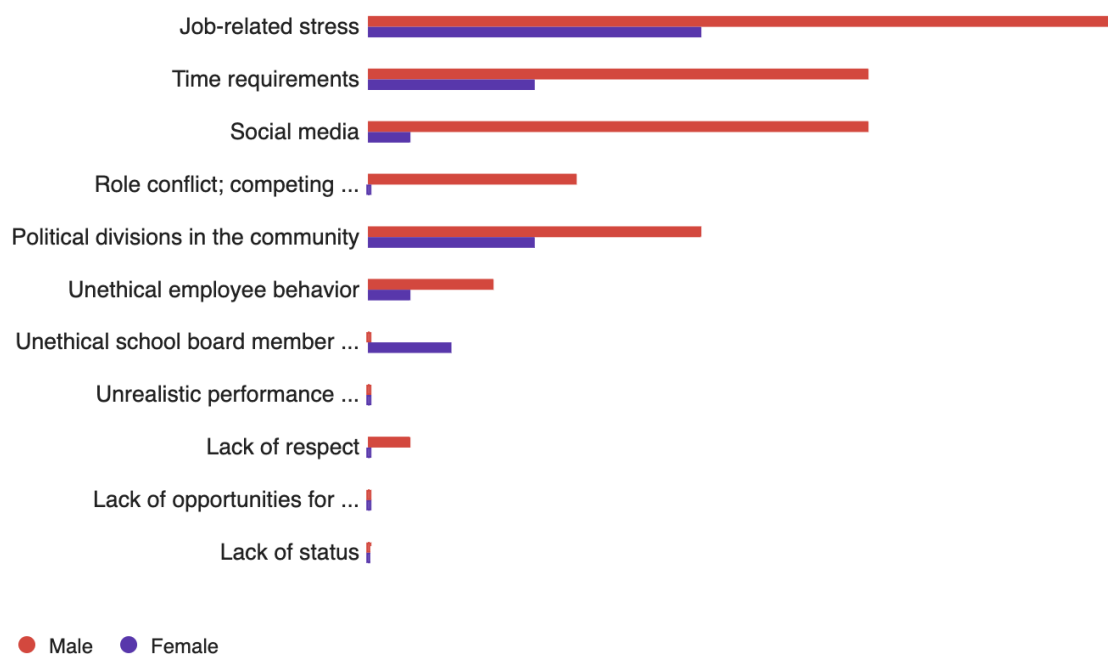
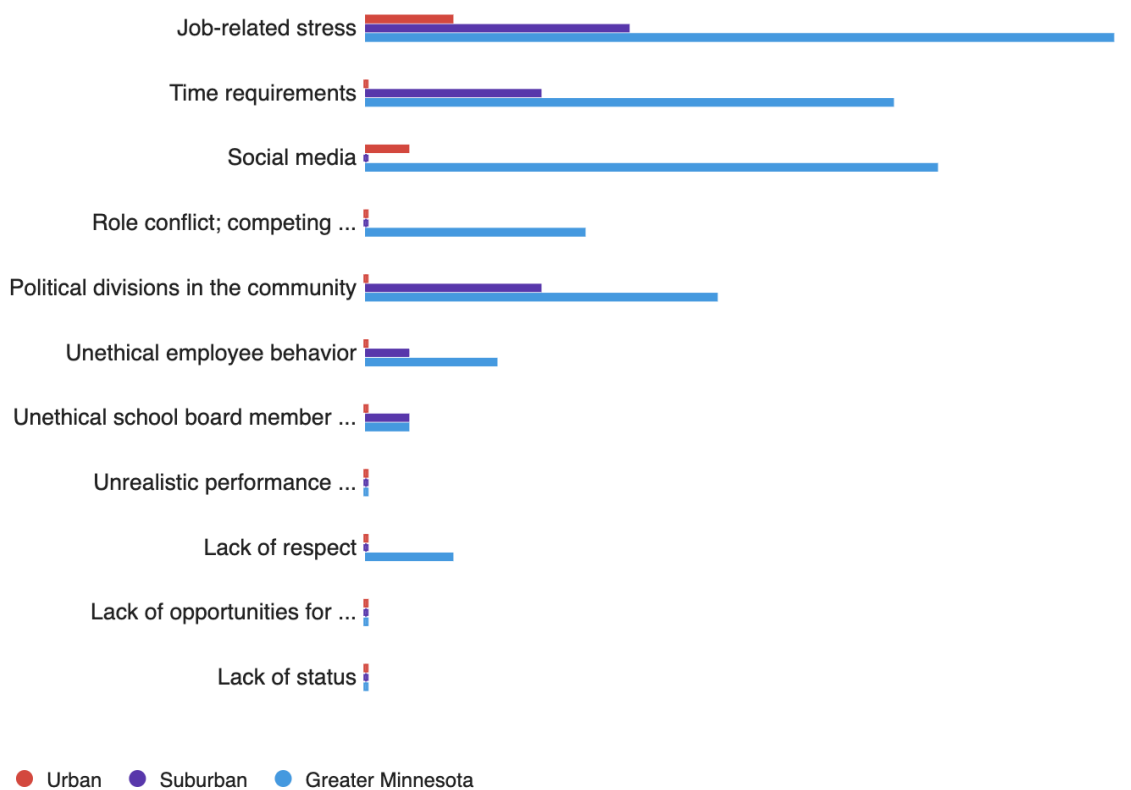


Figure 7*Most Pressing Problems of Superintendents by School District Type*

Superintendents were then prompted in an open response to describe the activities they engaged in as related to their most pressing problems that they identified. Their responses were analyzed thematically and broken down by gender and district type. This data is represented in Table 3. This data is important because the language used to develop the themes was generated by superintendents themselves, rather than by selecting items from a list. Therefore, open-ended comment data may be a better indicator of how superintendents described their most pressing problems.

Polarization was most frequently cited as the most pressing problem for superintendent respondents. For the purpose of the data analysis, polarization was defined

as related to community or political polarization. The comments were varied, but all spoke to a feeling of difficulty in meeting the needs of all perspectives within each district community. As one male suburban superintendent noted,

It is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy the extremes. While I think the great majority of parents and residents are reasonably satisfied with the products and services our school district offers, those at the extremes are louder, more persistent, and nearly impossible to satisfy.

Similarly, a female suburban superintendent stated, “Our school district provides education to four different communities... We continue to experience challenges, along with the political divide around race and equity, sex and gender, and politics in the school.” Notably, suburban superintendents tended to have the most comments related to polarization as related to their most pressing problem.

The second most pressing problem according to superintendent comments were job expectations and workload, which matches data collected by AASA as well as other questions in this survey. However, the comments that superintendents made as related to workload painted a clear picture of their lived experience. As one suburban, female superintendent articulated,

The job is non-stop. After missing a 4:00 am call from the police chief about two years ago, I never stop looking at my phone and I do not disengage it at night. I’m constantly checking email, connect(ing) people with each other or people with relevant issues that need to be addressed; my email is literally non-stop.

One male superintendent from greater Minnesota noted bluntly, “I typically put in 70-80 hours of work per week.”

Two male superintendents, one suburban and one from greater Minnesota, merged the two most pressing issues together in their comments. One stated, “The incredibly high workload and expectations for people with differing viewpoints to have their way and immediately is a challenge.” The other shared a similar experience, “Balancing work-life...balancing it all while maintaining relationships is very time consuming and people are quick to criticize.”

The data in Table 3 details superintendents comments related to their most pressing problems. The numbers in the table represent the number of times respondents named that theme as a most pressing problem.

Table 3

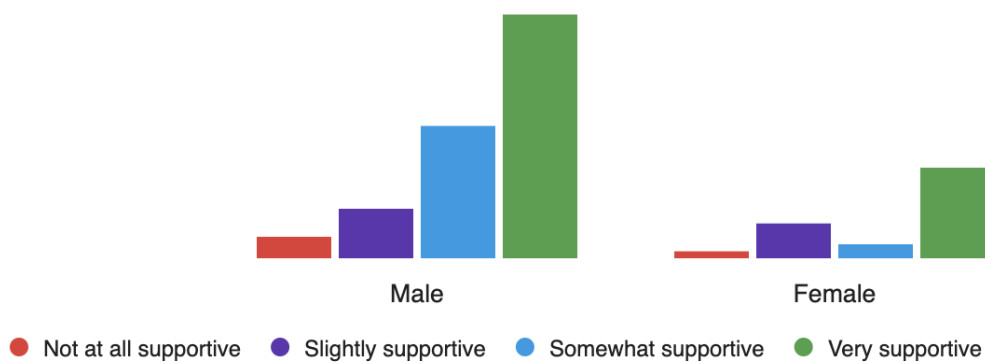
Post-COVID Themes Related to Most Pressing Problems

Theme	Description	Male	Female	Greater MN	Suburban	Urban
Job Expectations / Workload	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations and workload as a most pressing problem.	3	1	2	2	-
Polarization	Comment refers to community and/or political polarization as a most pressing problem.	5	3	2	6	-
Staff Management	Comment refers to staff management as a most pressing problem.	3	-	3	-	-
Social Media	Comment refers to responding to social media issues as a most pressing problem.	4	-	4	-	-
State Accountability	Comment refers to added state requirements or lack of local control as a most pressing problem.	1	-	1	-	-
Student Concerns	Comment refers to student concerns as a most pressing problem.	1	-	1	-	-
School Board Concerns	Comment refers to school board / school board member concerns as a most pressing problem.	-	2	1	1	-

Finally, superintendents were asked to share the level of support that they received from their school boards as related to the most important issues that they identified. Overall, as Figure 8 indicates, both male and female superintendents generally feel very supported by their school boards. However, as Figure 8 indicates, suburban superintendents chose *somewhat supportive* more often than *very supportive*. According to the AASA survey and the literature, the superintendent and school board relationship is critical to the success of the superintendent (Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Keedy & Bjork, 2002; Kowalski, 2013). At the point of this data collection, responding superintendents overall felt supported by their school boards, which is a positive indication for the success of the acting superintendents.

Figure 8

Support from School Board Related to Most Pressing Issues by Gender



Intent to Leave the Job

As the literature indicated, tracking superintendent attrition has not been widely systematized (Sawchuk, 2021). This section of the survey was designed to get current information on the intent of acting superintendents as related to their career planning.

Of the 84 total respondents, eight superintendents indicated that they planned to leave their current position as shown in Figure 9. Twelve superintendents indicated that they were unsure. Together, this indicates that of the responding superintendents, 24% were planning to leave their current position or considering it. However, a much smaller number appear to be planning or considering leaving the field altogether. According to the data, four or 5% of superintendents plan to or are considering retirement. Another 7% may seek a position outside of education or take time off from working. The majority of those respondents who are thinking of leaving their current position will seek another superintendency.

As Figure 9 shows, the eight superintendents planning to leave their position all identified as male, and of those respondents, data indicated that seeking a superintendency in another school district was the most common reason. Data in Figure 10 indicated that of the superintendents who did seek to leave their current position, the majority of them are not leaving the field altogether. The comments in the open-ended related question of the survey supported this as well. Two male respondents mentioned career advancement as their reason for leaving or possibly leaving their current role, and four male respondents mentioned moving to a more favorable location as their rationale. None of the female respondents shared these reasons.

No female superintendents reported a plan to leave their position at the end of the 2022-23 school year, though five were considering it. Of those considering leaving their position, two female superintendents indicated a desire to leave education, while one considered retirement, one planned to seek a different superintendent position, and one considered leaving without another position as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 9

Superintendents Indication of Whether They Will Leave Their Positions at the End of the 2022-23 School Year

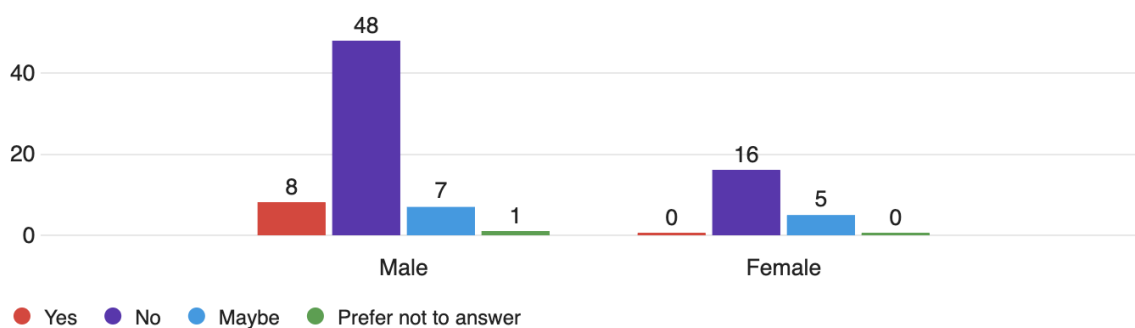
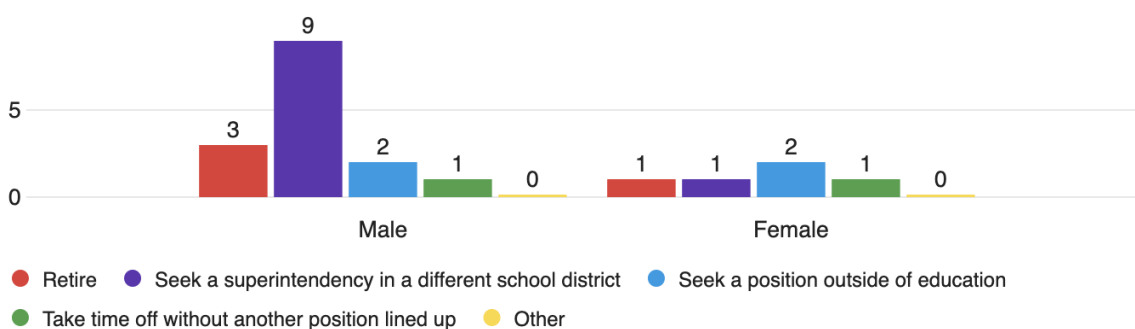


Figure 10

Superintendents Next Plans

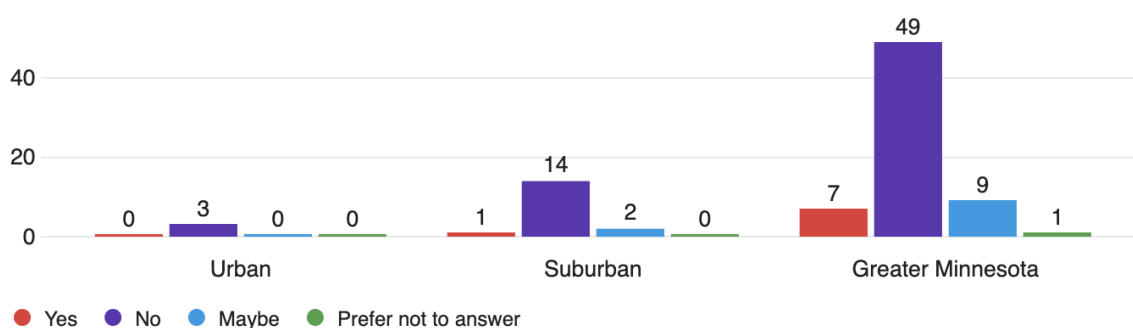


When the responses were analyzed by district type, there was a larger number of male respondents from greater Minnesota who intended to retire or who were interested

in pursuing a position in a more favorable location represented in Figure 11. This data supports the comments made by participants in the open-ended section of this part of the survey where superintendents reported wanting to move to be “closer to family” or had other personal reasons for relocating.

Figure 11

Superintendents Who Intend to or May Leave their Current Position Disaggregated by District Type



Male superintendents in greater Minnesota had the highest numbers of those planning to or considering leaving their positions, and the reasons given were workload concerns, retirement or seeking a more favorable location. As one male superintendent from greater Minnesota optimistically noted, “41 years in education and 10 years as superintendent - it is the right time. It's been a good run.” Other comments made by male superintendents in greater Minnesota included concerns around job expectations and workload. As one respondent stated, “...workload and days are too packed to feel like I am making forward progress with the district lack of time to support and lead leadership team.”

Female superintendents’ comments indicated a different experience. While no female superintendent responded that she was certain she would be leaving her position, five indicated that they were considering it. Some of the reasons given in their comments

were similar to those of male superintendents and related to workload and job expectations. However, some of the comments gave a clearer picture of the lived experiences of female superintendents. As one female superintendent in greater Minnesota noted, she was thinking about leaving her role because,

... [the school board] behaves as though I don't have 30 years of experience in education and 18 years in administration. I think they think because I am female, I don't know what I am doing. The constant questioning has turned into harassment and bullying on their part. It is draining and I feel like I am fighting to do my job.

More women than men also indicated that they were considering leaving their positions because of a sense of low self-efficacy. For the purpose of this theme, low self-efficacy is defined as a perception that the superintendent is not having the desired impact within their role. One female superintendent stated that she felt "...dissatisfaction with the job - don't feel like I'm making a difference when I'm buried in policy and paperwork."

Another superintendent concurred and stated that she felt a "...perception of a lack of impact..." Lack of impact or low self-efficacy was not in any of the previous (pre-COVID) survey results data or literature reviewed for this study. Interestingly, one male suburban superintendent did note in his comments (as related to the next survey question) that self-efficacy was a concern that might be contributing to a loss of superintendents in the post-COVID-19 era.

In addition to analyzing questions based on the number of respondents, the qualitative comment data from Question 15, Please *describe the factors contributing to this decision (to leave their current superintendent role)*, were analyzed thematically and broken down by gender and district type. This data is represented in Table 4. The

numbers in the table represent the number of times respondents named these themes as reasons related to intent to leave their position.

Table 4*Themes Related to Intent to Leave Superintendent Positions*

Theme	Description	Male	Female	Greater MN	Suburban	Urban
School Board Concerns	Comment refers to concerns with the school board as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	2	1	2	1	-
Job Expectations / Workload	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	4	2	5	1	-
Polarization	Comment refers to community and/or political polarization as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position	1	-	1	-	-
State Accountability	Comment refers to added state requirements or lack of local control as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	1	1	2	-	-
Career Advancement	Comment refers to a desire to leave their current position for a position considered a career advancement.	2	-	1	1	-
Gender Discrimination	Comment refers to experiencing discrimination based on gender as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	-	1	1	-	-
Ready to retire.	Comment refers to readiness to retire as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	4	-	4	-	-
Location	Comment refers to location as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	4	-	4	-	-
Self-Efficacy	Comment refers to a perception that the superintendent is not having desired impact within their role as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	1	2	2	1	-
Fresh start	Comment refers to the desire to work somewhere new as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	1	-	1	-	-
Lack of Funding	Comment refers to the lack of educational funding as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	1	-	1	-	-

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Superintendents

As part of the Current Work section of the survey, superintendents were asked the open-ended question, *is there anything you would like to say about how the role of the superintendent has changed since COVID-19 and/or about the possible loss of superintendents in the state?* One of the research goals for this survey and study was to capture the lived experiences of superintendents, so this question was designed to provide respondents an opportunity to provide commentary that was not informed by previous surveys data and questions in an open-ended manner. Unlike previous analyses, this data fell into two categories based on the structure of the question: changes to the superintendent role after the COVID-19 pandemic and possible loss of superintendents in the state. As a result, the data was analyzed by these themes first, and then again to determine sub themes for each part of the question. The data captured in this question is reported separately in Tables 5 and 6.

When asked how the superintendency has changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the comments made by respondents were all related to increased polarization. The comments shared told a clear story on how superintendents experienced polarization in their roles. As one male superintendent from greater Minnesota stated, “The COVID-19 years were unstable ... Created so much division and damage in the school community that we are still suffering from it.” A female superintendent in greater Minnesota experienced “Much less parent support ... lack of respect for diversity.”

This was not limited to greater Minnesota; suburban superintendents reported similar experiences. As one female suburban superintendent noted,

... we will not return to a pre-Covid normal in terms of social interactions or a social fabric. Part of people just saying whatever they want also includes parents fiercely advocating for whatever they want, even if it is only their child who will benefit.

A male suburban superintendent summed it up by sharing that “The increased political pressures are daunting.”

Superintendents also shared their thoughts about how the COVID-19 pandemic may cause possible losses of superintendents in the state. In this section of comments, some superintendents spoke more generally about the role, while others made comments specific to themselves. For example, one suburban male superintendent described why personal financial reasons meant he was unlikely to leave his position, “I know I could make more ... in other roles. Pension structures are what are keeping me in the role for a few more years.”

Several respondents cited unrealistic job expectations as the cause of possible losses among superintendents in the state, with superintendents in greater Minnesota sharing the most commentary on this. One male superintendent spoke to the time expectations by stating, “The supt role is a very demanding job that is a 24 hour/365 day a year job. Even during your time off, you are still on the job.” Another spoke to the complexity of the role and the weight of the district on one person’s shoulders when he noted, “The need to manage public relations and find creative fiscal solutions to current school issues ... puts a huge weight of responsibility and time investment on one position.”

Other superintendents in greater Minnesota shared personal impacts of leading

during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and how that may lead to colleagues selecting positions out of the field. As one female superintendent shared,

COVID-19 was hard for me as a superintendent. Prior to that, logic, reason and empathy helped guide our decision making when we disagreed in the community...people were openly hostile about not getting their way and on rare occasions targeting the superintendent as the one responsibly. It affected my well-being and my family - and superintendents are questioning if it is worth it.

Similarly, a male superintendent from Greater Minnesota shared “Stress took its toll on me and many of my colleagues. I can fully understand why some have walked away and/or are retiring earlier than they may have previously thought they would.”

Another theme that emerged from this question was a concern about support for public education in general. For the purpose of this analysis, any comment that referred to concerns with the state of public education and/or the Minnesota Department of Education was coded together as public education. Superintendents expressed concern about the future of public education for a variety of reasons. As one male superintendent from greater Minnesota wrote, “Education is in a crisis. The public opinion of education is not encouraging high school graduates to enter the field ...” Another male superintendent from Greater Minnesota cited the loss of public school students and the related financial stress as creating a possible loss of superintendents across the state.

One comment shared by a male suburban superintendent in this section represents the intersection and overlap of many of the concerns superintendents are facing as related to the COVID-19 pandemic. He wrote,

... I remain somewhat shocked at the incivility and extreme politics that evolved

during COVID. Relatively small groups of parents, with very loud voices, controlled the narrative and were relentless in their criticism of superintendents and other district staff, in addition to school board members. We were the target of a lot of misguided criticism simply by doing what MDE, MDH, the Governor and the CDC directed us to do in schools to manage this international health crisis. The science deniers amplified their voices by coming to board meetings, speaking in disparaging tones and with incredible inaccuracy laced with misinformation. It was pretty brutal, quite frankly. I am not sure if many superintendents, and other school district staff, have or will fully recover from this. One of my final frustrations with it all was when I felt the state somewhat abandoned the effort when the declaration was made, something to the effect of: 'We feel school superintendents and school boards are in the best position to make decisions about masking and other mitigation strategies on behalf of their school districts.' That may be true, however, school districts come up a bit short when it comes to having epidemiologists on staff. That was a turning point for the worse when our challenging parents could now come full force at us to change our mitigation strategies, which remained consistent with what MDH and the CDC were saying we should be doing. I know it was challenging for all enterprises, but this made it all feel that much more lonely in this type of decision-making ... We did our best while we weren't at our best.

Table 5*Possible Loss of Superintendents in the State*

Theme	Description	Male	Female	Greater MN	Suburban	Urban
Personal Financial	The comment refers to personal financial factors as contributing to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	1	-	-	1	-
Self-Efficacy	The comment refers to lack of self-efficacy in the job as contributing to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	1	-	-	1	-
Job expectations	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	4	1	5	-	-
School Board Relationships	Comment refers to the relationship with the school board as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	1	-	1	-	-
Public Education	Comment refers to concerns with the state of public education and/or the Minnesota Department of Education as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	3	-	2	1	-

The numbers in the table represent the number of times respondents named these themes as possible causes of losses of superintendents in Minnesota.

Resulting Common Themes

In order to verify the data and capture the most noted themes from the open-ended comments within the survey, a crosscheck of themes resulting from each open-ended question was conducted. Recurring themes emerged out of the qualitative data analysis across all of the open-ended questions, shown in Table 6. The data in Table 6 provided insight into the current lived experiences of superintendents specific to the comments they made in several answers. This indicated the job-related topics that were most front

of mind regardless of the question prompt. While some of the themes appeared in numerous responses, there were also some indicative and interesting outliers with only one response.

Comments related to polarization and job expectations / workload, as described in previous sections, were present across all of the open-ended questions. Though the numbers of respondents were lower, one new theme emerged through this process as occurring across several of the open-ended questions: state accountability. For the purposes of this analysis, state accountability is defined as added state requirements or lack of local control. Comments with this theme were made as related to the most time-consuming issues for superintendents, most pressing problems for superintendents, and a superintendent's reason for intent to leave their current position. The comments related to this theme indicated that superintendents were frustrated with the amount of time and effort state accountability took as well as a sense that it was not a good use of time. As one male superintendent in greater Minnesota summarized spending time engaging in, "... MDE reports on accountability (and other unproductive items)." Additionally, two superintendents in Greater Minnesota, one female and one male, were concerned with the loss of local control. As one remarked,

Just look at all the new proposed legislative items being voted on this spring. This is just another example of external factors trying to control what happens in our schools. We no longer have local control of our schools, and most of these bills are a result of social media opinions.

Table 6*Themes Across all Open-Ended Questions*

Theme	Question 3 (Time Consuming)	Question 7 (Pressing Problem)	Question 12 (Intent to leave current superintendent role)	Question 13 (Job Changes post-COVID)	Question 13 (Loss of Sups in the state)
Budgeting	x				
Career Advancement			x		
Community Engagement	x				
Fresh Start			x		
Gender Discrimination			x		
Grant Management	x				
Job Expectations / Workload		x	x		x
Lack of Funding	x		x		
Learning & Teaching	x				
Location			x		
Management & Operations Tasks	x				
Personal Financial					x
Polarization		x	x	x	
Public Education					x
Ready to Retire			x		
Referendum Planning	x				
School Board Relationships	x				x
School Board Concerns		x	x		
Self-Efficacy			x		x
Social Media	x	x			
Staff Management		x			
Staffing	x				

Theme	Question 3 (Time Consuming)	Question 7 (Pressing Problem)	Question 12 (Intent to leave current superintendent role)	Question 13 (Job Changes post-COVID)	Question 13 (Loss of Sups in the state)
State Accountability	x	x	x		
Strategic Planning	x				
Student Concerns		x			

The data represented in Table 6 indicates how often superintendents expressed concerns about a specific theme, regardless of which question they were responding to. Therefore, the themes that appeared in numerous responses represent a higher prevalence of that issue or concern for the superintendent.

Summary

The survey data collected was the foundation of this research. While the survey questions developed from other organizations previous superintendent surveys provided some insight, the comments made by acting superintendents provided the most important information as related to the research question, *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?*

In chapter five, I discuss my interpretation of the results and overall conclusions of the research. Chapter five also discusses the implications of the research for the field of district leadership and how the findings will be shared with colleagues.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

This research used a statewide survey and grounded theory approach to investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Minnesota superintendents and sought to further the literature on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education as a whole. Data on the lived experiences of superintendents was collected just prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and during, however given the extraordinary circumstances that the COVID-19 pandemic presented on educational systems, there was a hole in the literature as to effects of the pandemic on superintendents. Therefore, the research question: *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* and this study sought to add to the empirical body of research describing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the lived experiences of superintendents.

A survey was designed based on results from data collected prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic while also allowing for superintendents to provide open-ended comments describing their most pressing problems, most time-consuming issues, and other general thoughts about the job role post-pandemic. This approach allowed new insights to be drawn from comments that superintendents themselves made about their own experiences rather than how they rated various job tasks or pressing issues. In fact, the richness of the comments suggests future research opportunities, which will be discussed in more detail in the future research section.

Findings

The results of the Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey indicated that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Minnesota superintendents made the hard parts of their jobs harder by increasing requirements, strains, and pressures. While these may categorically match the experiences of superintendents prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, each was in addition to what superintendents were already living with and working through.

Lived Experiences of Superintendents in Minnesota

Table 7 summarizes the themes from the post-COVID survey results related to the most time-consuming activities that Minnesota superintendent respondents reported as well as most pressing issues. Following Table 8 is a discussion of each of these themes. The data from before the COVID-19 pandemic is summarized from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) decennial survey (Tienken, 2021).

Table 7

The Lived Experiences of Minnesota Superintendents Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

		Before COVID-19 Pandemic	After COVID-19 Pandemic
<i>Most Time Consuming</i>	Financial Management	Annual budgeting processes	Federal Grant Management / State Accountability / Budgeting
	Personnel Management	General staffing; Collective bargaining	Staffing shortages
<i>Most Pressing Issues</i>	Stress	Work-life balance	Community and staff polarization
	Social Media	Continuous need to be ready to respond	Community and staff polarization
	Time Requirements	Work-life balance	Work-life balance

Note. The data for the Before COVID-19 Pandemic are from Tienken, C.H. (Ed.). (2021) The American superintendent 2020 decennial study. Rowman & Littlefield.

Financial management and budgeting were reported as the most time-consuming activity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Tienken, 2021). The results of this survey indicated that in addition to annual budgeting processes, Minnesota superintendents added new processes related to grant accountability. To be sure, receiving federal assistance was critical; these federal funds were used to support many pandemic-related expenses in school districts across our states. However, for some districts, this may have been the first time having to navigate the requirements of such grants, and state and federal accountability is no small task. Additionally, creating equitable processes in the allocations of additional funding, tracking how the funding is spent, even sourcing the personal protective equipment that the funding is purchasing was all new and in addition to normal pre-pandemic activities. As the literature indicated, in our smaller and more rural districts, oftentimes the superintendent has the largest responsibility for these activities (Kowalski, 2013). Additional pressure on district budgets related to student enrollment increased budgetary strains. Again, while this is not a new experience for superintendents, it was exacerbated by the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that were new and unpredictable, which meant that systems continuously had to be recalibrated and readjusted to continuously changing models.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents nationwide also indicated that personnel management, including collective bargaining, was a very time-consuming aspect of their job role (Tienken, 2021). According to the results of this survey, personnel management continued to be a time-consuming task. However, in addition to collective bargaining and the other staffing-related activities that superintendents were previously doing before the COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota superintendent respondents reported

concerns with staffing shortages across all areas of the organization. Respondents noted that recruitment and retention efforts were added to their personnel management tasks. A few superintendents complained about unprofessional behaviors among their staff, including unexcused teacher/staff absences and an unwillingness to model positive behavior with students.

Superintendent respondents' most pressing issues were highly intermingled with one another both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that stress, social media and excessive time requirements were the topmost pressing issues for superintendents in the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in their decennial survey (Tienken, 2021). The same was true in the post-pandemic era according to those who responded. However, there were many striking comments made related to the increased polarization among their staff and community that is impacting their work-life balance, levels of stress, and interactions on social media. While polarization is not a new phenomenon, superintendents clearly are experiencing it in a heightened way post-pandemic and, as several superintendents noted, even in the post-pandemic era, there is still a sense that the public and staff have not returned to pre-pandemic norms of social and professional discourse. This finding was also present in the literature (Cohn, 2021).

School Board Relationships

Post-COVID survey data collected indicated that overall, most superintendent respondents felt very supported or somewhat supported by their school boards. The literature indicated that school board and superintendent relationships were critical to the success of the district (Kowalski, 2013), so this is positive news. One potential reason for

this coherence may be that during the pandemic, superintendents and school boards were the decision-making bodies for each school district's approach to making mitigation and learning model decisions. As one of the respondents noted, the Minnesota Department of Education left many decisions to local control. This may have led to a greater sense of collaboration between superintendents and school boards.

There was some variation among female superintendents' responses as well as suburban versus greater Minnesota superintendents, which may be an indicator that overall, male superintendents experience greater levels of support from their school boards than female superintendents and could be an area for future research. Some respondents had distinct concerns about their school boards, however. One female respondent from greater Minnesota characterized the school board's treatment of her as "bullying and harassment." Again, while this is an isolated comment, the severity bears notation and further research focused on the lived experiences of female superintendents in Minnesota and beyond.

Superintendent Attrition

Data collected in this research indicate that approximately 24% of respondents are planning to or considering leaving their positions. Of these, 7% planned to leave the profession and 5% planned to retire. In revisiting the literature, previous data collected on this topic indicated that this might be higher than previous years (Henton, 2022).

According to data collected by the Minnesota Association of School Administrators, Figure 1, the superintendency vacancy rate in Minnesota in Spring of 2020 was 16% and in 2021 was 17% (data from the spring of 2022 was not available at the time of this study). While this is not an exact lateral comparison, it is an indication that there may be

more movement among Minnesota superintendents than in previous years, although the data did not indicate that superintendents are leaving the field altogether.

Future Evolution of the Modern Superintendency

According to the results of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic has made a hard job even harder for Minnesota superintendents. Based on the data collected, community stresses and tensions became more acute, more polarized, more vitriolic. Job tasks and expectations were not replaced, they were expanded and added to, as has been true throughout the evolution of the role of superintendent (Kowalski, 2013). History has also shown that the superintendency is directly influenced by the cultural, political and economic circumstances of the era (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Grogan, 2000; Kowalski, 2013). The quality of the public interactions within a community and in school districts mirror the rest of the culture at-large. As the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our culture, politics and economics continue to unfold, so will their influences on the superintendency.

Perhaps the next evolutionary stage for district leadership is a shift from the superintendency as a collaborative community leader (Brunner, Grogan & Bjork; 2002) to the superintendent as a leader in community healing. To be a community healer places an even greater emphasis on being in relationship with others, both individually and collectively with community groups. It requires superintendents to be focused on local conditions and seek insights from all perspectives in the community (Grogan, 2000). This work takes time, skill and focus. Building relationships is time consuming, human work that should be privileged rather than added-on at the end of the “regular workday” at a sporting event or PTO meeting.

For superintendents to help communities be well, they must be well themselves. Their workloads must be controlled. As the age of technology integration moves rapidly into the age of artificial intelligence, superintendents would be well-supported if many of the rote or managerial tasks could be removed from their lists of responsibilities and supported or replaced by technology tools. Schools and school districts cannot be left behind for-profit industries in this. A reduction in daily routine tasks could create precious time in their schedules for the interactions to support the leading and healing within their local communities that is needed.

Even the way we think about the preparation of superintendents may need to shift to meet this next evolutionary stage. One interesting theme that did not emerge in the data collected in this research as a time-consuming issue for superintendents was policymaking, however many of the activities that superintendents described in their comments related to state requirements, health-related mandates, budgeting, and staffing issues are directly related to policy. One possible explanation for this disconnect is how superintendents understand and interpret the concept of policy itself. In my own experience within the context of the superintendent preparatory program, policy education was limited to document reflection. One suggestion for the profession might be to actively engage in a reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of policymaking. Doing so would give aspiring superintendents a greater understanding of and experience with policy as a form of collaborative and community-based action rather than a just set of documents.

Centering the role of the superintendent as community builder and healer may not be how we are currently conceptualizing or training superintendents (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Grogan, 2020) however in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued polarization and volatility communities continue to face, building skills in these areas should be areas of focus for current and aspiring superintendents.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to get a broad scope of the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, a survey was developed, which had both closed and open-ended questions. This design was effective in being able to garner responses from superintendents from across the state, and it was efficient in that it did not take a long time for respondents to fill out. However, in reviewing the responses, this research may have been enhanced by follow-up qualitative interviews with willing participants to get even deeper responses to some of the issues raised.

An additional limitation may have been the superintendents who self-selected to respond to the survey itself. It is possible that the superintendents who were compelled to respond, especially those who took extra time with their comments, had higher degrees of frustration with their job roles than the superintendents who did not participate. As a result, the themes that arose from the comments may have reflected more negatively than a broader cross section may have.

Future Research

Based on this research and personal interest, I am interested in two additional areas of study. First, further research into the differences in the lived experiences of

female superintendents who serve in both greater Minnesota and in the suburbs. This study indicated that there are some shared experiences and some differences, and it would be interesting to explore that in more depth.

An additional area of research that I am interested in is why, despite the generally agreed upon stressful and time-consuming nature of the role, do superintendents choose to stay in their roles? What are the contributing factors related to job satisfaction or wellness that allow them to remain in that role for a length of time? Studying the factors that may support a superintendent staying in their role longer and keeping them well within that role would be very beneficial to the profession.

Communicating the Results

Several of the survey respondents requested copies of the written survey report. Additionally, given the degree of interest in the survey and large number of respondents across the state, a condensed version of this research will be prepared and shared with the Minnesota Association of School Administrators for distribution among that member group.

Conclusion

The role of the superintendent has been researched at length; however, many are collectively just starting to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world, and specifically on education. In asking the research question *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?* I sought to document the impact of this unprecedented time on superintendents. By collecting the qualitative comments from superintendents across the state of Minnesota, I feel that I was able to give them a platform to share their experiences from the last several years.

I also desired my research and findings to be an asset to the educational leadership field and to provide some sense-making from this time that could support future leaders facing crises and challenges. In this respect, I think this research indicated a skill area that leaders could and should focus attention on, which is community building.

Finally, I also wanted this research to help me understand where my own career path may take me. While this research did not lead to a conclusion about my own future, I do see that despite the numerous stresses and challenges of the job, many superintendents choose to continue on in that role. As mentioned earlier, if I were to conduct this research again, I would ask superintendents choosing to stay in the field what keeps them there. Clearly, there is joy and reward experienced as well.

REFERENCES

- Arar, K. & Avidov-Ungar, O. (2020). Superintendents' perception of their role and their professional development in an era of changing organizational environment. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 19*:3, 462-476.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1585550>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brunner, C. C., Grogan, M. & Bjork, L. (2002). Shifts in the discourse defining the superintendency: Historical and current foundations of the position. *The Teachers College Record, 104*(9), 211-238.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.hamline.edu/10.1177/016146810210400910>
- Bushweller, K. (2021). How decisions are made in a crazy VUCA world: Three districts' experiences navigating volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. *Education Week, 40*(35).
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*(5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Cohn, C. A. (2021, September). An impossible position. *School Administrator*.
<https://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2021/Sep21/Cohn.aspx>

Fortin, J. (2022, March 7) Minneapolis teachers begin strike after talks fail. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/us/minneapolis-st-paul-teachers-strike.html>

Fung, K. (2021, December 23). The great exodus': Superintendents resigned in droves as culture wars hit schools in 2021. *Newsweek*.

<https://www.newsweek.com/great-exodus-superintendents-resigned-droves-culture-wars-hit-schools-2021-1662382>

Grogan, M. (2000). Laying the groundwork for a reconception of the superintendency from feminist/postmodern perspectives. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 36(1), 117-142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X00361005>

Grogan, M. & Nash, A. M. (2021). Superintendents and the intersections of race, gender, and district composition. In Tienken, C. H. (Ed.), *The American superintendent 2020 decennial study*. (pp. 19 - 28). Rowman & Littlefield.

Hawk, N. & Martin, B. (2011). Understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(3), 364-389.

Henton, D. (2022, April 7). The Henton Headlines. MNASA. https://mnasa.typepad.com/the_henton_headlines/2022/04/the-henton-headlines-april-7-2022.html

Hurst, T. M. (2017). The Discursive Construction of Superintendent Statesmanship on Twitter. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(29).

Hutchings, G. C. & Brown, J. L. (2021). The current work of the American superintendent. In Tienken, C. H. Editor (Eds.), *The American superintendent 2020 decennial study*. (pp. 39-49). Rowman & Littlefield.

- Keedy, J. L. & Bjork, L. G. (2002). Superintendents and local boards and the potential for community polarization: The call for use of political strategist skills. In Cooper, B. S. & Fusarelli, L. D. (Eds.), *The promises and perils facing today's school superintendent* (pp. 77-101). Scarecrow Press.
- Kersten, T. A. (2012). *Moving into the superintendency: How to succeed in making the transition*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2013). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases*. SAGE Publications.
- Miller, A., Nuzzi, R. J. & Wyttenbach, M. (2020). Navigating the uncharted pandemic waters: An examination of the role of the catholic school superintendency in response to COVID-19. *Journal of Catholic Education*. 23(1), 120-141.
<https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2301082020>
- Minnesota Department of Education (n.d.). *Superintendents of school districts*. Retrieved December 23, 2022.
<https://public.education.mn.gov/MdeOrgView/districts/superintendentsDistricts>
- Morton, N. & Valley, J. (2022, January 6). Who wants to lead America's school districts? Anyone? Anyone? *The Hechinger Report*.
<https://hechingerreport.org/who-wants-to-lead-americas-school-districts-anyone-anyone-superintendent-search-is-just-beginning/>
- Riley, V., Conley, S. & Glasman, N. S. (2002). Superintendents' views of new and traditional collective bargaining processes. In Cooper, B. S., & Fusarelli, L.D.

- Editors (Eds.), *The promises and perils facing today's school superintendent* (pp. 77-101). Scarecrow Press.
- Robinson, K. K. & Shakeshaft, C. (2015). Women superintendents who leave. *Planning and Changing*, 46(3/4), 440-458.
- Sawchuk, S. (2021, May 6). Has COVID-19 led to a mass exodus of superintendents? *Education Week*.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/has-covid-19-led-to-a-mass-exodus-of-superintendents/2021/05>
- Sawchuk, S. (2021, June 11). We pay superintendents big bucks and expect them to succeed. But we hardly know them. *Education Week*.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/we-pay-superintendents-big-bucks-and-expect-them-to-succeed-but-we-hardly-know-them/2021/06>
- Schwartz, H. L. & Diliberti, M. K., (2022). Flux in the educator labor market: acute staff shortages and projected superintendent departures: Selected findings from the fourth American school district panel survey. *RAND Corporation*.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-9.html.
- Schwartz, H. L. & Diliberti, M. K., (2022). State of the superintendent - high job satisfaction and a projected normal turnover rate: Selected findings from the fifth American school district panel survey. RAND Corporation.
<https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA956-12>
- Senge, P. M., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J., & Kleiner, A. (2012). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. Nicholas Brealey.

- Shockman, E. & Krueger, A. (2022, March 25). Deal reached to end Minneapolis teachers strike; Classes expected to restart Tuesday. *MPR News*.
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/03/25/tentative-agreement-reached-to-end-minneapolis-educators-strike>
- Taylor, K. & Nierenberg, A. (2021, October 15). School superintendents are superstressed. *The New York Times*.
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/us/school-superintendent-burnout-covid.html?_cldee=ZWR3YXJkcy5zaGlybGV5OGx1c2Qub3Jn&recipientid=contact-bdfb918fe8e4e41180e2005056b02a09-28e73315e62a4ae2b8a9d755e836c584&esid=42c01802-f8a8-eb11-8145-005056b02a09
- The National Superintendents Roundtable. (2021). *Superintendents struggle during pandemic: Panic attacks, strokes & threats of violence meet prayer, exercise, meditation, and booze*.
<https://www.superintendentsforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Superintendents-Struggle-During-Pandemic.pdf>
- American Association of School Administrators. (n.d.) *Superintendent and District Data*. Retrieved November 25, 2022. <https://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=740>
- Tienken, C.H. (Ed.). (2021). *The American superintendent 2020 decennial study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Appendix A

Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey

Directions: Thank you for taking the *Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey*. This survey should take 10 minutes to complete and will aid in understanding the challenges facing Minnesota superintendents after the COVID-19 pandemic. Your responses will be confidential and your name will not be associated with your responses. Thank you again for your participation. If you would like a digital copy of the survey results once they are published, please email Ann Ertl at AErtl01@hamline.edu.

Although this study is of minimal risk, there is always some level of risk associated with participating in any study. For this study, there is the possible risk of emotional distress as you may relate difficult past events. In this event, please contact your healthcare provider for access to appropriate care, text “BRAVE” to 741 741, the Crisis Text Line, where a trained crisis counselor will receive it and respond within minutes.

By checking YES below and clicking NEXT, you consent to participate in this survey. You may stop taking the survey at any time if you decide you no longer want to continue. If you would like to discuss concerns or questions about this survey, you may contact the student doctoral candidate researcher at AErtl01@hamline.edu or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Linnette Werner, for this research project at LWerner01@hamline.edu. If you do not want to participate, simply close the form and disregard the message. If you begin the survey and decide you no longer want to participate, simply close the form.

- o I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Screening Question:

Have you served as a superintendent in any school district since the 2019-20 school year through the present school year?

If no, stop survey.

Section 1: Current Work

This section of the survey is designed to determine whether the functions and problems identified by superintendents before and during COVID have changed in the post-COVID era.

1: Select the three most time-consuming activities you currently engage in from the following list:

Financial management

Collective bargaining
 Staffing shortages
 School reform / improvement
 School district & community relations
 Facility planning / management
 Superintendent & board member relationships
 Law / legal issues
 Curriculum / instruction issues & management
 School safety / crisis management
 Policy development / management
 Educational equity / diversity
 Other

2. Out of these three, which is the most time-consuming activity?

3. Please describe the activities you engage in as related to your most time-consuming activity as stated above (open)

4. Select the two least time-consuming activities from the following list:
 - Financial management
 - Collective bargaining
 - Staffing shortages
 - School reform / improvement
 - School district & community relations
 - Facility planning / management
 - Superintendent & board member relationships
 - Law / legal issues
 - Curriculum / instruction issues & management
 - School safety / crisis management
 - Policy development / management
 - Educational equity / diversity

5. Select the three most pressing problems you face as a superintendent:
 - Job-related stress
 - Time requirements
 - Social media
 - Role conflict; competing expectations of you
 - Political divisions in the community
 - Unethical employee behavior

Unethical school board member behavior
 Unrealistic performance expectations
 Lack of respect
 Lack of opportunities for professional growth
 Lack of status
 Other

6. Out of these three, which is the most pressing problem?

7. Please describe your experience of the most pressing problem you identified as a superintendent (open)

8. When considering your most pressing problem as a superintendent, rate the level of support you receive from your school board. My school board is...

Not at all supportive
 Slightly supportive
 Somewhat supportive
 Very supportive

9. Rate the overall level of support you receive from your school board. Overall, my school board is...

Not at all supportive
 Slightly supportive
 Somewhat supportive
 Very supportive

Section 2: Intent to Leave

Many superintendents in the nation have stated that they plan to leave their positions at the end of this year. This section of the survey is designed to gather current insight into how Minnesota superintendents are thinking about their career plans and to help us understand the level of leadership crisis we may be facing in the state.

10. Do you plan to leave your position at the end of the 2022-23 school year?
 (remember, your responses are completely anonymous)
 (yes, no, maybe prefer not to answer)

If No:

11. Ideally, how many years do you intend to continue serving in the role of superintendent?

1-2

3-5

More than 5

Unsure

If Yes or maybe:

11. Do you intend to:

- Retire
- Seek a superintendency in a different school district
- Seek a position outside of education
- Take time off without another position lined up
- Other

12. Please describe the factors contributing to this decision. (open response)

13. Is there anything you would like to say about how the role of the superintendent has changed since COVID-19 and/or about the possible loss of superintendents in the state?

Section 3: Demographic Information

14. Have you served in the same school district from the 2019-20 school year - present?
(yes, no, other)

15. Total number of years as a superintendent in any district (including outside of Minnesota)

(dropdown)

16. Gender

(dropdown: Female, Male, Non-binary, other)

17. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? (check all that apply)

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican

- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (e.g. Dominican, Colombian, etc.)

18. What is your race? (check all that apply)

- White (e.g., German, Irish, English, etc.)
- Black/African American (e.g., African American, Haitian, Somali, etc.)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (e.g., Dakota, Navajo, Mayan)
- Asian American or Pacific Islander (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Native Hawaiian)
- Northern African/Middle Eastern (Indian, Pakistani, Iranian)
- Bi- or multi-racial
- Another Race _____

19. Please describe your school district

Urban

Suburban

Greater Minnesota

Other:

20. Percentage of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students in your district (slider scale)

Thank you again for your participation in this confidential survey. If you would like a digital copy of the survey results once they are published, please email Ann Ertl at aertl01@hamline.edu.

Appendix B

Survey Recruitment Communications

Survey Recruitment Email #1

Hello, Minnesota Superintendent!

I am Ann Ertl, a current Hamline EdD student. I am contacting you because I am conducting a dissertation study on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents. To do this, I have created the ***Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey***. This survey should take 10 minutes to complete and will aid in understanding the challenges facing Minnesota superintendents after the COVID-19 pandemic. I will use this data to compare to superintendent survey data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Your responses will be confidential and your name will not be associated with your responses.

If you would like a digital copy of the survey results once they are published, please email Ann Ertl at AErtl01@hamline.edu.

Thank you so much for your participation!

Sincerely,
Ann Ertl, EdD 11

AErtl01@hamline.edu
612.964.5543

LINK TO SURVEY



Survey Recruitment Email #2

Hello, Minnesota Superintendent!

If you have already taken the MN Superintendent ***Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey***, thank you!!

If you haven't taken it yet, it should only take 10 minutes to complete and will help us to understand the challenges facing Minnesota superintendents after the COVID-19 pandemic. Your responses will be anonymous and your name will not be collected.

If you would like a digital copy of the survey results once they are published, please email Ann Ertl at AErtl01@hamline.edu.

Thank you so much for your participation!

Sincerely,
Ann Ertl, EdD 11

AErtl01@hamline.edu
612.964.5543

LINK TO SURVEY



Newsletter Recruitment Blurb

Calling all Minnesota Superintendents!

I am Ann Ertl, a current Hamline EdD student and I am conducting a dissertation study on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the lived experiences of Minnesota superintendents.

To do this, I have created the Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey. This survey should take 10 minutes to complete and will aid in understanding the challenges facing Minnesota superintendents after the COVID-19 pandemic. I will use this data to compare to superintendent survey data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Your responses will be confidential and your name will not be associated with your responses. If you would like a digital copy of the survey results once they are published, please email Ann Ertl at AErtl01@hamline.edu.

Thank you so much for your participation!

Sincerely,

Ann Ertl, EdD 11

AErtl01@hamline.edu

612.964.5543

LINK TO SURVEY



Appendix C

Minnesota Superintendent Post-COVID Survey Codebook

Research question: *How did two years of the COVID-19 pandemic affect Minnesota superintendents' day-to-day work?*

Question 3: Please describe the activities you engage in as related to the time-consuming activity you identified.

Theme / Code	Description	Example
Management and operations Tasks	Comment refers to activities such as meetings and communications, staff management, purchasing, insurance.	<i>"Phone calls, meetings"</i>
Grant management	Comment refers to activities related to the financial management of grants.	<i>"Grant writing, reporting, planning on use of funds"</i> <i>"Developing narratives"</i>
Staffing	Comment refers to activities related to staffing such as recruitment.	<i>"We are constantly promoting our openings on a variety of avenues."</i>
Community engagement	Comment refers to activities related to working with community stakeholders.	<i>"...engaging in a community inclusive process..."</i>
Strategic Planning	Comment refers to activities related to goal setting and strategic planning.	<i>"...engaging in a community inclusive process to review our strategic plan..."</i>
Social Media	Comment refers to responding to social media issues.	
Budgeting	Comment refers to tasks	<i>"Efficiently using scarce resources to avoid</i>

	related to budgeting processes	<i>budget reductions”</i> <i>“Balancing the budget and making significant staff reductions is a real challenge...”</i>
State accountability	Comment refers to tasks related to state reporting requirements.	<i>“...MDE reports on accountability (and other productive items,”</i>
Learning & Teaching	Comment refers to tasks related to learning and teaching.	<i>“Effective, evidenced based approaches to teaching reading and math.”</i>
School board relationships	Comment refers to tasks related to building and maintaining school board relationships.	<i>“I have spent a significant amount of time establishing, growing and maintaining board relationships”</i>
Referendum Planning	Comment refers to tasks related to planning or executing a referendum.	<i>“As a district we went to the voters for a \$463M dollar bond and were unsuccessful. Since that time in August, we have conducted a new demographic study, a new community survey to gauge where families are at...”</i>

Question 7: Please describe your experience of the most pressing problem you identified as a superintendent.

Theme / Code	Description	Example
Job Expectations / Workload	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations and workload as a most pressing problem.	<i>“The incredibly high workload and expectations for people with differing viewpoints to have their way and immediately is a challenge.”</i> <i>“Balancing work-life...balancing it all while maintaining relationships is very time consuming and people are quick to criticize”</i> <i>“I typically put in 70-80 hours of work per week.”</i> <i>“The job is non-stop. After missing a 4:00</i>

		<p><i>am call from the police chief about two years ago, I never stop looking at my phone and I do not disengage it at night. I'm constantly checking email, connecting people with each other or people with relevant issues that need to be addressed; my email is literally non-stop."</i></p>
Polarization	<p>Comment refers to community and/or political polarization as a most pressing problem.</p>	<p><i>"Pair that with low levels of patience and increased stress on others gets transferred to superintendents along with political dynamics and expectations."</i></p> <p><i>"It is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy the extremes. While I think the great majority of parents and residents are reasonably satisfied with the products and services our school district offers, those at the extremes are louder, more persistent, and nearly impossible to satisfy."</i></p> <p><i>"The current political dive throughout the country has made it extremely difficult to continue to build trust within communities."</i></p> <p><i>"Our school district provides education to four different communities... We continue to experience challenges, along with the political divide around race and equity, sex and gender, and politics in the school."</i></p> <p><i>"The critical scrutiny of public education never lets up from a small percentage of the population."</i></p> <p><i>"Increased division (in the community)..."</i></p>
Staff Management	<p>Comment refers to staff management as a most pressing problem.</p>	<p><i>"Employees utilizing all of their personal leave and running a negative balance."</i></p> <p><i>"Issues involve teachers who lack an understanding of what it means to be a positive role model for students."</i></p> <p><i>"The expectations for leadership to solve</i></p>

		<i>employee issues whilst they work less and less is very disheartening. Leaders are bashed at nearly every turn and still, our employees want more for less work. The landscape heavily favors our employees and has little respect for their leaders.</i>
Social Media	Comment refers to responding to social media issues as a most pressing problem.	<p><i>“Social media is an issue as it spreads misinformation that is difficult to manage.”</i></p> <p><i>“Social media is what creates most of the stress. It never goes away, and even though so many people know it is untrue they feed into it and add additional posts that support the misinformation.”</i></p> <p><i>“Hard to keep everyone informed about issues when social media picks up the information first.”</i></p>
State Accountability	Comment refers to added state requirements or lack of local control as a most pressing problem.	<i>“I am new to the position and there aren’t a lot of good options for learning how to meet all of these requirements.”</i>
Student Concerns	Comment refers to student concerns as a most pressing problem.	<i>“Our younger students are having more emotional issues and causing problems in the class.”</i>
School board concerns	Comment refers to school board / school board member concerns as a most pressing problem.	<p><i>“Stress and strife managing the unethical behavior of a former board member”</i></p> <p><i>“I have board members that don’t understand their role. They think they run the day to day operations of the district. They say racist and sexually harassing things. They are bullies...”</i></p>

Question 12: Please describe the factors contributing to this decision (to leave their current superintendent role)

Theme / Code	Description	Example
School board	Comment refers to the	<i>The board is ridiculous in how they treat</i>

support	relationship with the school board as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	<i>me. They behave as though I don't have 30 years of experience in education and 18 years in administration.</i>
Job Expectations	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	<i>“workload and days are too packed to feel like I am making forward progress with the district lack of time to support and lead leadership team”</i> <i>“The overall stress is overwhelming. Everyone wants you to solve their problems or simply blame you for their problems. The overall victim mindset of teachers and the community is horrible.”</i>
Polarization	Comment refers to community and/or political polarization as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position	<i>“There are 2 sides we are dealing with today, and we are not in either one of them as we just want to educate students and provide a positive learning experience for all students. Because of the polarized political viewpoints today, if we make the wrong decision we could be out of a job, or career because we did not make the right decision that aligned with one of the 2 parties ideology. We walk a tightrope everyday.”</i>
State Accountability	Comment refers to added state requirements or lack of local control as a contributing factor to their decision to leave their current position.	<i>Just look at all the new proposed legislative items being voted on this spring. This is just another example of external factors trying to control what happens in our schools. We no longer have local control locally of our schools, and most of these bills are a result of social media opinions.”</i> <i>“...don't feel like I'm making a difference when I'm buried in policy and paperwork, state taking away local control”</i>
Career Advancement	Comment refers to a desire to leave their current position for a position considered a career advancement.	<i>Leaving for another district for an advancement opportunity</i>

Gender discrimination	Comment refers to experiencing discrimination based on gender as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<i>(the school board) behaves as though I don't have 30 years of experience in education and 18 years in administration. I think they think because I am female, I don't know what I am doing. The constant questioning has turned into harassment and bullying on their part. It is draining and I feel like I am fighting to do my job.</i>
Ready to retire	Comment refers to a readiness to retire as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<p><i>"retiring and coming back as a retired employee.. mostly financially, as getting two checks. More money and less time working pretty easy decision for me"</i></p> <p><i>"41 years in education and 10 years as superintendent - it is the right time. It's been a good run."</i></p>
Location	Comment refers to location as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<p><i>"Better location to work."</i></p> <p><i>"Distance from family..."</i></p>
Low Self Efficacy	Comment refers to a perception that the superintendent is not having the desired impact within their role as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<p><i>... "perception of a lack of impact..."</i></p> <p><i>"...dissatisfaction with job - don't feel like I'm making a difference when I'm buried in policy and paperwork"</i></p> <p><i>"workload and days are too packed to feel like I am making forward progress"</i></p>
Fresh start	Comment refers to the desire to work somewhere new as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<i>"Sometimes people need a fresh start. While I have felt support from previous boards, my district has half of the board being replaced by new people. While they may be great, it might be time for new blood all around. A fresh start for the district might be beneficial for them as well as me personally."</i>
Lack of Funding	Comment refers to the lack of educational funding as a contributing factor to their decision to leave.	<i>"Too much to do and it is a losing battle as funding has not kept up and we are not able to do things how they need to be done."</i>

Question 13: Is there anything you would like to say about how the role of the superintendent has changed since COVID-19 and/or about the possible loss of superintendents in the state?

Job Changes post-COVID

Theme / Code	Description	Example
Polarization	Comment refers to community and/or political polarization as a significant change to the superintendency post-COVID.	<p><i>“The COVID-19 years were unstable...Created so much division and damage in the school community that we are still suffering from it.”</i></p> <p><i>“The increased political pressures are daunting.”</i></p> <p><i>“...we will not return to a pre-Covid normal in terms of social interactions or a social fabric. Part of people just saying whatever they want also includes parents fiercely advocating for whatever they want, even if it is only their child who will benefit.”</i></p> <p><i>“I think we deal with more politics than previously”</i></p> <p><i>“Much less parent support...lack of respect for diversity.”</i></p>

Loss of Sups in the state

Theme / Code	Description	Example
Financial	The comment refers to financial factors as contributing to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	<i>“I know I could make more...in other roles. Pension structures are what are keeping me in the role for a few more years.”</i>
Lack of Efficacy	The comment refers to lack of self-efficacy in the job as contributing to the decision to	<i>“I do love the work and find a high value, but with my level of expertise...I know I could...see greater movement or impact faster in other roles. Often competing</i>

	continue in a superintendent role.	<i>interests slow change down in public education and require really long cycles of change management.”</i>
Job expectations	Comment refers to unrealistic job expectations as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	<p><i>“It is really, really difficult to serve as a Superintendent.”</i></p> <p><i>“The supt role is a very demanding job that is a 24 hour/365 day a year job. Even during your time off, you are still on the job”</i></p> <p><i>“The need to manage public relations and find creative fiscal solutions to current school issues...puts a huge weight of responsibility and time investment on one position.”</i></p> <p><i>“Stress took its toll on me, and many of my colleagues. I can fully understand why some have walked away and/or are retiring earlier than they may have previously thought they would.”</i></p> <p><i>“COVID-19 was hard for me as a superintendent. Prior to that, logic, reason and empathy helped guide our decision making when we disagreed in the community...people were openly hostile about not getting their way and on rare occasions targeting the superintendent as the one responsibly. It affected my well being and my family - and superintendents are questioning if it is worth it.”</i></p>
School board support	Comment refers to the relationship with the school board as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.	<i>“A school board is vital to the supt job. When there is lack of support, this is when a Supt typically starts looking for a different position.”</i>
Public Education	Comment refers to concerns with the state of public education and/or the Minnesota	<i>“Education is in a crisis. The public opinion of education is not encouraging high school graduates to enter the field...”</i>

	<p>Department of Education as a contributing factor to the decision to continue in a superintendent role.</p>	<p><i>“The loss of public school students and corollary revenue has created financial stress.”</i></p> <p><i>“We were the target of a lot of misguided criticism simply by doing what MDE, MDH, the governor and the CDC directed us to do in schools...I am not sure if many superintendents, and other school district staff, have or will fully recover from this. One of my final frustrations...was when I felt the state somewhat abandoned the effort when the declaration was made, something to the effect of ‘We feel school superintendents and school boards are in the best position to make decisions about masking and other mitigation on behalf of their school districts’...this made it all feel that much more lonely in this type of decision-making.”</i></p>
--	---	---