

DEEP VISIBILITY:  
MEANINGFUL ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE  
SUPERINTENDENCY

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2014

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## Acknowledgements

At the outset of a doctoral program, one hopes for the experience to be transformative. My experience has indeed been just that. My personal and professional growth through this process is noteworthy, and I am grateful to the University of Minnesota and the faculty and staff who have contributed along the way.

I would like to acknowledge my wife, Clare, and our two wonderful children, Anna and Vincent. We have sacrificed together so that I may achieve this lifelong goal. My hope is that this experience will enrich our lives in some meaningful way. I would also like to note that we eagerly await the birth of our third child in the summer of 2014.

I would like to extend a general acknowledgement to several of my teachers and coaches who helped me develop confidence and who helped to instill in me a passion for learning. “Work hard, do your best” was a basic life lesson learned during my formative years. A variation of this advice lives on as I remind my own children to “Work hard, do your best, and have fun.” I would especially like to acknowledge Mr. Garry Kotts, my high school science teacher and track coach.

I would like to thank Mr. Garth Gideon, a former school board chair at Lakeview Public Schools. Mr. Gideon and his fellow board members entrusted me to be their superintendent, and for that I am grateful. While we have both moved on, we recall our time at Lakeview with fondness. Mr. Gideon provided the seed, which, ultimately, grew into this dissertation.

Finally, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. C. Cryss Brunner, for her guidance and support throughout this marathon of a journey. Her impact has been, simply, profound.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Anna, Vincent, and their new brother or sister who will be born shortly after this dissertation journey is complete. You each inspire me to be a better person and a better father. May you each set goals that push you beyond your comfort zone, and may you all have success in finding your passion.

## Abstract

Using a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study method, this study identifies perceptions about the visibility of superintendents from various perspectives. Superintendents, school board members, community members, and staff members were interviewed and offered their varied perspectives.

The literature review provided an extensive examination of the history of the superintendent, a historical view of the discursive roles of the superintendent, and a review of relevant leadership literature. The study's conceptual framework was developed using research related to reflective practice, general leadership theory, organizational learning, Theory U, social impact theory, the superintendency, and communication. A deeper visibility resulting in meaningful absence and presence in the superintendency is the essence of this framework.

Key findings included aspects of presence, which included the terms adverse, accessible, authentic, beyond physical, transparent, trustworthy and synergetic. Aspects of absence identified in the study included symbolic, job pressures, tied to desk, privacy and contra-visibility. Areas noted for future research include adverse visibility, contra-visibility, synergetic visibility, reflection and symbolic absence.

The concept, *superintendent visibility*, has previously lacked meaningful structure and, therefore, has been described, in the past, through general discussions rather than through an empirical lens. A Model of Superintendent Visibility was developed after careful analysis of the data, consideration of the study's conceptual framework and literature review, and the study's identified conclusions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Study .....	2
Origins of the Superintendency .....	2
Role Conceptualizations of the Superintendent.....	6
Superintendent as teacher-scholar.....	7
Superintendent as manager .....	8
Superintendent as democratic leader .....	11
Superintendent as applied social scientist.....	13
Superintendent as communicator.....	16
Purpose Statement and Research Questions .....	18
Significance of the Study .....	19
Definition of Terms.....	20
Organization of the Study .....	22
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	24
Context of Visibility: Relationships and Communication Interconnected .....	24
Relational Leadership .....	25
Leader—follower .....	27
Leader—member exchange .....	29
Authentic.....	30
Transformational.....	32

Communication Theory .....	35
Leadership communication.....	36
Michigan leadership studies.....	37
Ohio State leadership studies .....	38
Blake and McCauley's leadership grid.....	39
Superintendent communication .....	40
Concept of Visibility: Social Psychology and Leadership Considered .....	44
Social Psychology .....	44
Leadership .....	48
Social influence.....	49
Politicians.....	52
Superintendents.....	54
Concept of Visibility: Absence and Presence Discussed.....	60
Reflective Practice: Inextricability of Absence and Presence .....	60
Organizational Learning: Intentionality of Absence and Presence.....	64
Intentional visibility: Theory U .....	66
Intentional visibility: Action theories .....	68
Summary of Chapter Two: Literature Review and Discussion .....	71
Conceptual Framework of the Study: Model and Description .....	72
CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN.....	76
Methods: Theoretical Underpinnings .....	76
Qualitative Inquiry .....	77
Case Study Research.....	80

Methods Approach.....83

Design: Study Plan.....84

Site Selection .....84

Participant Selection .....86

    Superintendents.....87

    District-level staff members.....87

    Building-level staff members.....87

    School board members.....87

    Community members.....88

    Total participants .....88

        Liberty Public Schools.....88

        Washington Public Schools .....89

        East Clifton County Public Schools.....89

        Sandstone Public Schools .....89

        Total number of study participants .....89

Data Collection .....90

    Interviewing in depth .....91

    Analyzing documents.....92

Data Analysis .....94

    Organize and prepare .....97

    Review .....97

    Code and categorize.....97

    Describe .....101

Interpret and understand .....	102
Data Reporting .....	102
Delimitations and Limitations: Cautionary Notes .....	103
Delimitations .....	103
Limitations .....	104
CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS .....	107
The Superintendency .....	107
Role Conceptualizations .....	107
Communicator .....	109
Manager .....	114
Teacher-scholar .....	117
Democratic approach .....	120
Applied social scientist .....	121
Community Expectations .....	122
Large/small school expectations .....	122
School board expectations .....	127
Visibility as Presence .....	131
Aspects of Presence .....	131
Adverse .....	132
Accessible .....	136
Authentic .....	143
Beyond physical .....	148
Transparent .....	150

Trustworthy.....	152
Synergetic .....	159
Requirements of Communication .....	164
Characteristics of communication.....	164
District face/spokesperson .....	164
Public perception .....	166
Framing and rumor control .....	168
Appearance/dress .....	169
Methods of communication .....	169
Written .....	169
Public speaking.....	171
Mass media .....	171
Social media.....	173
Technology impact.....	174
Communication artifacts.....	177
Relationship Development.....	178
Internal relationships.....	184
Relationships with staff.....	185
Relationships with students.....	188
External relationships/community connection.....	191
Relational leadership.....	195
Engagement Efforts .....	199
Local-level involvement .....	200

Memberships.....	201
Event attendance.....	202
Community events.....	202
School events.....	203
State-level involvement/memberships.....	206
National-level involvement/memberships.....	211
Importance of Presence.....	213
Community and economic development.....	217
Political considerations.....	220
Diversity of visibility.....	222
Impact on groups.....	224
Visibility as Absence.....	225
Aspects of Absence.....	225
Symbolic absence.....	226
Job pressures.....	231
Tied to desk.....	236
Privacy.....	238
Contra-presence.....	239
Importance of Absence.....	244
Reflective practice.....	244
Organizational learning.....	245
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	250
General Answers to Research Questions.....	251

Conclusions that Support the Literature .....	253
Conclusions Beyond the Literature.....	256
Model of Superintendent Visibility .....	261
Conceptual Framework Revisited.....	261
Emergence of a Visibility Model .....	263
Implications.....	265
Educational Leaders and Preparation Programs .....	266
Future Research .....	268
Adverse visibility .....	268
Contra-presence .....	269
Synergetic visibility .....	269
Reflection.....	269
Symbolic absence.....	270
REFERENCES .....	271
APPENDICES .....	290
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter .....	290
Appendix B: Superintendent Recruitment Letter .....	291
Appendix C: Consent Information Sheet.....	292
Appendix D: Open-ended Interview Guide and Possible Probes .....	294
Superintendent .....	294
District-level Staff.....	298
Building-level Staff.....	301
School Board Members.....	304

Community Members .....307

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Summary of Participants from All School Districts .....	90
Table 2: Themes of Visibility .....	99
Table 3: Summary of the Most Frequently Coded Responses.....	100
Table 4: Summary of Participant Discussion about Superintendent Roles .....	108

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework .....74

Figure 2: Model of Superintendent Visibility .....264

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

Assumptions about leaders tend to place a premium on their visibility. These assumptions related to the importance of visibility have permeated general leadership literature and educational leadership literature focused on the superintendency (Eller & Carlson, 2009; Petersen & Barnett, 2005; Wilmore, 2008). Superintendents' visibility may significantly affect their perceived effectiveness (Eller & Carlson, 2009). Despite the assumptions and general beliefs, there exists little or no empirical research on the concept of visibility, generally, or superintendent visibility, specifically. This empirical study seeks to address this dearth.

Defining the term visibility is important at the outset. Various sources define the term similarly. The Collins English Dictionary (2010a) defines visibility as 1) the state or fact of being visible; 2) the relative ability to be seen under given conditions of distance, light, atmosphere; 3) the distance at which a given standard object can be seen and identified with the unaided eye; 4) the ability to give a relatively large range of unobstructed vision; and 5) legibility. The MacMillan Dictionary (2010b) defines visibility as 1) the distance that one can see, depending on conditions such as the weather or the place in which one is located; and 2) a situation in which someone or something can be clearly seen or noticed. Merriam-Webster (2011) defines visibility as 1) the quality or state of being visible; 2) the degree of clearness, specifically, the greatest distance through the atmosphere toward the horizon at which prominent objects can be identified with the naked eye; 3) the capability of being readily noticed; 4) the capability

of affording an unobstructed view; 5) publicity; and 6) a measure of the ability of radiant energy to evoke visual sensation.

Visibility can be understood using any of these definitions, but for the purposes of this study, the phenomenon of visibility is understood to be absence and presence. In this study, absence and presence are inextricably bound concepts. Further discussion of these concepts will follow in Chapter Two.

To address the dearth of literature, this exploratory study examines how various stakeholders in school communities perceive and understand the visibility of school district superintendents. This chapter's sections are: 1) Background of the Study, 2) Purpose Statement and Research Questions, 3) Significance of the Study, 4) Definition of Terms, and 5) Organization of the Study. To begin, in order to understand how visibility fits into the role of superintendent, the following section describes the origins of the position of superintendent and describes the five role conceptualizations of the superintendency.

### **Background of the Study**

The origins of the position of superintendent and the factors relating to its development are essential to understanding the role of superintendent as it currently exists. This section includes a description of the various types of superintendent positions in the field of education. Additionally, it identifies five role conceptualizations of the school district superintendent.

### **Origins of the Superintendency**

Because the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution says, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the

States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people,” the development of a comprehensive public educational system in the United States was made the domain of each state. In the 19th century, public education was in its infancy (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). As the public education system of the United States has evolved, so too has the position of school superintendent, which in some capacity has been in place in the United States for nearly two hundred years (Butts & Cremin, 1953).

Review of the literature on the superintendency reveals three generic levels of the superintendency: state, intermediate district, and local district. Kowalski (2006) noted that the state-level superintendent, a role that originated in the early 1800s, was the control agent in the state’s hierarchical educational system and was originally assigned the duties of reporting on the management of public funds and providing educational information to the state legislature. Additionally, related to the common school movement, the state superintendent was to ensure that public schools implemented state-prescribed curriculum. Intermediate districts, created along with most state departments of education and most prevalent in the early 1900s, are situated between local districts and state departments of education. The office of county superintendent was the earliest form of the intermediate district-level superintendent, and its primary function was to provide services and management to ineffective school districts (Knezevich, 1984; as cited in Kowalski, 2006). The position of local district-level superintendent originated in the mid-1800s and is by far the most prevalent of the three generic iterations of the superintendency, as there are now approximately 14,500 local school districts in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century (Kowalski, 2006).

The origins of the role of superintendent as it is understood today date back to 1812 when the superintendent was a state-level position in New York that focused primarily on planning a common public school system, reporting on the management of public funds, and providing information to the state legislature (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). State superintendents were in a position to influence state policy and public opinion, but most had little effective authority (Allison, 1991). Leading into the mid-19th century, many states followed this same model and installed a state superintendent who acted as an advocate for local school districts while serving the interests of the state (Butts & Cremin, 1953; Edwards, 2007). In the 21st century, all 50 states have some form of state superintendent, although the name, authority, and role of the positions differed significantly from state to state (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010).

By the mid-1800s, the quality and scope of education provided in local public schools varied greatly, and because education was a state responsibility, state-level officials were compelled to address the inequities by developing a common set of minimum standards for all schools (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). State agencies were created to monitor the implementation of these common standards, with the responsibility of oversight lying with the state superintendent (Spring, 1994). In addition to establishing state departments of education, most states developed county-level agencies to function as liaisons between local school districts and state education departments; the leader of these county agencies often also was called the superintendent (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). These regional superintendents played a crucial role in the development of public education as they advised residents, trustees, and teachers on desirable practices and state requirements (Allison, 1991).

In contrast, the position of local school district superintendent evolved from the state- and county-level positions, and of the three generic positions of superintendent, the superintendent at the local level came to dominate the culture of school administration in the United States (Allison, 1991). As school districts increased in size, which resulted in greater administrative responsibilities, early school boards determined a need for someone apart from board members to fulfill administrative duties, including the day-to-day operations associated with running a school district (Edwards, 2007; Sharp & Walter, 2004).

The local school district superintendent position was first created in the mid-1800s, with the first appointment in Buffalo, New York, in 1837 (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). The emergence of the superintendency coincided with the building of state systems of public elementary and secondary schools during the common school movement, and between 1837 and 1850, 13 urban districts, including St. Louis, Missouri, and Louisville, Kentucky, established the position well before the onset of the Civil War (Cuban, 1988; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski, 2006). Through the mid to late 1800s, the number of school districts, as well as the number of superintendents, grew slowly so that by 1870 there were only 27 city superintendents of schools in the United States (Callahan, 1966). The number of school superintendents increased substantially in the late 1800s due to dramatic population shifts caused by the industrial revolution, and by the end of the 19th century, most urban school districts had created the position of superintendent (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski & Brunner, 2010; Urban & Wagoner, 2009). In fact, between 1870 and the early 20th century, the number of school districts, and subsequently superintendents, increased dramatically so that by 1915 there

were 1,551 superintendents in cities and towns with populations greater than 4,000 (Callahan, 1966).

Concurrent with this dramatic increase in the number of school districts, the nature of education itself became increasingly complex (Callahan, 1966). Both of these factors reflected “the fantastic growth and development of the United States from a thinly populated, simple, agrarian society to a mass, industrial society” (Callahan, 1966, p. 12). While the growth in the number of school districts and superintendents can be attributed largely to population shifts and growth in the United States and to the increased complexity of the educational system, these factors do not adequately explain the way in which the position developed over time (Callahan, 1966).

### **Role Conceptualizations of the Superintendent**

The evolution of the superintendency was deeply rooted in the particular nature of American society and the American education system (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2006). The demands of the position and the expectations placed on superintendents have changed due to social, political, and economic trends in American society. Having evolved over more than 150 years, the role conceptualizations of the superintendent reflect these pressures (Kowalski, 2006; Petersen & Barnett, 2005). Kowalski and Brunner (2010) delineate five role conceptualizations of the local school district superintendent that have evolved since the mid-1800s. The first four were originally chronicled by Callahan (1966) and the fifth by Kowalski (2005a): superintendent as teacher-scholar (1850 to early 1900s), manager (early 1900s to 1930), democratic leader (1930 to mid-1950s), applied social scientist (mid-1950s to mid-1970s), and communicator (mid-1970s to present).

The roles are not exclusive of one another; each has waxed and waned, but none has become irrelevant (Cuban, 1976). Most historical analyses imply that a particular role conceptualization dominated a particular time period, while other scholars suggest that superintendents have historically blended multiple roles (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). Brunner, Grogan, and Björk (2002) described the historical stages of the superintendent as discursive rather than developmental. Each discursive stage is not necessarily built on the previous stage as may be implied with a developmental model. The role conceptualizations of the superintendent are divided into the following subsections: 1) Superintendent as teacher-scholar, 2) Superintendent as manager, 3) Superintendent as democratic leader, 4) Superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) Superintendent as communicator.

**Superintendent as teacher-scholar.** The responsibilities of early superintendents varied widely from district to district. While many early superintendents were evangelists for public education across the United States, engaging in political struggles to obtain funding and support for a free public education for all children, the superintendent's primary responsibility during the earliest stage (1850 to early 1900s) was that of instructional leader of the school, which included the primary responsibilities of implementing a state curriculum and supervising teachers (Callahan, 1962; Kowalski, 2005b; Sharp & Walter, 2004). American public schools were established in large part to assimilate students into the American culture by delivering common educational experiences, including common subjects and courses as part of the common school movement, and superintendents were to ensure standardization and centralized control

(Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents were primarily concerned with furthering these common national educational goals during this period (Brunner, et al., 2002).

Callahan (1966) described the superintendent in this period as “scholar-educator type—an educational leader and a teacher of teachers” (p. 8), as students of education, and the educational leaders in their respective communities. Others described the superintendent during this period as the instructional leader of teachers and principals (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). As pedagogical matters became more and more complex, school boards expected superintendents to serve as the instructional leader of schools (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Around 1910, the role conceptualization of the district superintendent as teacher-scholar began to wane, but it remained relevant (Kowalski, 2005b). Emphasis on this role conceptualization has fluctuated for the past century, and research findings on the superintendent’s influence over educational outcomes have been mixed (Kowalski, 2005b). The growth of education associated with the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society and a shift towards efficiency in the early 1900s created the expectation that the superintendent would not only be the instructional leader, but also the business manager of the school district (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

**Superintendent as manager.** The superintendent as manager emerged during the period from the early 1900s to 1930. At the turn of the 20th century, a new social ethos was evolving in which efficiency was the new watchword and captains of industry were the new heroes, while schools were viewed as archaic and inefficient (Allison, 1991). Industrialization, improved roads, demographic shifts, and urbanization were changing life in America (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003; Tyack, 1974). Modern business methods

prevailed in America in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and a business ideology became an expectation in educational institutions just as it had in institutions associated with other industries (Callahan, 1966). The language and imagery of business efficiency, however rhetorical it may have been, was useful because superintendents needed to please the local business and professional elites who controlled local boards of education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In the early 1900s, the role of the superintendent began to shift from instructional supervision towards business management as a means to reform inefficiencies and the steadily increasing corruption on school boards, and as a result, superintendents gained executive power and considerable credibility during this period (Brunner, et al., 2002). This shift was not due to any changes in the nature of teachers' work or to changes in the purpose of schools; rather, the change was a result of powerful social forces and the relative weakness of educators in public schools (Callahan, 1966).

As Frederick Taylor's system of scientific management and resulting efficiency practices came to prominence in industrial settings after 1910, the public demanded that this approach be applied in education as a means to curtail perceived economic waste and inefficiency, especially in public institutions supported by tax dollars (Callahan, 1966). Business and professional elites delegated almost total administrative power to an expert superintendent so that they could "reshape the schools to fit the new economic and social conditions of an urban-industrial society" (Tyack, 1974, p. 126). As administrative chief, the superintendent directed the organization and was devoted to productivity (Cuban, 1988).

The sudden popularity of scientific management, coupled with the American infatuation with efficiency and the attacks on educational systems by popular muckraking journalists, made it a certainty that education would be heavily influenced by this phenomenon (Callahan, 1962). Budget development, budget administration, standardization of operations, personnel management, and facility management were the primary duties of the superintendent during this period (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). Carter and Cunningham (1997) referred to this as the era of the four Bs: bonds, buses, budgets, and buildings. Some authors, however, questioned the use of business practices in schools because the development of human beings is so different from the development of material goods, which can be impersonally gauged and manipulated (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

There was a tendency to apply business methods to all areas of America at the turn of the 19th century, and higher education joined this trend, which had lasting effects on graduate programs for school administration. Graduate programs were developed around the administration of education beginning in approximately 1915 (Callahan, 1966). Since the 1920s, the managerial role has been the primary focus of graduate programs in education, with relatively little time devoted to curriculum and instruction (Cuban, 1988). As several leading universities began offering graduate degrees in school management during this period, superintendents no longer protected their images as professional educators, but instead embraced this new administrative or business management role in order to elevate the superintendency above the role of teacher (Kowalski, 2005b). Superintendents responded to societal pressures to increase the business values of efficiency and productivity in educational institutions, and the image

of the superintendent transformed from that of a scholar to that of a businessperson (Brunner, et al., 2002). By 1920, the transformation to manager was complete, as superintendents were expected to be scientific managers capable of improving operations by focusing on time and efficiency (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Support for the conceptualization of the superintendent as business manager diminished during the late 1920s, coinciding with the stock market crash and subsequent depression (Kowalski, 2005b). The Great Depression tarnished the captains of industry, and some prominent superintendents who had been praised for imitating industrial leaders were now being disparaged (Kowalski, 2006).

**Superintendent as democratic leader.** In the period of 1930 to the mid-1950s, the conceptualization of the superintendent as one dominated by managerial efficiency declined in prominence, and the superintendent role shifted to that of an educational leader operating within a complex democratic framework (Callahan, 1966). Superintendents understood that any public institution supported by taxes in American society would not be left alone to be run by the professionals hired to do so (Cuban, 1988).

Particularly during the decade immediately following the Great Depression, the superintendent in this era became a political strategist working on behalf of the school district to secure scant resources (Björk & Gurley, 2003; Kowalski, Peterson, & Fusarelli, 2007). As financial resources became scarce, superintendents were called on to garner necessary support for the school board's initiatives, perhaps their most difficult task with an economically-minded public (Callahan, 1966; Howlett, 1993). Political activity increased dramatically as school districts competed with other public entities for financial

support, which then required superintendents to serve as lobbyists for their respective districts (Kowalski, 2006).

People often associate the role of democratic leader with statesmanship (Björk & Gurley, 2003; Kowalski, 2005b). The central image of the superintendent as statesman was one of politics, and superintendents were expected to be astute political strategists and had to understand the purpose and complexities of public education and endure criticism while responding to the demands of multiple and diverse groups (Björk & Gurley, 2003; Cuban, 1988). Superintendents knew that schools needed the financial and moral support of the majority and that their positions were insecure with annual contract renewal as the norm. Knowledge of these factors was the seedbed for political behavior, as “no superintendent who wished to survive in the position could ignore for very long the political dimensions of the job” (Cuban, 1988, p. 120).

While early generations of superintendents cultivated community relations, this practice became prominent during the 1930s up to the mid-1950s as the superintendent became a more public figure for whom community engagement became an important and expected aspect of the position (Cuban, 1988; Kowalski, 2005a). The importance of establishing partnerships with school communities and other stakeholders underscored the political role of the superintendent (Leithwood, 1995). Superintendents needed to understand the purposes of public education in their local context and needed to achieve an appropriate balance of community engagement through democratic processes (Björk & Gurley, 2005). Kowalski (2005b) noted that superintendents need a “high level of political acuity tempered by moral principles and the capacity to communicate effectively with a broad range of community-based constituents and work collaboratively for the

common good” (p. 170), an accurate description of the prominent role conceptualization of the superintendent during this period.

**Superintendent as applied social scientist.** Beginning after World War II, the dominant concept of the superintendent as democratic educational statesman was replaced by the notion of the superintendent as applied social scientist (Callahan, 1966). The superintendent in this era (mid-1950s to mid-1970s) was a person who understood human beings and organizations and who would use this understanding to run the organization effectively (Callahan, 1966). During this era, education continually evolved due to forces such as the growth and increased relevance of education research, fluctuations in the nation’s economy, wars, changes in the status of the family, international unrest, and the influence of special-interest groups. These changes also contributed to the evolution of the superintendency (Fensch & Wilson, 1964). Additionally, social justice issues, such as civil rights for minority Americans and women, and the resulting social tension of this period put added strain and greater responsibility on the superintendent to respond to these external pressures (Brunner, et al., 2002; Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Callahan (1966) identified four major factors as the most influential in the shift of the superintendent’s predominant conceptualized role from democratic leader to applied social scientist. The first was a growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership as it came under fire for being too idealistic. The second factor was the rapid development of the social sciences during and after World War II, which gave hope to superintendents that this knowledge would allow them to cope with their difficult jobs more adequately, as many scholars concluded that the social sciences were at the core of superintendents’

administrative work (Kowalski, 2005b). The third factor was the work of the Kellogg Foundation, which from 1950 to 1960 spent more than seven million dollars, a substantial sum at the time, on educational administration training at eight major universities. The fourth factor was a resurgence of criticism of public education in the 1950s, which coincided with the apparent end of school segregation, families relocating from cities to the suburbs, and national defense concerns that intensified in response to the escalating Cold War.

School districts as systems have been described as socio-political, highly normative, and nested within a larger environment filled with other dynamic institutions in which social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics shape interactions (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002b). Unlike the very early superintendent role of dealing primarily with operations, the superintendent as social scientist brought about the application of systems theory and with it the need to function with a greater understanding of how external legal, political, social, and economic forces affected schools (Getzels, 1977; as cited in Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). The study of administration, historically focused on relationships within a school system, turned its focus outward towards relationships between the school system and other systems with which it was inextricably bound (Getzels, 1977; as cited in Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005). Noted Fusarelli & Fusarelli (2005), “With additional insights drawn from the fields of political science and economics, educational leaders were schooled in the principles of motivation, individual and group interaction, resource allocation, and the nature and functioning of public bureaucracies” (p. 190).

Following *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* in 1954, schools became the intended primary institution for resolving America's societal ills like discrimination (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005). The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown* targeted the racial segregation of students, but its language of justification and its force as a moral precedent encouraged not only African Americans but other groups as well to demand educational equity as a right (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Shortly after the *Brown* decision in 1957, a critical moment in defining the role of the superintendent occurred with the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The United States government considered this an extreme blow to the American ego and blamed only one institution: American schools (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Minority and poor families saw education as the way to improve conditions for their children, but the focus on improving the math and science curriculum in the wake of Sputnik has often been blamed for closing off educational opportunities for underprivileged groups (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

During the 1960s, federal and state influence on local education increased dramatically with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. As a result, superintendents found themselves responding to mandates as much as providing leadership (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Superintendents established permanent citizens' committees and began to study and apply social science tactics in part to build a reserve of good will and support for themselves in their communities (Callahan, 1966). Other significant factors of this era that changed the superintendency included encroachment by more involved citizenry and school boards and the ever-growing number of individuals and groups set

on influencing school decision making, the most powerful of which were the teacher unions (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Leadership, political acumen, reform, community responsiveness, and improved education were demanded of American educational leaders from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, and superintendents were called upon to serve as the professional advisors to school boards, to lead reforms, manage resources, and to communicate more and more with the public (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The role of the superintendent broadened in this period due in large part to growing public dissatisfaction and subsequent pressure on superintendents to communicate with the public, thereby making the superintendent a district spokesperson and community advisor (Brunner, et al., 2002).

**Superintendent as communicator.** The fifth superintendent role conceptualization, communicator, coincided with America's emergence in the mid-1970s from a manufacturing society into an information-based society, coupled with a renewed demand for school reform that gained traction in the early 1980s (Kowalski, 2001). The position of superintendent has evolved since 1812, and communication has recently been noted as perhaps the most critical skill for superintendents, along with relationship building and political acumen (Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002). Normative or role-based communication, which entailed the superintendent giving directives and suggestions to subordinates and responding to information requests from school board members, was implicit in each of the first four role conceptualizations, but the ascent of information-based social values and dynamics placed new communication expectations on superintendents (Kowalski, 2006). This shift was so significant that it

became necessary to view communication as a distinctive role conceptualization (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005).

Since the turbulent 1960s, the complexity of the superintendency has increased while superintendent authority could be seen as decreasing due in large part to information being more available to interest groups (Harris, 2009). During the mid-1970s and continuing into the early 21st century, superintendents, with this seemingly diminished power, have been expected to be even more responsive to multiple and diverse political pressure from the community, legislation, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Brunner, et al., 2002). But another interpretation is that positional power has been enhanced for effective communicators. As Brunner, et al. (2002) noted, “the rhetoric that superintendents be ‘communicators to the public’ granted them the positional power to determine what, when, how, how much, and to whom they communicated or provided information” (p. 221).

The onset of an information-based society led to stakeholders bypassing school administrators to obtain the information they desired. Consequently, stakeholders were able to thwart school-improvement efforts viewed as politically or philosophically unpopular (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). As a result, prescriptive school improvement efforts and strategies advised administrators to work collaboratively to “construct a collective vision and goals for achieving it” (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010, p. 9). The superintendent’s work is not done in isolation, but in collaboration with many others. The pursuit of a collective vision required for successful school improvement encourages superintendents to work collaboratively and communicate with principals, teachers, parents, and other taxpayers (Kowalski, 2006; Leithwood, 1995). Since about 1980, there

has been mounting evidence that communication, which can impact school culture and productivity, has become a core competency for school administrators, yet little attention has been given to the preparation of superintendents to take on this role conceptualization (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010; Kowalski & Keedy, 2005).

The superintendent as communicator remains the prominent role of the superintendent in the early 21st century, and the most effective superintendents exhibit consistent communicative behavior characterized by open, multidirectional, symmetrical and relational exchanges (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005). Kowalski & Keedy (2005) suggested that appropriate communication by a superintendent is no longer contingent on role-specific skills. Rather, it is now based on the pervasive application of relational communication, in which information is exchanged in multiple directions, with a focus on engaging others in identifying and solving problems in an organization. Superintendents must recognize that intermittent and inconsistent communication will have detrimental effects on the development of the positive relationships necessary to produce the political, social, and human capital essential for school reform (Kowalski, 2008).

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this multicase study is to explore how certain groups perceive and understand the visibility of school district superintendents, broadly speaking. The following questions will guide this study:

1. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?

2. What perceptions and understandings do school board members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
3. What perceptions and understandings do community members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
4. What perceptions and understandings do staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

### **Significance of the Study**

Superintendents are expected to be involved in their communities, and there is evidence that a superintendent's status in a community is elevated with increased community involvement (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Additionally, a study by Kowalski, et al. (2011) revealed that of the five conceptualized roles of the superintendent defined previously, school boards placed the highest level of emphasis on being an effective communicator; school boards in fact expect superintendents to be skilled communicators. Superintendents in an increasingly pluralistic society are rightly embracing collaboration as a means to accomplish goals, and getting to know the community and establishing ties is a key to this approach (Grogan & Blackmon, 2001). Involvement in the community, effective communication, and a visible presence in a community are all related concepts of which superintendents in the 21st century should take heed.

Petersen & Barnett (2005) summarized several investigational studies related to the personal and professional behavior and organizational relationships and structures superintendents establish. The findings suggest the importance of superintendents maintaining a high level of visibility and communicating clearly. As the conceptualized

roles of the superintendent have evolved over the past century, so too have the concepts of visibility and presence related to successful superintendents (Eller & Carlson, 2009). While building relationships with stakeholders, superintendents must also develop an understanding of the connections and alignment of all district dimensions, and a presence in the community helps a superintendent accomplish this (Eller & Carlson, 2009; Wilmore, 2008).

The goal of this study is to add to the research base on superintendent leadership. Additionally, and more specifically, the study intends to inform superintendents of the value visibility has on the ability to lead an organization and the effect it has on the perceived effectiveness of superintendent leadership. Assumptions of what visibility means have permeated the literature. While education leadership literature implies that visibility is important for a superintendent, and there is a general belief that it is important, there exists no empirical research on the concept of visibility itself.

### **Definition of Terms**

To clarify professional and theoretical terms and to ensure a uniform understanding of conceptual variations of terms related to this study, several definitions are provided below. A definition without a specific citation was developed by the author of the study. While the study relates specifically to school district superintendents, the terms defined are not restricted to the field of education. (Terms are in alphabetical order.)

1. *Organizational Learning*: Learning, which requires reflection, is the foundation of organizational improvement (Argyris, 1977). In the context of an organization, individuals are collectively engaged in order to produce desired results (Senge, 1990).

Organizational learning includes organizational inquiry, the instrumental learning that leads to improvement in the performance of tasks, and “inquiry through which an organization explores and restructures the values and criteria through which it defines what it means by improved performance” (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 20).

2. *Reflective Practice*: The act of deliberately pausing “to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes” (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001, p. 6). These thinking processes allow practitioners to examine beliefs, goals, and practices in order to gain new or deeper understandings that lead to improved actions (York-Barr, et al., 2001). Learning, which requires reflection, is the foundation of individual improvement (Argyris, 1977).

3. *Relational Leadership*: The relational approach to leadership emphasizes the relationships among leaders and followers rather than the characteristics of leaders and followers or leadership behaviors (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

4. *Social Impact*: This refers to the processes through which individuals or groups change the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others (Stangor, 2004). Latané (1981) defined social impact as the changes in “psychological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behavior, that occur in an individual, human or animal, as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of other individuals” (p. 343).

5. *Superintendent*: A local school district leader; a leader apart from a board of education who is charged with fulfilling administrative duties, including day-to-day operations of a school district (Edwards, 2007; Sharp & Walter, 2004). The primary roles of the superintendent are teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social

scientist, and communicator (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005a). Superintendents have historically blended these multiple roles (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

6. *Transformational Leadership*: A type of leadership in which leaders satisfy followers' higher-level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. Transformational leaders help followers grow, stimulating and inspiring followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their own leadership capabilities (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Transformational leaders are morally uplifting, and the transformational leader is "truly concerned with the desires and needs of followers and cares about their individual development" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 14).

7. *Visibility*: For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon of visibility is defined as absence and presence. Absence is the state of not being present, while presence is the fact or condition of being present (Merriam-Webster, 2011). These terms remain to be fully understood and defined based on the proposed study.

The next section provides the overall organization of the dissertation. The organizational plan that follows includes a brief description of the study's five chapters: 1) Introduction, 2) Review of the Literature, 3) Research Methods and Design, 4) Data Analysis, Findings, and Discussions, and 5) Conclusions and Implications.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. This first chapter provided an introduction to the study, its background, the purpose statement and research questions, the significance of the study, a definition of terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two provides a review of the pertinent literature for the study. Chapter Three describes the study's research methodology and design. Chapter Four provides the data

resulting from the study in both narrative and numerical format. Chapter Five concludes the study and includes implications for educational leaders and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

When seeking information on the concept of visibility in leadership literature, specifically superintendency literature, one finds that the concept has been empirically studied very little, if at all. Thus, while several authors recognize and have written about the importance of visibility for leaders (Carucci, 2006; Dlott, 2007; Eblin, 2011; Johnson, 1996; Keohne, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Phillips, 1992), their ideas and comments are typically vague and not supported by empirical research. As a result, what follows is a loosely coupled collection of research-based literature, including the topics of leadership, communication, reflective practice, and social psychology.

To address the dearth of research-supported literature on visibility, the purpose of this multicase study was to explore how the visibility (absence/presence) of school district superintendents is perceived and understood, broadly speaking. The first chapter reviewed the literature on the superintendency position. Chapter Two reviews literature relevant to the concept of visibility. The Chapter Two review is divided into five sections: 1) Context of Visibility: Relationships and Communication Interconnected, 2) Concept of Visibility: Social Psychology and Leadership Considered, 3) Concept of Visibility: Absence and Presence Discussed, 4) Summary of Chapter Two: Literature Review and Discussion, and 5) Conceptual Framework of Study: Model and Description.

### **Context of Visibility: Relationships and Communication Interconnected**

Examining literature related to the concepts of leadership and communication provides the context of visibility. The leadership theories included in this literature review have a strong relational component. There is an underlying assumption that

visibility is a key component to successfully developing relationships between leaders and followers, whether there exists a leader to follower ratio of one-to-one or one-to-many (Conrad & Poole, 2005). Leadership is a symbolic, communicative endeavor (Hackman & Johnson, 2009), and being visible when communicating is an important aspect of the communication process (Conrad & Poole, 2005). Further, an effective leader understands that communication is a transactional process, and effective communicators simultaneously transmit and receive messages (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). This requires visibility, which can come in many forms of communication, including written, electronic (such as videos, audio, and tweets), and face-to-face. All of these forms of visibility contribute to a leader's ability to communicate effectively and control their message. Communication and relationships involve shared interpretations and understandings; therefore, visibility is an important part of both.

This large section of the literature review establishes the connection between leadership, communication, and visibility and is divided into two sections: 1) Relational Leadership and 2) Communication Theory.

### **Relational Leadership**

Five primary approaches to understanding and explaining leadership have evolved over approximately the last century: 1) the traits approach, 2) the situational approach, 3) the functional approach, 4) the relational approach, and 5) the transformational approach (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Although literature focused on leadership approaches generally falls into these primary categories, only two are important for the discussion of visibility: the relational approach and the transformational approach. The relational approach to leadership shifts the focus from the characteristics of leaders and followers

and leadership behaviors to the relationships among leaders and followers, while the transformational approach is considered a more complex view of leadership but at its core is about relationships (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

General leadership literature identifies several examples of organizations and leaders that appear to have capitalized on focusing on relational aspects of leadership to attain excellent long-term results. Successful leaders may share advice such as “If you haven’t visited every plant this year, get out there and do it” (Iacocca, 2007, p. 169), noting the importance of personal connections and relationship building. Maxwell (1998) noted that leaders often get bogged down with managerial duties and may have difficulty leaving the office, but to be truly effective, a leader must afford the effort to build relationships. “A leader has to do it, no matter how many obstacles there might be” (p. 107). This can be problematic, because as Maxwell (2005) noted, “Leaders are often agenda driven, task focused, and action oriented because they like to get things done. They hole up in their offices, rush to meetings, and ignore everyone they pass in the halls along the way” (p. 213). Some authors (Bolman & Deal, 2000; Donaldson, 2006) have called for changes in leadership training programs to include a new focus on relationship building in order for leaders to develop relational capacities.

When leaders are producing extraordinary results, “we can always detect a set of relationships that are vibrant and engaging. The quality of genuine conversation among leaders in such relationships is different” (Carucci, 2006, p. 14). Carucci also noted that there may be no greater device for a leader than a one-on-one informal exchange:

At the end of the day, there is no need to search out elaborate ways to engage those with whom you lead. Sitting down for a leisurely cup of coffee, in a setting

where you can and must have meaningful conversation—free of interruption, hidden agenda, and looming deadlines—will serve to enrich that conversation in ways that will undoubtedly surprise you. (p. 72)

Such interaction with an employee “will unearth perspectives, ideas, and concerns like nothing else” (Carucci, 2006, p. 72).

The establishment of a culture that values personal connections can lead organizations to tremendous success. Starbucks is one such example of a company that prides itself on positive relationships and personal connections. Starbucks leaders spend a great deal of time helping partners and employees seize opportunities to positively affect the lives of those they serve, and in doing so they build the brand (Michelli, 2007). When Starbucks staff members, as noted by Michelli (2007), understand how their efforts and contributions help the business and uplift and change lives, “they are more likely to exert the creative and passionate energy that gets noticed by customers” (p.13). At Southwest Airlines, relationships between leaders and employees are established in the field through a program called Leaders on Location. Once a year, leaders from corporate headquarters visit each location in the system, which promotes respect, friendship, and a sense of family (Grubbs-West, 2005). Southwest also commits to relationships with community and industry partners by carefully and meticulously cultivating, nurturing, and cherishing these relationships (Grubbs-West, 2005).

Relational Leadership is divided into four subsections: 1) Leader-follower, 2) Leader-member exchange, 3) Authentic, and 4) Transformational.

**Leader-follower.** Leadership, stripped to its essentials, involves only three things: a leader, followers, and a common goal (Bennis & Biederman, 2009). To a large extent,

leadership is conferred by followers; therefore, leaders must not underestimate the relational aspects of leadership (Gardner, 1990). Any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of the relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). A leader's presence in an organization facilitates an understanding of the organization and helps foster the relationships necessary to achieve the organization's goals (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) noted that one of the distinguishing qualities of successful leaders in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships. Concentrating on personal relationships is critical for managing people who are with a leader on an issue, for managing those who are in opposition, and for managing those who are uncommitted but wary and who could potentially be moved (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Social capital gained through building relationships is valuable because relationships serve as conduits for influence processes like leadership (Bono & Anderson, 2005). Blanchard (2007) noted that effective leaders value relationships with followers as well as results; both are "critical for long-term survival...[I]f you don't have followers, it's very hard to get long-term results" (p. 268). The quality of relationships varies, as leaders develop better relationships with some subordinates than others, and those who have good relationships are treated better, get more freedom on the job, and produce better results (Stangor, 2004). Those who do not have good relationships are treated more formally, are given less interesting assignments, and are less satisfied in their positions (Stangor, 2004).

Leadership theories that stress the importance of relationships are pervasive. Graen (1976) developed an early relational approach to leadership, noting that models of

leadership must acknowledge the importance of relationships. Howell and Shamir (2005) defined leadership as a relationship that is jointly produced by leaders and followers. Further, Howell and Shamir (2005) consider the follower a central figure in the role of organizational leadership. For example, a follower's admiration of a leader may actually affect the leader's self-concept and behavior. Donaldson (2006) referred specifically to school leadership when he noted that leadership models "must honor relationships as an integral dimension of leadership" (p. 37). De Pree (2004) defined leadership as "more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of information" (p. 3). Burns (1978) noted that leaders "must know much more about the hitherto nameless persons who comprise the followers of leaders" (p. 61) if they are to develop an adequate understanding of the reciprocal relationships that are formed. Burns also noted that "the most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* with one another" (p. 11). Kouzes and Posner (2006) concluded that success as a leader is wholly dependent on the capacity to build and sustain the human relationships that enable people to get extraordinary things done on a regular basis.

**Leader-member exchange.** Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) classified leadership into three domains: leader, follower, and relationship. The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) approach to leadership shifted the focus from traits of the leader and followers to the relationships they must develop, focusing specifically on the quality of the relationship between a leader and follower (Graen, 1976; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). The central concept of the LMX theory is that "effective leadership processes occur when leaders and followers are able to develop mature leadership relationships (partnerships) and thus gain

access to the many benefits these relationships bring” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX is considered a leadership-making process, and Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) delineated a three-phase model. The first phase, stranger, is formal in nature, as an organization’s rules dictate the roles of leaders and followers. In the second phase, acquaintanceship, more productive working relationships are built. In the third phase, partnership, leaders and followers exert mutual influence on one another and enjoy a sense of mutual trust, respect, and obligation.

The quality of a leader-follower relationship can be plotted on a continuum ranging from a low LMX to a high LMX. A link between relational quality and organizational effectiveness exists (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). This theory of leadership not only emphasizes relationships, it also highlights the importance of communication, as communication helps build and maintain partnerships (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

**Authentic.** The concept of authentic leadership as defined by George (2003) is working together toward a common goal through connectedness and a shared purpose, which build enduring relationships. An authentic leader “brings people together around a shared purpose and empowers them to step up and lead authentically in order to create value for all stakeholders” (George, 2007, p. xxxi). Authentic leaders rely on relationships built on trust in their personal and professional lives, and “The rewards of these relationships, both tangible and intangible, are long lasting” (George, 2003, p. 24). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) also referred to the notion of authentic leaders:

The art of handling relationships well, then, begins with authenticity: acting from one’s genuine feelings. Once leaders have attuned to their own vision and values,

steadied in the positive emotional range, and tuned into the emotions of the group, then relationship management skills let them interact in ways that catalyze resonance. (p. 51)

Additionally, authentic leaders engender trust and develop genuine connections with others. Followers will notice a sense of falseness and will instinctively distrust a leader who acts disingenuously or manipulatively, thereby jeopardizing hope for success (George, 2007; Goleman, et al., 2002).

Effective leaders bond with those around them not because of position or title in an organization, but because of their relationships with others (Sanborn, 2006). This kind of emotional connection occurs only when a leader is genuinely concerned about others; it cannot be achieved through “gimmicks, tricks, or shortcuts. When you care for others—even those you have only limited personal contact with—it shows” (Sanborn, 2006, p. 55). According to Maxwell (1999), a leader can do three things to cultivate good relationships:

1. Have a Leader’s Head—Understand People. Treat people as individuals, understand them, and connect with them.
2. Have a Leader’s Heart—Love People. According to physicist Albert Einstein, “man is here for the sake of other men.”
3. Extend a Leader’s Hand—Help People. Focus on what you can put into people rather than what you can get out of them, they’ll respect you. (pp. 106-108)

The mark that a leader leaves in his or her life—his or her legacy—is “most often left not in stone and steel, in history and politics, or poetry and literature, but in the lives

of other people” (Sanborn, 2006, p. 102). Healthy relationships result in a leader being able to effectively influence. As De Pree (2004) noted, “Leaders need to foster environments and work processes within which people can develop high-quality relationships—relationships with each other, relationships with the group with which we work, relationships with our clients and customers” (p. 25). Former oil company executive J. Paul Getty (as cited in Maxwell, 2002) stated, “It doesn’t make much difference how much other knowledge or experience an executive possesses; if he [or she] is unable to achieve results through people, he [or she] is worthless as an executive” (p. 87).

**Transformational.** As previously noted, the transformational approach is one of five primary approaches for understanding and explaining leadership that have evolved over approximately the last 100 years. The transformational approach to leadership emerged as a new perspective in the 1970s and was first outlined by James MacGregor Burns (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Burns (1978) compared traditional leadership, a transactional approach, to a more potent type of leadership that he labeled transformational. Transformational leaders are not focused only on leader traits or behavioral qualities; rather, transformational leadership is a complex, dynamic style of leadership that has much to do with human interactions. As the transformational leader lifts his or her followers to higher levels of morality and engages their imaginations to accomplish something that enlarges their lives and, by definition, always involves values (Keohane, 2010; Parks & Sanna, 1999). A transactional leader motivates followers by satisfying basic human needs such as shelter, safety, and belonging. Transformational leaders may satisfy these same basic needs, but in addition they satisfy followers’ higher-

level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. Transformational leaders help followers grow, inspiring them to achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their own leadership capabilities (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

Transformational leaders are morally uplifting, and the transformational leader is “truly concerned with the desires and needs of followers and cares about their individual development” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 14).

Several researchers (as cited in Hackman & Johnson, 2009) have attempted to describe the common characteristics of extraordinary or transformational leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Maxwell, 2011; Neff & Citrin, 1999; Peters, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Five primary characteristics emerged from these efforts: transformational leaders are creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). The researchers also noted that transformational leaders can convert followers into leaders themselves, since the five characteristics are typically filtered throughout organizations. Transformational leadership moves members of an organization to a relationship of mutual commitment and interdependence (Johnson, 1996). It has become a sort of transcending leadership, the type of leadership “to which all leaders, and all followers, would seem to aspire” (Kellerman, 2010, p. 104).

Scholars who write about transformational leadership often include a discussion of charismatic leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Gardner, 1990; Hackman & Johnson, 2009; Keohane, 2010). They frequently discuss negative aspects of charismatic leadership, the type based on exploitive, authoritative, and domineering behaviors, or behaviors that fail to empower followers or lead others to destructive or even evil ends and can be dangerous to the future of an organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Keohane,

2010). As an example, in describing Good-to-Great companies, defined as companies that show industry-leading earnings and growth results sustained for at least fifteen years, Collins (2001) delineated five levels of leadership. Each Good-to-Great company had a Level 5 leader, described as a transformational leader, at the helm during the period studied. Collins' research indicates that charismatic leaders, however, are negatively associated with sustainability. Charismatic leaders often create unrealistic expectations, feel pressure to continue the magic, create a sense of dependency, and make employees reluctant to disagree with them; they also might have very limited range (Nadler & Tushman, 1990). This view of charisma is contrary to authors who consider charisma at minimum a helpful trait for a leader to possess, provided that the leader is well-intentioned (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Gardner, 1990). Leaders who possess charisma are rare, and their impact is hard to predict (Schein, 2010).

Although the literature acknowledges negative aspects of charisma, by definition the focus of transformational leadership is a well-intentioned leader (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 2003), and that will remain the focus in this section of the literature review. Bass and Riggio (2006) noted, "Transformational leadership has much in common with charismatic leadership, but charisma is only part of transformational leadership" (p. 5). They also noted that as a concept, leadership is charismatic and followers seek to identify with and emulate the leader.

Defining leadership as a communicative process, Hackman and Johnson (2009) stated that charismatic leaders excel in three core functions of communication: relationship building, visioning, and influencing. Further, they stated that charismatic leaders are often considered the superstars of leadership. Gardner (1990) perhaps put

charisma in an appropriate context when he stated that “to the extent that the word *charisma* has any use at all in serious contemporary discussions of leadership, it should probably be confined to leader-constituent relationships in which the leader has an exceptional gift for inspirational, non-rational communication, and the followers’ response is characterized by awe, reverence, devotion, or emotional dependence” (pp. 35-36). Bono and Anderson (2005) noted that charismatic individuals are admired, trusted, and respected. When motivated by the notion of transformational leadership, charismatic leaders can bring a sense of optimism and enthusiasm to an organization in order to achieve goals and further advance the organization’s vision (Bono & Anderson, 2005).

### **Communication Theory**

Leadership is first and foremost a communication-based endeavor, and the higher the level of leadership, the higher the demand for communication competence (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Hackman and Johnson (2009) defined leadership as “human (symbolic) communication, which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs” (p. 11). The connection between leadership, interpersonal relationships, and communication is also evident in definitions of the term communication, such as the following definition by Conrad and Poole (2005):

Communication encompasses “both information exchange and the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships” (p. 109). Iacocca (2007) simply referred to communication as “the lubricant that makes an organization run” (p. 169), a fitting play on words from the former Chrysler chief executive officer. Schein (2010) noted that individuals who form a group, such as within an organization, must establish a “system of

communication and a language that permits setting goals and interpreting and managing what is going on” (p. 3).

A successful organization that values personal connections is Southwest Airlines, which has a well-established culture that fosters the notion of leaders connecting with employees (Grubbs-West, 2005). Williams (2002) wrote extensively about Southwest Airlines and noted that the company leaders view the world as not just being filled with “deadlines, bottom lines, meetings, agenda, strategies, and competition,” but also as a place of personal relationships (p. 47). Herb Kelleher, CEO of Southwest Airlines, expressed the following about the importance of communication (as cited in Williams, 2002): “It can’t be rigid, it can’t be formal. It has to proceed directly from the heart. It has to be spontaneous. Communication is not about getting up and giving formal speeches. It’s saying, ‘Hey, Dave, how are you doing? Hear your wife is sick—is she okay?’ That sort of thing” (pp. 47-48).

Communication Theory is divided into two subsections: 1) Leadership communication and 2) Superintendent communication.

**Leadership communication.** From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, researchers identified and labeled the dimensions of leadership communication that are related to tasks and relationships (Fielder, 1967; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). A variety of researchers using different techniques drew similar conclusions about task-oriented and interpersonal-oriented communication. Various leadership models refer to task-oriented communication as production-oriented, initiating structure, and concern for production. Alternatively, interpersonal-oriented communication is referred to as employee-oriented, consideration, and concern for people (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

A task approach to leadership communication focuses on the successful completion of tasks, while an interpersonal approach is mostly concerned with relationships (Fielder, 1967; Northouse, 2001; Goleman, et al., 2002). A leader who is a strong communicator in the interpersonal dimension is “most concerned with promoting harmony and fostering friendly interactions, nurturing personal relationships that expand the connective tissue with the people they lead” and focuses on the emotional needs of employees over work goals (Goleman, et al., 2002, pp. 64-65). Although the research treats the interpersonal dimension as a mostly positive aspect of a leader’s potential communication repertoire, not all authors would agree, as there are several drawbacks to this communication approach, particularly if a leader relies on it solely. Decisions are not necessarily consistent with the work that is at hand, procedures are secondary to the decisions that make people happy, and key goals are rarely met (Harvard Business Essentials, 2005). However, an over-reliance on the task approach to communication can diminish motivation, particularly if a task is repetitive or not clearly defined (Northouse, 2001).

Empirical research has addressed these two contrasting leadership communication styles, and the results from several studies show similar results (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Three of the most significant attempts to identify the communication styles of leaders were 1) the Michigan leadership studies, 2) the Ohio State leadership studies, and 3) Blake and McCauley’s leadership grid (Northouse, 2001; Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

***The Michigan leadership studies.*** Conducted shortly after World War II, the University of Michigan studies focused on the effect of leaders’ communication on the performance of small groups and attempted to discover which leadership communication

contributed to effective group performance (Northouse, 2001; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Researchers examined two high- and low-performing teams within two organizations in an attempt to identify the factors contributing to satisfactory and unsatisfactory leadership communication (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). They identified two styles of leadership communication: production-orientation and employee-orientation. Production-orientated communication focuses on the production aspects of the job. Employee-orientated communication predictably focuses on relationships between people and approached employees with a strong human relations emphasis. The researchers initially believed that these communication styles were opposing and that a leader could choose one or the other or remain neutral, but follow-up studies suggested it was possible for leaders to adopt both communication styles (Northouse, 2001). Leaders who communicated high concern for both production and people were found to be more effective than leaders who exhibited only one of the leadership communication styles (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

*The Ohio State leadership studies.* At about the same time that the Michigan studies were taking place, researchers at The Ohio State University attempted to identify the factors associated with leadership communication and focused on how individuals acted when they were leading a group or an organization (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). A questionnaire called the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) was distributed to military personnel, who were asked to rate the communication style of their commanders. The subordinates identified the number of times their leaders engaged in certain types of behaviors. Researchers found that responses clustered around two types of leadership communication behaviors: consideration and initiating structures.

Consideration consists of interpersonal-oriented communication and describes the extent to which a leader exhibits concern for the welfare of others in his or her organization (Fleishman, 1973). Considerate leadership communication expresses affection for followers; camaraderie, respect, and trust; the consideration of followers' feelings, opinions, and ideas; and the maintenance of an amiable working environment, as opposed to inconsiderate leaders, who criticized followers in front of others and made threats (Northouse, 2001; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Initiating structure communication refers to task-related behaviors such as initiating action, the assignment of tasks, and the determination of clear-cut standards of performance (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Researchers concluded from the study that to be an effective leader, one must communicate relatively well regarding both task behaviors and relationship behaviors (Northouse, 2001).

***Blake and McCauley's leadership grid.*** Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial Grid first appeared in the early 1960s. Blake and McCauley later renamed the Managerial Grid the Leadership Grid (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). This grid was designed to explain how leaders help their organizations achieve their goals through two communication styles: concern for production and concern for people. Concern for production refers to how a leader is concerned with task behaviors, and concern for people refers to an interpersonal orientation, such as how a leader relates to the people in an organization, and involves building organizational commitment and trust, promoting the personal worth of employees, and promoting good social relations (Blake & Mouton, 1964). The Leadership Grid joins these concerns in a model with two intersecting axes: the horizontal axis represents a leader's concern for production and the vertical axis

represents a concern for people. This model identifies five communication styles: 1) impoverished management—low concern for tasks, low concern for relationships; 2) authority compliance—high concern for tasks, low concern for relationships; 3) middle-of-the-road management—adequately concerned with tasks and relationships; 4) country club management—low concern for tasks, high concern for relationships; and 5) team management—high concern for tasks and relationships (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Leaders generally adopt a dominant communication style but might shift to another in some situations. The most effective style is team management (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

**Superintendent communication.** In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ability to communicate is perhaps the most critical skill of a school district superintendent (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005). In fact, one of the most frequently voiced concerns about superintendents by school board members is a failure to communicate. Specifically, this concern is characterized by superintendents who disseminate material selectively and exhibit little interest in exchanging information with others (Kowalski, 2006). Kamrath and Brunner (2011) noted that community members desire superintendents who possess three important personal characteristics: (a) traditional power profiles, (b) visible involvement in a community, and (c) strong communication skills. They also noted, however, that “difficult tensions were created when community members required, at once, visibly involved and authoritarian superintendents” (p. 14), as dominant, decisive leaders can create distance between schools and their communities because decisions tend to be made without collaborating with broader publics.

Generally, when hiring a leader, organizations determine the essential skills they desire. The ability to communicate well is almost without exception one of the most

critical elements (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Kamrath and Brunner (2011) noted that over half of the community members who participated in a study on superintendent turnover indicated that in order for a superintendent to be successful, he or she must “possess and demonstrate strong communication skills” (p. 7). Findings such as these emphasize the importance of communication, as communication gives meaning to the work done in school districts and forges perceptions of reality (Kowalski, 1998; as cited in Kowalski & Brunner, 2010).

Communication is central to the well-being of an educational organization because it is the key for such organizations to effectively overcome the institutional culture of schools that far too often dooms reform initiatives (Schein, 1992). Superintendents are expected to be effective communicators who use information and interactions to resolve conflict and change behavior to ultimately improve schools. Specifically, effective superintendents articulate “the importance of organizational culture, the reasons why school reform has become essential, and the critical nexus between culture and change” (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005, p. 213). Effective system leaders engage the public coherently and are able to inspire the vision for short- and long-term reform (Fullan, 2005). A visionary superintendent continually identifies and communicates a school district’s vision (Deal & Peterson, 2000).

In simple terms, part of communicating a vision is to pay attention to what parents, staff, and students are saying (Deal & Peterson, 2000). Maxwell (1999) noted, however, that while effective communicators are able to make simple what is complex, too often educators fall into the trap of making complex what is simple. Thus, quality interpersonal conversation, facility in connecting with the public, and the ability to

convey a worthwhile, easy-to-understand message are vital components of effective communication for a superintendent, because engaging the public through the written word does not in isolation effectively communicate a worthwhile message (Dlott, 2007). The notion of a worthwhile message warrants emphasizing: A superintendent who connects without an important message will appear shallow or ineffective (Dlott, 2007). Leaders also must recognize the detrimental effects that intermittent and inconsistent communication can have on the ability to cultivate productive relationships (Kowalski, 2011).

Hiring leaders who have the ability to communicate and connect with people may not in isolation be the answer to hiring successful executives for school or business. While these traits can be extremely valuable, the quality of relationships that develop as a result should never be underestimated (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005). Through the process of communicating with an organization's stakeholders, leaders get to know people for the benefit of the organization. Kouzes and Posner (2006) stated the following:

Getting others excited about future possibilities is not about creating better PowerPoint presentations. It's not about better public-speaking skills, although that would help. And it's certainly not about being more charming or charismatic. It's about intimacy. It's about familiarity. It's about empathy. The kind of communication needed to enlist others in a common vision requires understanding constituents at a much deeper level than we normally find comfortable. It requires understanding others' strongest yearnings and their deepest fears. It requires a profound awareness of their joys and their sorrow. It requires experiencing life as they experience it. (p. 211)

This is a dramatic change from how a typical leader views his or her role in communicating a vision for the future. People in organizations want to hear how their dreams and hopes will be fulfilled—“they want to see themselves in the picture of the future that the leader is painting” (Kouzes & Posner, 2006, p. 208). The very best leaders understand that leadership is about inspiring and communicating a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Conrad and Poole (2005) noted that the message a leader delivers carries “meaning at both content and relational levels—they provide information and they make a statement about the interpersonal relationship that exists between the communicators” (p. 135). Getting to know the many members and constituencies of the organization requires a deep level of communication and visibility in the organization and an authentic presence that may resemble aspects of relational and transformational leadership.

School administrators have ever-increasing communication expectations placed upon them by a variety of school district and community stakeholders (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents are expected to be involved in their communities, and there is evidence that increased involvement in the community elevates a superintendent’s community status (Kowalski, et al., 2011). Of the five conceptualized roles of the superintendent as defined in Chapter 1, school boards place the highest level of emphasis on being an effective communicator. Fullan (2005) offered valuable advice to school leaders, telling them to do three things: communicate, communicate, and communicate.

### **Concept of Visibility: Social Psychology and Leadership Considered**

This section is divided into two subsections: 1) Social Psychology and 2) Leadership.

#### **Social Psychology**

As previously defined, the concept of visibility is understood to be absence and presence. Because research related to visibility is limited, there is value in including in this literature review a discussion of visibility from the field of social psychology. While not specifically related to leadership, educational administration, or organizational learning, social psychological literature based on human behavior and social interaction is relevant.

There are certain phases of psychology that study the relation of the individual organism to the social group it belongs to (Mead, 1934). These phases constitute social psychology as a branch of general psychology. In an organization, reality is a social construct, a sociology of knowledge dealing with both the empirical variety of knowledge and also with the processes by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially established as reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Individuals influence the social group, which in turn constructs the reality that exists in an organization as people adjust attitudes and behaviors to the actions of others in a given situation (Charon, 2010).

The perspective of social psychology, to include symbolic interactionism, is useful when considering the absence and presence of leaders. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the activities that take place between and among actors (Blumer, 1969). Consider Gestalt psychology, which emphasizes perception in human behavior: “the human being acts according to how the situation is perceived” (Charon, 2010, p. 22).

Social psychology that developed from this perspective focused on interpersonal influence. The focus is not on society or the person, but on the present situation one is in; “the individual is influenced by forces in the immediate environment, most importantly other people” (Charon, 2010, p. 23).

Charon (2010) noted that Goffman’s approach to the study of social interaction is described as dramaturgical, meaning that he viewed social life as something of a staged drama. Goffman also viewed interaction as something of a religious ceremony filled with ritual observances. A third theme, self, helps form the core of Goffman’s perspective on social interaction. Goffman’s focus on the self is not defined as the self-concept carried by an actor from situation to situation; rather, it is the socially situated self developed in and governing specific interactions (Charon, 2010). Goffman’s (1959) analysis of the dramaturgical process of social interaction begins with the following observation:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (p. 1)

Further, Goffman (1959) states that observers, if unacquainted with an individual, can glean clues from that person's conduct and appearance in order to consider previous experience with individuals similar to the one before them, or to apply untested stereotypes to the individual being observed. When an individual appears in the presence of others, there is usually a reason for this mobilization of activity, as she likely desires to convey an impression to others that is in her interest to convey (Goffman, 1959). Human beings are understood to be social, interactional, and symbolic by their very nature, and they seek to be understood in terms of what they do rather than who they are (Charon, 2010). Perhaps one of the most evident means by which an individual shows himself or herself to be situationally present is through the disciplined management of personal appearance, including the choice of clothing, make-up, hair style, and other adornments (Goffman, 1963). "In public places in Western society, the male of certain classes is expected to present himself in the situation neatly attired, shaven, his hair combed, hands and face clean; female adults have similar and further obligations" (Goffman, 1963, p. 25).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained the social reality of everyday life using a continuum that characterized individuals as progressively anonymous as they are removed from being present in a face-to-face situation. At one end of the continuum are those with whom one frequently and intensively interacts in face-to-face situations. At the other end are highly anonymous abstractions, which by their very nature can never be available in face-to-face interaction. "Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them. As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life" (p. 33) and is

affected by the relative absence and presence of individuals such as leaders (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The face-to-face situation is the most important experience in social interaction, and all other experiences are derivatives of it as social interaction becomes progressively anonymous the farther away people are from the face-to-face situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Goffman (1963) noted that when individuals come into one another's immediate presence, they engage in the communicative process even when nothing is spoken. They ascribe significance to things such as bodily appearance and personal acts like "dress, bearing, movement and position, sound level, physical gestures such as waving or saluting, facial decorations, and broad emotional expression" (Goffman, 1963, p. 33). An individual, generally, is aware that a certain aspect of his or her activity is available for all others present to perceive; therefore, individuals tend to modify activity with its public character or public perception in mind (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman (1963) may have provided a justification for a leader's presence when he stated that there is "body symbolism, an idiom of individual appearances and gestures that tends to call forth in the actor what it calls forth in the others, the others drawn from those, and only those, who are immediately present" (Goffman, 1963, p. 34). In other words, only individuals who are present will be perceived by others as participating in a social situation, although absence may contain meaning as well. For example, an individual may realize that he or she will not be willing or able to comply with an expected level of involvement and will refrain from entering the situation in the first place (Goffman, 1963).

## **Leadership**

There are no secret formulas, Sparks (2004) noted, for establishing positive connections. It may very well “involve something as simple as looking someone in the eye, turning our body toward the person, or setting aside distractions so that we can give our full attention to someone” (p. 40). Leaders learn that it is the simple things, such as being “present or being more authentically who they are, that produces a long-lasting impact on their organization” (Sparks, 2004, p. 40). A leader in the field of industry, Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, suggested the following (Takala & Kemppainen, 2007):

Good business leaders create a vision, articulate the vision, passionately own the vision, and relentlessly drive it to completion. Above all else, though, good leaders are open. They go up, down, and around their organization to reach people. They don't stick to the established channels. They're informal. They're straight with people. They make a religion out of being accessible. They never get bored telling their story. (p. 118)

The preceding example resembles common advice from successful leaders to those currently in leadership roles or those who aspire to lead. It appears that the concepts of leaving one's office, sociability, informal connections, walking through the halls, engaging in genuine conversations, and generally being accessible have played a significant role in many leaders' ability to remain visible in their organizations, which in turn have allowed them to further contribute to company success and advance the goals of their respective organizations.

At Southwest Airlines, one of the top five best companies to work for in America according to Fortune Magazine, new leaders are told, “Don’t try to learn your job. Your first priority is to get to know your people!” (Grubbs-West, 2005, p. 97). Southwest’s executives use the same elevators as everyone else, they take time to say hello and acknowledge others, and they get to know their employees. Southwest Airlines executives are expected to ascribe to a leadership style called GTHOOYO, an acronym for Get The Heck Out Of Your Office, better known as Management by Walking Around (Grubbs-West, 2005). In short, they are visible.

This large section about leadership is divided into three subsections: 1) Social influence, 2) Politicians, and 3) Superintendents.

**Social influence.** The concept of social influence, or social impact, refers to the processes through which individuals or groups change the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others (Stangor, 2004). A general framework of social influence, Social Impact Theory, was developed by Latané (1981), who defined social impact as the changes in “psychological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behavior, that occur in an individual, human or animal, as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of other individuals” (p. 343). The amount of influence an individual or group feels is a function of the strength, immediacy, and the type or quality of presence exhibited by others. Strength in this context refers to the power, importance, or intensity of a source determined by factors such as the source’s status, age, prior relationships with others, or future power over others. Immediacy in this context is defined as closeness in time or space, while the number of sources refers primarily to the idea that there is strength in numbers (Parks &

Sanna, 1999). An individual will experience a greater impact “the higher the status, the more immediate the influence, and the greater the number of other people affecting him or her” (Latané, 1981, p. 344).

Forgas and Williams (2001) outlined a framework similar to Social Impact Theory that is useful for examining the concept of influence. They generally based the levels of influence on immediacy, directness, and conflict of interests or disagreement (Forgas & Williams, 2001, p. 189). This model also includes a discussion of an influencing party of some type, such as a leader (Forgas & Williams, 2001). Related to presence, Social Impact Theory predicts responses to social stimuli without specifying the process; however, social influence is determined by distance, and the frequency of memorable interactions is heavily determined by distance (Jackson, 1986; Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonovento, & Zheng, 1995).

Leadership is a social relationship characterized by disproportionate social influence, meaning that an individual’s influence on a group or organization is greater than that of the other members (Shamir, 2007). There is no shortage of leadership definitions that suggest a leader’s influence is created in part by visibility and other practices. Consider the following sampling compiled by Hackman & Johnson (2009, p. 12):

- Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2007, p. 3).
- Leadership is social influence. It means leaving a mark, it is initiating and guiding, and the result is change (Manning & Curtis, 1988, p. 4).
- Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about

what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives (Yukl, 2006, p. 8).

- A leader [can be defined as] a person who influences individuals and groups within an organization, helps them in the establishment of goals, and guides them toward achievement of those goals, thereby allowing them to be effective (Nahavandi, 2006, p. 4).

The concept of influence very often comports with a persistent myth associating leadership with rank. While positional power has value to a leader, some authors contend that leadership does not come strictly from a position; rather, it is a process—a process that is observable, understandable, and learnable and that inspires followers to pursue common goals (Keohane, 2010; Kouzes, 1999). Thus, influence can be understood as a positive, power-sharing dynamic, rather than a power-hoarding or power-wielding one. Effective leaders often get their followers to participate in leadership within their organization (Stangor, 2004).

Consider an example of the educational leader in the context of social impact or influence. The status of the leader plays a significant role in decision making and in influencing others within the organization to adhere to group norms or to perform certain tasks. A leader may be able to influence another rather effectively due to immediacy, also known as proximity or presence, such as when a leader gives a response in private rather than in a group (Wren, 1999). A leader must maintain presence throughout the organization in order to maximize the impact of immediacy. Effective leadership involves

the creative use of social influence, including presence, to produce desired outcomes (Wren, 1999; Stangor, 2004).

**Politicians.** The political aspects of organizational leadership as defined by Bolman and Deal (2000) emphasize that no strategy will work without a power base. Effective leaders build networks and coalitions by first figuring out whose help is needed and then by developing meaningful relationships with those people, because when they are needed, they need to be accessible immediately. The most visible leaders occupy institutional roles or offices that confer upon them a favorable asymmetry of influence, relative to others (Keohane, 2010). Visibility invites opportunities for frequent interactions, and while these can be either positive or negative, many theorists assert that frequent interactions between people can promote a positive environment. A leader must be seen, and the interactions and connections leaders make require a degree of visibility, as good leaders are not only competent and can get things done, but they also intentionally connect to the people they lead (Carucci, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Maxwell, 2005). Alternatively, visibility of ineffective leaders—for example, those who micromanage the work of their team members—may lead to a negative environment (Eblin, 2011). A leader rendered ineffective because of his or her own personal insecurity or a tyrant who makes followers believe they have an obligation to obey will likely not be able to use visibility as a means to connect with followers in the same way as an effective leader (Eblin, 2011; Keohane, 2010).

Leadership is a people business, first and foremost, so one of the greatest mistakes a leader can make is spending too much time in his or her office and not enough time out among people (Maxwell, 2005). Consequently, when leaders allow others to see them,

including flaws, passions, convictions, questions, uncertainty, pride in a job well done, and delight in others in the organization, a context is set for them in which being seen is less a risk and more an opportunity to be appreciated and to grow (Carucci, 2006). Furthermore, Dlott (2007) noted, “Visibility is very important to connecting with community members as people feel a sense of comfort and security in seeing their leader” (p. 89).

Political leaders in particular must be visible in order for constituents to see leadership activity and examples of confidence (Maxwell, 1998). A political candidate being elected president of the United States, for example, has as much to do with that candidate’s ability to connect with an audience as any other factor (Maxwell, 1998). During U.S. presidential primaries, for example, candidates vividly recall the concerns and needs of citizens they have heard from by describing conversations that may have happened over coffee or at a county fair, interactions that can occur only by being visible and accessible (Keohane, 2010). Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter provide a well-known example of the need to connect with an audience (Maxwell, 2010). During their final presidential debate in 1980, Carter came across as cold and impersonal while Reagan was engaged with his audience and even with Carter (Maxwell, 2010). Reagan, dubbed the Great Communicator, used his ability to connect to win the 1980 presidential election over Carter (Maxwell, 2010).

Visibility certainly benefited Reagan as he developed meaningful connections with audiences (Dlott, 2007), and Bill Clinton also craved human contact and drew energy from crowds (Keohane, 2010). Clinton may have equaled Reagan’s ability to connect one-on-one as well as on camera, and he also mastered the interview and talk

show formats (Maxwell, 2010). In an attempt to foster a greater sense of connectedness with the American people than his opponent, George H. W. Bush, Clinton used visibility to develop connections, including an appearance on a late night talk show, *Arsenio*, during which he played the saxophone (Maxwell, 1998). Clinton's ability to connect with the public contributed significantly to his successful 1992 presidential campaign, and he clearly took communication to a level beyond that of a typical politician at that time (Maxwell, 2010).

Historical analysis of presidential leadership shows that visibility is central to a president's effectiveness and legacy (Phillips, 1992). While not necessarily considered a skilled leader during the time of his presidency, the history books have esteemed Abraham Lincoln, and Lincoln's visibility contributed significantly to his being considered by many to be the greatest president in U.S. history (Phillips, 1992). Lincoln's advancement as a politician depended largely on his visibility and his abilities as a speaker during an era when speeches were crucial in campaigning, and he was able to convince others to see the world as he did through storytelling (Keohane, 2010). Lincoln's leadership philosophy has been called roving leadership, being in touch, and getting out of the ivory tower. One of the keys to Lincoln's success was his ability to get out of his office and circulate among military troops (Phillips, 1992). While he relied heavily on speeches to communicate his agenda, being visible to large groups was not all that he relied on, as one of Lincoln's primary leadership principles was "Loyalty is more often won through private conversation than in any other way" (Phillips, 1992, p. 161).

**Superintendents.** Successful politicians are in tune with the heartbeat of their constituents. Educational leaders must also be attuned to the needs of the community and

must be ever-present (Langley & Jacobs, 2006). Superintendents could learn from effective politicians who know that the nature and quality of the connections people have with one another are more important than almost any other factor in determining results (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). While often skilled at marshalling processes and resources to solve technical problems, many superintendents do not appreciate the importance and difficulty of engaging key constituencies whose behaviors affect the education of children (Heifetz, 2006). Bolman and Deal (2000) noted that rarely will “people provide their best efforts and fullest cooperation merely because they have been told to. If you want their assistance, it helps a great deal if they know you, like you, and see you” (p. 169).

Staff, students, community members, and school board members desire and expect district leaders who are visible and who will develop and maintain a presence within a district and in a community (Johnson, 1996; Kamrath & Brunner, 2011; Kowalski, et al., 2011). Success in the position may largely depend on the superintendent’s visibility (Eller & Carlson, 2009). The ability to articulate and circulate throughout the school system a shared vision that at once compels and inspires is critical for a superintendent (Schlechty, 2000). To be sure, the stakes are high for a school district’s top administrator, as effective superintendents who connect with all relevant stakeholders in establishing goals for their district may have a positive effect on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

While visibility is not specifically listed as a standard by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) (2000), Standard 4 is closely related to visibility: “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students

by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (p. 109).

Furthermore, the ISLLC standards propose that school leaders have high visibility in the community, develop relationships with community leaders, establish partnerships with business and higher education institutions, reach out to religious, political and service agencies, secure available community resources for their school, and ensure the appropriate and wise use of public resources (Lugg, Bulkley, Firestone, & Garner, 2002). Indeed, superintendents are encouraged to spend time out of the office in the broader community and in school buildings, and should do so without an agenda (Sharp & Walter, 1997). They must be accessible, must talk to people, and must “wave to the teacher down the hall” (Sharp & Walter, 1997, p. 122).

A study conducted in Alberta, Canada, showed that superintendents take the notion of visibility seriously and devote a considerable amount of time towards being visible in schools. Holdaway and Genge (1995), in a study of 63 superintendents from Alberta, reported that superintendents averaged seven hours per week in schools. This is likely time well spent, as superintendent visibility has been shown to affect staff morale, and staff morale can be important to good external relations for a school district. A superintendent can have only limited contact with the public, while the sum of all staff members’ contact with the public is tremendous, which can help with public relations as a whole (Sharp & Walter, 1997).

Additionally, community members appear to desire a visible and present superintendent. In a previously noted study that examined high superintendency turnover in four small Midwestern rural communities, a total of 24 community members were

interviewed, with 16 of them commenting a total of 25 times on the importance of the superintendent's visibility in the community (Kamrath & Brunner, 2011). Further, the community members desired a superintendent who is seen at school events, joins civic organizations, and is active in a local church. Community members notice and expect the presence of a community's educational leader, and maintaining a visible presence in a community and in a district's schools enhances credibility, demonstrates commitment, and can prevent many pitfalls for a superintendent (Dlott, 2007; Eller & Carlson, 2009).

The notion of the visible school superintendent is one that has evolved along with the position itself, as more than ever, superintendents must be visible, empower risk takers, encourage collaboration, and build community relationships in order to succeed (Lashway, 2002). Education leaders rely on face-to-face interactions to accomplish goals that involve people working together to influence others, making "people work" very important and complex in schools, perhaps more so than in other organizations (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002a, p. 4). As a function of leadership, visibility is operationalized in different ways as it relates to both the internal school community and the external community (Riley et al., 1995). Visibility is central to connecting with community members because it is important for people to feel a sense of comfort in seeing their leader. The position also comes with the expectation that the superintendent will be one of the most visible citizens in the community, and collaborating in a community-wide context creates opportunities for a superintendent to be visible in a broader, more public sense than within only a school-wide context (Dlott, 2007; Eller & Carlson, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Consider the hiring process for a new superintendent. The ability to connect with people likely determines a superintendent candidate's fate, as community members often "hope that their new superintendent will not only be an effective educator but also an influential and cooperative player in the community" (Johnson, 2000, p. 78). Schlechty (2000) noted that one of the primary duties for a new superintendent is to take the time to build relationships, as visibility and building relationships enable a leader to know what the interests of the community are in order to implement successful change. Being connected to the community, as Sergiovanni (2000) notes, "lets us know that we are connected to others and are part of a social group that is valuable, and thus we ourselves are valuable. Community reminds us of our responsibilities to the common good" (p. 14).

Leithwood (1995) summarized the interpersonal nature of the superintendency when he wrote that a superintendent's life appears to "be a long series of overwhelmingly interpersonal negotiations and compromises punctuated with occasional episodes of planning and goal setting" (pp. 315-316). A study by Hickcox (1992) found that ten effective superintendents spent an average of five hours per day in meetings (as cited in Leithwood, 1995). Furthermore, Cuban (1988) referenced a study published in 1973 in which it was observed that superintendents had a high concentration of verbal exchanges with people, both planned and unplanned. Petersen & Barnett (2005) summarized several investigational studies related to the personal and professional behavior and organizational relationships and structures established by superintendents. These findings suggest it is important for superintendents to maintain a high level of visibility and to clearly communicate (Peterson & Barnett, 2005).

As the conceptualized roles of the superintendent have evolved over the past century, so too has the emergence of the concept of presence related to successful superintendents (Eller & Carlson, 2009). While building relationships with stakeholders, superintendents must also develop an understanding of the connections and alignment of all district dimensions while understanding the relationships among the parts, and a presence in the community helps a superintendent to accomplish these things (Eller & Carlson, 2009; Wilmore, 2008).

Visibility is not just an issue for superintendents. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) have also identified visibility as one of 21 leadership responsibilities for school principals. The underlying purposes of visibility for the school leader include the ability to monitor, being available, establishing and earning credibility, modeling, and offering support for teachers (Riley, et al., 1995). School leaders are expected to be visible by touring schools, visiting classrooms, and seeking out and spending time with students and colleagues. Additionally, “downplaying management concerns in favor of educational ones; presiding over ceremonies, rituals, and other important occasions; and providing a unified vision of the school through proper use of words and actions” all contribute to the visibility and effectiveness of a school leader (Sergiovanni, 1999, p. 9).

School-level leaders place varying degrees of emphasis on the importance of visibility among parents, community groups, professional agencies, or the local press as compared to visibility among the people within the school environment (Riley, et al., 1995). A leader signals to others what is important and valued, and by modeling visibility, a leader takes on a symbolic leadership role in his or her organization (Kouzes

& Posner, 2002). Being visible to pupils and teachers, having an open door policy, and visiting classrooms can have a dramatic impact on school culture (Riley, et al., 1995).

### **Concept of Visibility: Absence and Presence Discussed**

Because visibility is defined as absence and presence, literature about the concepts of reflective practice and organizational learning may provide the means to examine visibility. Learning, which requires reflection, is an individual as well as an organizational event and is the foundation of individual and organizational improvement (Argyris, 1977). This large section includes two subsections: 1) Reflective Practice: Inextricability of Absence and Presence, and 2) Organizational Learning: Intentionality of Absence and Presence.

#### **Reflective Practice: Inextricability of Absence and Presence**

The concept of reflective practice is a crucial component of this study's conceptual framework. Reflection, requiring introspection and at times absence from given situations, is critical for one to lead an organization into the future. Reflection on one's presence, and on the present as one understands it, contributes to a constructive and consistent theory of reality (Mead, 1932). In order to learn from their realities, people need to become competent in taking action (being present) and simultaneously reflecting (being absent) on the action taken (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Reflection is typically characterized as learning by gaining new insights or learning through one's experience, resulting in the transformation of perspective (Johns, 2009; Mezirow, 1981). Gaining these new insights and knowledge of oneself requires reflection because knowledge is not immediately gained following experience or action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Mead (1932) defined reflection as "the operation of

inference in the field of ideation, i.e., the functioning as symbols of contents and characters of things, by means of which constructions of objects sought can be carried out” (p. 91). Simply stated, learning requires reflection (York-Barr, et al., 2001).

Reflective behavior arises only under the condition of self-consciousness, which makes possible the purposive control by an individual organism of its own conduct with reference to the social and physical environment it is involved in and reacts to (Mead, 1934). Collectively, the understanding, thinking, learning, and acting that result from organization-wide engagement of individuals provides for the greatest potential for reflective practice to improve an organization (York-Barr, et al., 2001). The nature of reflective practice and the intricate relationship that exists between presence and absence are captured by Schön’s (1983 & 1987) discussion of professional practice, in which he describes remaining on the high, hard ground that is removed from the swampy lowlands below:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems...? (Schön, 1987, p. 3)

There are those who choose the swampy lowlands. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through. Other professionals opt for the high ground. Hungry for technical rigor, devoted to an image of solid professional competence, or fearful of entering a world in which they feel they do not know what they are doing, they choose to confine themselves to a narrowly technical practice. (Schön, 1983, p. 43)

As these passages show, Schön's view of the nature of reflective practice clarifies the relationship of absence and presence and their impact on learning.

Another view of reflective practice stems from a problem-solving perspective. Leaders and managers too often narrowly define learning as problem solving, with a focus on the external environment. For learning to persist in organizations, however, leaders must look inward and reflect critically upon their own behavior (Argyris, 2008). Learning occurs whenever errors are detected and corrected; an error is any mismatch between the intended product of an action and what actually happens when the action is implemented (Argyris, 1993). Argyris and Schön (1974) identified two ways to correct errors. The first is to simply change the behavior, requiring only single-loop learning. The second way is to change the underlying beliefs or governing values that led to the error; this is double-loop learning. If someone changes actions without changing underlying beliefs, "the correction will either fail immediately or will not persevere" (Argyris, 1993, p. 50). When an error is "detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system (be it individual, group, intergroup, organizational or

interorganizational), the learning is single-loop” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68). Double-loop learning occurs when errors or mismatches are “corrected by first examining and altering the governing variables and then the actions” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68).

A simple analogy explains the difference between single- and double-loop learning. A thermostat that automatically turns on the heat in a room when the temperature drops below a predetermined number is an example of single-loop learning. If that thermostat were to ask, “Why am I set at 68 degrees?” and then explore whether or not a different temperature might more economically achieve the goal of heating the room, this would be an example of double-loop learning (Argyris, 2008). Double-loop learning challenges the status quo (Argyris, 2004). Highly skilled professionals with advanced degrees are frequently skilled at single-loop learning but are not very skilled at double-loop learning, and when single-loop learning strategies fail, leaders often become defensive, deflect criticism, and blame everyone but themselves (Argyris, 2010). Instead of only asking the question “What next?”, double-loop learning involves two additional questions: “What are we doing now?” and, perhaps most importantly, “Why?” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reflective practice facilitates double-loop learning (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

The model of single-loop and double-loop learning and the metaphor of the swampy lowlands highlight the inextricable nature of absence and presence within the context of reflective practice and, therefore, learning. A practitioner who is engaged in the swampy lowlands is present, yet she or he must become absent by withdrawing to the high, hard ground in order to reflect on the best course of action to respond to the very real, everyday problems that may defy a technical solution and are so typical of unique

human-to-human encounters (Johns, 2009). The possible objects of reflection are as varied as the kinds of observed phenomena (Schön, 1983), and to be effective, one must comfortably dwell in the swampy lowlands but must also be comfortable visiting the high, hard ground “in order to appropriately assimilate relevant theory and research into practice” (Johns, 2009, p. 5).

### **Organizational Learning: Intentionality of Absence and Presence**

In addition to considering the inextricable nature of absence and presence, it is helpful to consider visibility by examining literature related to the concept of organizational learning (Senge, 1990). Organizations that excel are those that discover how to tap into people’s commitment and their capacity to learn at all levels in the organization (Senge, 1990, p. 4). Leaders of these organizations intentionally bind the two aspects of visibility, absence and presence. As Mead (1934) noted decades ago, a human’s consciousness of himself or herself and of other individuals is equally important for his or her self-development and for the development of the organized social group he or she belongs to. Organizations come to life through the thoughts and actions of individuals acting on behalf of the organization (Argyris, 1993).

The formal practice of organizational learning is relatively new, and the capabilities of the learning organization have only begun to be understood in the last 20 years (Senge, 1990). While the concept of organizational learning is relatively new, the problem of effectively integrating thought (absence) with action (presence) has “plagued philosophers, frustrated social scientists, and eluded professional practitioners for years. It is one of the most prevalent and least understood problems of our age” (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 3). The concept of the learning organization may begin to address this

problem. Senge (1990) defined the learning organization as an organization “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). The most basic meaning of the learning organization is an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future (Senge, 1990).

A learning organization may be desirable, but the dominant culture in most organizations allows for little or no time for reflection and learning (Argyris, 1990). Organizations have developed elaborate organizational defenses and traps that are anti-learning, that inhibit effective problem solving and learning at times when these are especially needed (Argyris, 1990 & 2010; York-Barr, et al., 2001). Additionally, the scope of a leader’s reflection is strongly influenced, and may be severely limited, “by the learning system of the organization in which he practices” (Schön, 1983, p. 242).

Leaders who are learning-oriented must portray that problem solving leads to learning and must demonstrate a commitment to the learning process rather than to any particular solution to a given problem (Schein, 2010). As problems grow in complexity, the learning-oriented leader will depend even more on others to generate solutions, and the acceptance of these solutions will be more likely if members of the organization have been involved in the learning process (Schein, 2010). Organizations work the way they work because of the ways that people work, and so to become a learning organization, leaders and other members of the organization must change the typical ways in which they work (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000, p. 21). This is no easy task, as “knowledge and learning—the processes by which people create

knowledge—are living systems made up of often-invisible networks and interrelationships” (Senge, et al., 2000).

**Intentional visibility: Theory U.** A recently developed organizational learning theory that describes how a leader may have a profound impact on an organization by intentionally using visibility’s component parts, absence and presence, is Theory U. Scharmer’s (2007) Theory U asks the question “What is required in order to learn and act from the future as it emerges?” (pp. 13-14). Scharmer identified two types of organizational learning: learning from the experiences of the past and learning from the future as it emerges. Learning from the future is relatively unknown and not as well understood as learning from the past, which underlies most leadership theories, best practices, and approaches to organizational learning (Scharmer, 2007). Scharmer defined the term “presencing” as operating from the future as it emerges: “Presencing is a blending of the words ‘presence’ and ‘sensing.’ It means to sense, tune in, and act from one’s highest future potential—the future that depends on us to bring it into being” (p. 8). Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2004) concluded that “the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence” (p. 13). They defined presence as “deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense” (p. 13). Additionally, Halpern and Lubar (2003) defined presence as the “ability to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others” (p. 3), while Kouzes and Posner (2010) noted that a competent leader may very well be defined as one with the capacity to imagine and articulate future possibilities for an organization.

Theory U is a theory of different levels of perception and change and uses the image of the letter U to distinguish differing depths of perceiving reality and the different

levels of action that follow (Scharmer, 2007). The image of a U emphasizes these perceived depths of reality and various levels of action as one moves along the U (Senge, et al., 2004). The three basic aspects of Theory U are sensing, presencing, and realizing. Sensing is represented on the upper left portion of the U, presencing is represented at the bottom of the U, and realizing is represented on the upper right portion of the U (Senge, et al., 2004). The three major stages along the U are further defined as follows (Senge, et al., 2004): “Observe, observe, observe—become one with the world; retreat and reflect—allow the inner knowing to emerge; act swiftly, with a natural flow” (p. 87).

Senge, et al. (2004) explained movement along the U as a journey that begins with sensing on the upper left:

When we start down the left-hand side of the U, we experience the world as something given, something ‘out there.’ Gradually, we shift our perception to seeing from inside the living process underlying reality. Then, as we move up the right-hand side of the U, we start to experience the world as unfolding through us. On the left-hand side of the U, the world is ‘as it is’ and later ‘as it emerges’; on the right-hand side the world is ‘coming into being through us.’ Starting down the left-hand side, the self is an observer of this exterior world, which is a creation of the past. Starting up the right-hand side, the self turns into a source through which the future begins to emerge. The shift involved in moving from one state to another is the mystery that happens at the bottom of the U. (p. 103)

Presencing, “seeing from the deepest source and becoming a vehicle for that source,” is the state at the bottom of the U (Senge, et al., 2004, p. 89). During this process, it is essential to immerse oneself in the reality of a situation without imposing

preestablished frameworks until ultimately one “becomes ‘one with the situation’” (Senge, et al., 2004, p. 88). Scharmer (2007) emphasized that rather than being stuck in patterns of the past, leaders must learn to operate from the highest possible future, and in order to do so, leaders must understand both absence and presence. Scharmer (2007) explicitly described a double movement, “the opening to the deeper levels of emergence, on the one hand, and the enhanced power of the forces of destruction, on the other” (p. 45), suggesting that both absence and presence are aspects of a single evolutionary movement. He further described the relationship of absence and presence as anti-emergence and emergence, such as when we “often see how people in the face of the utmost destruction have the ability to wake up to a higher level of awareness and consciousness” (p. 45).

**Intentional visibility: Action Theories.** Meaningful organizational change will likely not occur without changing underlying assumptions and beliefs (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reflective practice facilitates the identification, examination, and modification of theories-in-use that shape behavior and ultimately modifies the problematic basic assumptions that lead people in organizations to act predictably but often ineffectively (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Argyris (2004) identified effective action as the fundamental objective of human and organizational performance, stating the following:

Action is effective to the extent that it is consistent with intention, that it persists, and that it does so without harming the existing level of organizational performance. Learning occurs when these three features are all in the service of effective action. (p. 7)

Theories of action inform individuals of the strategies they can use to achieve their intended goals (Argyris, 1993). Two distinct types of personal theories of action that are helpful in understanding behavioral stability and change within the context of organizational learning are espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Espoused theories resemble presence at an oversimplified level, while theories-in-use reflect the power of absence. Espoused theories comprise one's beliefs, attitudes, and values; they are what we say and believe, and they tend to change with relative ease in response to new information, such as when one participates in a university class or takes part in some other form of professional development (Argyris, 1993; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Espoused theories do not guide action and often remain independent of practice. Conversely, theories-in-use directly, persistently, and consistently influence behavior (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Theories-in-use develop through acculturation and shape the understanding of how an organization functions, which ultimately shapes the behaviors of those within the organization (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Surprisingly, individuals commonly design and implement theories-in-use that differ significantly from their espoused theories (Argyris, 1999).

Argyris and Schön (1974) described two theories-in-use: Model I and Model II. The purpose of Model I is to protect and defend against change when one faces threatening or potentially embarrassing situations. Model II is a theory that can be used to help prevent the counterproductive consequences of Model I by instead focusing on openness, transparency, and trust. The governing values of Model II are producing valid information, informed choice, and vigilant monitoring of the effectiveness of

implemented actions (Argyris, 2004). Leaders of organizations who encourage the use of Model II rather than Model I ask their followers to retreat and reflect deeply on the practices that are the very foundation of their sense of competence in producing effective action.

Argyris (1993 & 2010) also discussed how an organization could intentionally reduce the number of organizational traps and the subsequent negative consequences of such traps. Traps inhibit organizational learning when learning is most needed; traps impair even successful organizations, strangling decision-making and causing conflicts that can potentially grind organizational progress to a halt.

An organization that depends on innovation and adaptation for its survival is by its nature interested in the concept of organizational learning (Schön, 1983). Yet formal organizations have a “powerful interest in the stability and predictability of organizational life. An organization is a cooperative system in which individuals depend on the predictability of one another’s responses” (Schön, 1983, p. 327). This creates an organizational predicament, as significant organizational learning, which involves significant change in underlying values and knowledge structure, is “necessary to effective organizational adaptation, but it disrupts the constancies on which manageable organizational life depends” (Schön, 1983, p. 328).

Effective leaders are not only present, but they are also reflective, which requires absence, as many actions that at first glance appear to consist of a mere unilateral process in fact involve a reciprocal process (Simmel, 1907). Thinking is essentially a withdrawal from action; reflection requires a degree of absence and is arguably as important for a leader as presence (Schön & Rein, 1994). Once again, consider Theory U and recall that

both the left and right sides of the U emphasize the importance of presence as leaders seek to understand the present by observing and as they act to swiftly realize the future. Also recall that at the bottom of the U, absence is necessary as leaders retreat and reflect. Furthermore, reflective conduct very definitely refers to the presence of the future in terms of ideas; the intelligent man or woman, as distinguished from the intelligent animal, presents to himself or herself what is going to happen (Mead, 1934).

### **Summary of Chapter Two: Literature Review and Discussion**

This literature review explored many facets related to visibility and several other related areas and revealed support for the importance of visibility for the superintendent.

Leadership was examined with a focus on the relational and transformational approaches to understanding leadership. Relational leadership, which focuses on the relationships among leaders and followers rather than the characteristics of leaders and followers and leadership behaviors, was examined, including a discussion of the following leadership theories or approaches: Leader-Member Exchange, authentic leadership, and interpersonal leadership, which was discussed by examining the Michigan leadership studies, the Ohio State leadership studies, and the Leadership Grid.

Transformational leadership was discussed along with charisma, since the literature seemed to indicate a link between the two concepts. Transformational leadership has much to do with human interaction and high levels of morality and has become a transcending approach to leadership, one to which all leaders should aspire. Five primary characteristics of transformational leaders emerged from the literature. Transformational leaders are creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate.

Theories of communication were examined in the context of leadership in general and specifically for politicians and superintendents. Leadership was defined as a communication-based endeavor. There appears to be an ever-increasing demand for effective communication by leaders, including superintendents.

The concept of visibility was examined in the context of politicians and superintendents. Absence and presence were also examined in the areas of social psychology, specifically by considering human behavior and social interaction, and Social Impact Theory, or more generally, social influence. The examination of Social Impact Theory, or social influence, revealed that the influence individuals have over other individuals and groups is a function of the strength, immediacy, and the type or quality of presence exhibited by others. In this section, several definitions of leadership were provided that suggest influencing others in an organization is a critical part of leadership.

The concept of reflective practice was discussed, specifically reflective practice by individuals and the concept of organizational learning. Additionally, Theory U was defined and discussed within an organizational learning context. Theory U defines the concepts of absence and presence related to organizational learning as an emerging field of study in which leaders, through presencing, learn from the future as it emerges.

### **Conceptual Framework of Study: Model and Description**

Although all the included literature is relevant and important to this dissertation, some was primary to the development of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1, p. 73). A deeper visibility resulting in meaningful absence and presence in the superintendency is the essence of this theoretical framework. Beginning with the superintendency, the

framework identifies several key superintendency and visibility concepts. Relational and transformational leadership capture the critical leadership elements necessary for meaningful leader-follower relationships and also provide a leadership model (transformational) all leaders should aspire to because of the powerful impact a transformational leader can have on an organization.

The current dominant discursive role conceptualization of the superintendent supports the notion of the superintendent as communicator (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). Additionally, communication has been identified as perhaps the most critical skill for a superintendent in our information-based society. Success as a school district leader, or arguably a leader of any organization, hinges upon that individual's ability to communicate.

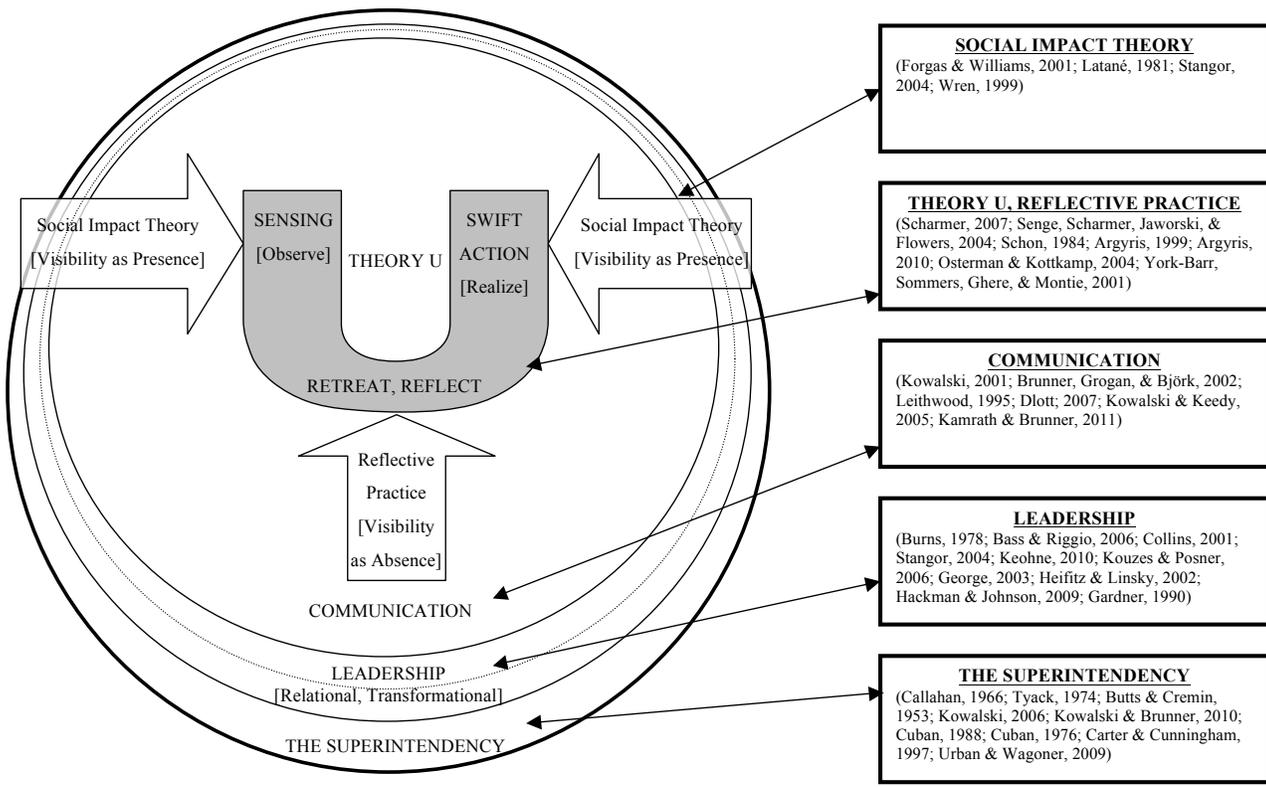


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The superintendency, relational and transformational leadership, and communication are interrelated in the conceptual framework. By building upon Sharmer's (2007) Theory U, the critical concept of the framework is identified as visibility. The upper left portion of the U indicates where an organization is currently situated; the upper right portion represents the future of the organization; and the bottom of the U represents the leader's role in bringing the organization from its past into its future. Presence is reflected on both sides of the U and is supported by Latané's (1981) concept of Social Impact Theory. The bottom of the U identifies actions taken by the leader—retreat and reflect. The concepts of reflective practice and absence inform the bottom of the U. Insights and complex learning result from reflecting on one's own experiences (York-Barr, et al., 2001), and in order to properly reflect, a leader must understand that organizational learning includes presence and absence (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Reflecting requires a degree of absence, and the literature on reflective practice espouses reflective practice as a vital resource for significant and sustained school improvement (York-Barr, et al., 2001). Without meaningful reflective practices, it is not possible to move an organization on the U from left to right, or from observing and learning from its past into the desired state of realizing a new future. The conceptual model is abstract rather than concrete, and it will guide and support this study.

### **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN**

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore how the visibility (absence/presence) of school district superintendents is perceived and understood, broadly speaking. The following questions guided this study:

1. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
2. What perceptions and understandings do school board members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
3. What perceptions and understandings do community members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
4. What perceptions and understandings do staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

This chapter includes information related to the methods and design of the study and is organized into the following sections: 1) Methods: Theoretical Underpinnings, 2) Design: Study Plan, and 3) Delimitations and Limitations: Cautionary Notes.

#### **Methods: Theoretical Underpinnings**

This section includes a review of relevant literature related to qualitative inquiry and case study research. This large section is divided into three subsections: 1) Qualitative Inquiry, 2) Case Study Research, and 3) Methods Approach.

## **Qualitative Inquiry**

Several considerations play into the decision to choose one research approach over another, including the research problem or purpose, the personal experiences of the researcher, the audience for whom the report is written, and practical purposes (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 1996). The research problem is the most significant of these.

Additionally, the personal experiences of the researcher are significant, as a level of familiarity may exist with a certain method due to training and educational experiences. The audience may also affect a researcher's decision, as readers want the answer to a question worth asking. A research approach may differ for graduate committees, colleagues in the field, or journal editors (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003; Creswell, 2003). Practical purposes may include the desire to accomplish something such as meeting a need, changing a situation, or achieving a goal (Maxwell, 1996). A researcher's first task, however, "is quite often to convince critics that the research has the potential to be useful" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 10).

When designing an approach to research, the researcher must consider the following three framework elements as identified by Creswell (2003): (a) philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge claims, (b) general research procedures called strategies of inquiry, and (c) detailed procedures of data collection, analysis, and writing, called methods (p. 3). By answering these questions, a researcher will combine philosophy, strategies, and methods, resulting in a framework for conducting research.

Two general research types are commonly identified as quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is often synonymous with positivist research, which is grounded in the assumption that "features of the social environment constitute an

independent reality and are relatively constant across time and settings” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 28). Positivist researchers typically collect numerical data on observable behaviors of samples and then subject the data to numerical analysis in order to extract knowledge (Gall, et al., 1996). However, when a theory is lacking, or if existing theory does not adequately explain the phenomenon, researchers cannot develop hypotheses in order to structure a research investigation. Qualitative research is often referred to as postpositivist research, which is “grounded in the assumption that features of the social environment are constructed as interpretations by individuals, and that these interpretations tend to be transitory and situational” (Gall, et al., 1996, p. 28). Postpositivist researchers tend to collect primarily verbal data through the intensive study of cases and then subject the data to analytic induction (Gall, et al., 1996).

A quantitative research approach is the best choice, for example, when a researcher desires to test a theory or explanation, identify factors that influence an outcome, or understand the best predictors of outcomes (Creswell, 2003). Alternatively, if a researcher needs to understand a concept because there has been little research done on it, a qualitative approach may be warranted, as specific quantifiable variables may not be known (Creswell, 2003). In other words, qualitative research plays a discovery role, while quantitative research plays a confirmatory role. Further, Gall et al. (1996) stated that “qualitative research is best used to discover themes and relationships at the case level, while quantitative research is best used to validate those themes and relationships in samples and populations” (p. 29).

Qualitative research has been established as an important research method in education and the social sciences and is a broad approach to the study of social

phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In contrast to quantitative research, which typically examines the individual component parts of a phenomenon, qualitative research can reveal how all parts work together to form a whole (Merriam, 2001). Meaning is embedded in people's experiences, and this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions (Merriam, 2001). Thomas (2003) provided a simple yet helpful way to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research: Qualitative research often involves a researcher describing *kinds* of characteristics of people and events whereas quantitative methods tend to focus attention on measurements and *amounts* of the characteristics displayed by the people and events being studied.

Adjectives used to describe qualitative research include pragmatic, interpretive, and inductive (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell, 1996). Grounded in the lived experiences of people, qualitative researchers are "intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2). The strength of qualitative research is primarily derived from its inductive approach and its focus on specific situations or people, as well as its emphasis on words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 1996). Rossman and Rallis (2003) offered five general characteristics of qualitative research and four typical stances of those who practice qualitative research. Qualitative research typically:

- is enacted in naturalistic settings
- draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study
- focuses on context

- is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured
- is fundamentally interpretive. (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 2)

Additionally, qualitative researchers take the following four stances:

- view social worlds as holistic and complex
- engage in systemic reflection on the conduct of the research
- remain sensitive to their own biographies/social identities and how these shape the study
- rely on complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative. (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 2)

Finally, Creswell (1998) provided the following succinct definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

Because one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on specific instances, or cases, of a phenomenon, qualitative research is sometimes referred to as case study research (Gall, et al., 1996; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The two terms, however, are not synonymous, as case study research has evolved as one of several distinctive approaches to scientific inquiry within the field of qualitative research.

### **Case Study Research**

Case study research holds a long and distinguished history across many disciplines (Creswell, 1998). Regardless of the discipline, studies focusing on society and

culture in a group, a program, or an organization typically espouse some form of case study as a strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Gall et al. (1996) defined case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 545). In case studies, the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, or process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2003; Thomas, 2003). The interest is in “process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, and in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 2001, p. 19). Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, current practice and future research (Merriam, 2001).

A researcher who engages in case study gathers as much information as possible with the intent of analyzing, interpreting, or theorizing about the phenomenon (Merriam, 2001). A case study is an exploration of a bounded system (bound by time and place) through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information that is rich in context (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001).

Case studies focus on holistic descriptions and explanations. As Yin (1994) observed, case study is particularly suited for situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context. Reflecting this relationship, case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2001). Particularistic in this context means that case studies focus on a particular situation or phenomenon, and the case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon. Descriptive in this context means that the end product of a case study is a rich, thick description of the phenomenon being studied and includes as many variables as possible. The phrase “thick description” originated in the field of anthropology to refer

to a complete, literal description of a cultural phenomenon and is now used in qualitative research (Gall, et al., 1996). Heuristic, defined as learning through discovery, in this context means that case studies illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. Previously unknown relationships and variables can emerge, leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon (Stake, 2005).

Case study research can be designed as single case or multicase. To more thoroughly understand a particular phenomenon, researchers study what is similar and different about single cases in order to better understand the object of the multicase study (Stake, 2005). Yin (1994) outlined several distinct advantages and disadvantages that multicase designs have compared to single case design. The primary advantage of studying multiple cases is that the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling and robust. Single cases, however, are preferred over multiple cases when studying an unusual or rare case. One disadvantage of multicase studies is that they usually require extensive resources and time beyond the means of a single investigator. Each case of a multicase study should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of the study. Yin (1994) stated "a major insight is to consider multiple cases as one would consider multiple experiments—that is, to follow a 'replication' logic" (p. 45).

Merriam (2001) identified two stages of analysis in a multiple case study: within-case and cross-case. For within-case analysis, each case is treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Once the analysis of each case is complete, cross-case analysis begins, with the intent of building abstractions across cases (Merriam, 1994). The researcher must display the unique vitality of each case while examining what is common and what is unique across the cases (Stake, 2005). A multicase study seeks to understand

the phenomenon, “both its commonality and its differences across manifestations” (Stake, 2005, p. 40). Stake (2005) reminds us that multicase study is not a design for comparing cases; rather, the cases being studied are a selected group of instances chosen for better understanding of a phenomenon.

### **Methods Approach**

The previous two subsections have provided the theoretical basis of the rationale for the use of qualitative research, generally, and case study research, specifically, for this study. The interest in case study design is in (a) process rather than outcomes, (b) context rather than a specific variable, and (c) discovery rather than confirmation (Merriam, 2001, p. 19). The phenomenon of superintendent visibility is understudied, thus there was a need to seek perceptions and understandings, best achieved through the use of qualitative, multicase study research.

Stake (2005) identified three main criteria for selecting cases: (a) the cases should be relevant to the phenomenon being studied, (b) the cases should provide diversity across contexts, and (c) the cases should provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts (p. 23). These criteria were important for the study. One of the most important tasks for a multicase researcher is to show how a phenomenon appears in different contexts (Stake, 2005). In order to understand a concept such as superintendent visibility in various contexts, a qualitative study that emphasized experience with the phenomenon by a broad range of participants was appropriate.

## **Design: Study Plan**

This section related to the design of the research is presented in five subsections:

1) Site Selection, 2) Participant Selection, 3) Data Collection, 4) Data Analysis, and 5) Data Reporting.

### **Site Selection**

The theoretical approach to site selection for this multicase study was guided by Yin (1994), Gall, et al., (1996), Patton (1990), Creswell (1998), and Merriam and Rossman (2011). Yin (1994) recommended selecting multiple cases in order to provide replication. Each additional case that replicates the findings of the first adds to the certainty of those findings (Gall, et al., 1996). Patton (1990, as cited in Gall, et al., 1996) suggested that selecting an appropriate number of sites involves a trade-off between breadth and depth:

With the same fixed resources and limited time, a researcher could study a specific set of experiences for a larger number of people (seeking breadth) or a more open range of experiences for a smaller number of people (seeking depth). In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich. Less depth from a larger number of people can be especially helpful in exploring a phenomenon and trying to document diversity or understand variation. (p. 184)

Additionally, Patton (1990) referred to the purposeful selection of participants to describe the process of selecting cases that are most likely to be information-rich. Creswell (1998) noted that there is great value in selecting cases that potentially show different perspectives on the phenomenon being studied.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined the appropriate site as realistic; that is, one in which (a) entry is possible, (b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, and interactions of interest is present, (c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relationships with the participants, (d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically, and (e) data quality and credibility are reasonably assured. These considerations were taken into account when sites were selected. Additionally, for this study site selection was driven by school district size. In order to uncover whether district size<sup>1</sup> alters understandings of superintendent visibility, four Midwest school districts of varying size were selected (one small, two medium-sized and one large). Each of the four districts is described below: 1) Liberty, 2) Washington, 3) East Clifton County, and 4) Sandstone. Note that pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of participant school districts. Additionally, any references to cities, counties or individual participants were done so using pseudonyms; actual names were not used.

**Liberty Public Schools.** Liberty Public Schools is a small, rural school district of approximately 400 students. The City of Liberty's population is approximately 1,400 according to 2010 census data, down from just over 1,600 residents in 2000. Liberty is the county seat of Prairie View County, which has a population density of seven persons per square mile compared to a statewide figure of 66.6 persons per square mile.

**Washington Public Schools.** Washington Public Schools is a medium-sized, rural school district of approximately 2,500 students. The City of Washington's population is approximately 13,100 according to 2010 census figures, down from

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, school district size was defined by adapting the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categories of school district size (Gray, Bitterman & Goldring, 2013). A district with kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) student enrollment of less than 1,000 was considered small; K-12 student enrollment of 1,000 or more but less than 5,000 was considered medium; and K-12 student enrollment of 5,000 or more was considered large.

approximately 13,500 in 2000. Washington is the county seat of Lake County, which has a population density of 29.1 persons per square mile compared to a statewide figure of 66.6 persons per square mile.

**East Clifton County Public Schools.** East Clifton County Public Schools is a medium-sized, rural school district of approximately 3,300 students. The largest city in the East Clifton School District is Poplar. The City of Poplar's population is approximately 18,000 according to 2010 census data, down from approximately 18,400 in 2000. Poplar is the county seat of Clifton County, which has a population density of 44.2 persons per square mile compared to a statewide figure of 66.6 persons per square mile.

**Sandstone Public Schools.** Sandstone Public Schools is a large and geographically isolated school district of approximately 10,500 students. The City of Sandstone's population is approximately 61,300 according to the 2010 census, up from approximately 55,300 in 2000. The entire metropolitan area had a population of approximately 120,000 in 2010. Sandstone is the county seat of Hugo County and is its state's capital city. The population density of Hugo County is 49.8 persons per square mile compared to a statewide figure of 9.7 persons per square mile.

### **Participant Selection**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the visibility of school district superintendents is perceived and understood, broadly speaking. To address this purpose, perceptions and understandings were collected from superintendents, district-level staff members, building-level staff members, school board members, and community members. This section describes how the participants from each participant group were

selected for the study and provides a summary of the number of the various types of participants by school district and in total. As previously indicated, pseudonyms were used in order to conceal the identity of participants. Actual names were not used. This section related to participant selection is presented in six subsections: 1) Superintendents, 2) District-level staff members, 3) Building-level staff members, 4) School board members, 5) Community members, and 6) Total participants.

**Superintendents.** Perceptions and understandings of superintendent visibility by superintendents themselves was a critical component of this study. The school districts selected for the study depended largely on the willingness of the superintendents to participate. The superintendent from each of the four selected school districts ( $n = 4$ ) was included.

**District-level staff members.** The study includes responses from district-level staff members, including 1) district-level administrators, 2) communications directors or individuals with similar duties, and 3) district-level support staff. Due to district size and staffing levels of the districts selected, the number of participants in this category varied among the four sites. The study included a combined total of nine district-level staff members from the four districts ( $n = 9$ ).

**Building-level staff members.** This study includes responses from building-level staff members, including 1) building-level administrators, 2) teachers, and 3) building-level support staff. The study included a combined total of 12 building-level staff members from the four districts ( $n = 12$ ).

**School board members.** The perceptions and understandings of current school board members was another critical component of this study. As the agents of the school

district charged with the hiring, evaluation, and ultimately retention decisions about superintendents, school board member involvement was critical in addressing the purpose of this study. While school board members are community members, their direct, regular, and expected contact and access to the superintendent renders their perceptions and understandings especially relevant when compared to other community members. The study included a combined total of six school board members from the four districts (n = 6).

**Community members.** This study includes responses from a variety of community members who provided multiple and varied perspectives. The following community members participated in the study: 1) elected officials such as mayors and city council members, 2) leaders from the business community, identified through a local chamber of commerce or other similar entity, 3) members of the clergy, 4) parents who had children attending school in the district at the time of the study, 5) retired community members, and 6) community members who were actively involved in school volunteer efforts at the time of the study, such as a member of a parent-teacher association. The study included a combined total of 19 community members from the four districts (n = 19).

**Total participants.** A description of the type and number of participants from each district and for the study in its entirety is provided here and is organized in the following manner: 1) Liberty, 2) Washington, 3) East Clifton County, 4) Sandstone, and 5) Total number of study participants.

***Liberty Public Schools.*** Participants in the study from Liberty included the superintendent (1), district-level staff member (1), building-level staff members (3),

school board members (2) and community members (5) for a total of 12 participants. Six males and 6 females participated.

***Washington Public Schools.*** Participants in the study from Washington included the superintendent (1), district-level staff members (2), building-level staff members (4), school board member (1) and community members (6) for a total of 14 participants. Ten males and 4 females participated.

***East Clifton County Public Schools.*** Participants in the study from East Clifton County included the superintendent (1), school board member (1), building-level staff member (1), district-level staff members (3) and community members (6) for a total of 12 participants. Six males and 6 females participated.

***Sandstone Public Schools.*** Participants in the study from Sandstone included the superintendent (1), district-level staff members (3), building-level staff members (4), school board members (2) and community members (2) for a total of 12 participants. Seven males and 5 females participated.

***Total number of study participants.*** The researcher attained the established goal of at least 50 study participants. Participants in the study from all of the districts combined included superintendents (4), district-level staff members (9), building-level staff members (12), school board members (6) and community members (19) for a total of 50 participants. Twenty-nine males and 21 females participated (see Table 1, p. 89).

*Table 1: Summary of Participants from All School Districts*

<b>Participants from All School Districts</b>			
Participant Description	Male	Female	Total
Superintendents	3	1	<b>4</b>
District-level Staff Members	4	5	<b>9</b>
Building-level Staff Members	10	2	<b>12</b>
School Board Members	5	1	<b>6</b>
Community Members	7	12	<b>19</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>50</b>

### **Data Collection**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) identified four primary methods for gathering information in qualitative research: 1) participating in the setting, 2) interviewing in-depth, 3) observing directly, and 4) analyzing documents (p. 137). For the purposes of this study, consideration was given to the second and the fourth approaches. This subsection includes a discussion of these primary data collection methods.

Multiple methods of data collection were used in this study in order to triangulate the data. Triangulation assures that the researcher has a clear picture of the phenomenon being studied and that the findings are meaningful, relatively free of bias, and not likely to mislead the reader (Stake, 2005). Triangulation is an approach that allows the researcher to see if the new views are consistent with what is already well known about the case and occurs throughout the fieldwork and analysis (Stake, 2005). The use of five

different participant groups, gathered documents, and analysis of websites all contribute to the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring triangulation of the data.

**Interviewing in-depth.** The interview was the primary data collection method in this study. The study used the person-to-person type of interview, as opposed to group or collective interview formats. Person-to-person interviews are the most common form of interview (Merriam, 2001). At the root of in-depth interviewing lies an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Creswell (2003) identified the following as advantages of interviewing as a data-gathering method: 1) interviews are useful when participants cannot be observed directly, 2) participants can provide historical information, and 3) interviewing allows a researcher to control the line of questioning.

Gall et al. (1996) referred to interviewing key informants. “In a key informant interview, the interviewer collects data from individuals who have special knowledge or perceptions that would not otherwise be available to the researcher” (p. 306). Details of a person’s experience flow from participants’ stream of consciousness when they tell stories (Seidman, 1998). Patton (1994) explained the purpose of interviewing:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose

of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.  
(p. 196)

Interviews differ depending on the level of structure desired by the researcher. Consider an interview structure continuum where on one end fall highly structured, questionnaire-driven interviews and at the other end fall unstructured, open-ended, conversational formats (Merriam, 2001). Interviewing in qualitative investigations tends to be more open-ended and less structured than what might typically be used in a quantitative study. This study employed a combination of a standardized open-ended interview and the use of a general interview-guide approach which included a pre-determined sequence and wording of the same set of questions asked of each participant in order to minimize the possibility of bias (Gall, et al., 1996). Each participant, including the participant superintendents, was interviewed using this standardized open-ended interview approach. A protocol with sets of guiding, open-ended, general questions was used in the interviews. The protocol also included several possible probes that were used during the interviews (see Appendix D: Open-ended Interview Guide and Possible Probes, p. 292).

Superintendent participants were interviewed for approximately one hour. All other participants were interviewed for approximately 20-45 minutes. A general set of questions was developed for all participants but differed according to the category each participant represented.

**Analyzing documents.** Qualitative researchers often study written communications found in natural settings in order to gain further understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Gall, et al., 1996). Merriam (2001) claims that using

documentary material as data is not much different from using interviews or observations. Indeed, the analysis of documents can reveal the portrayal of the values and beliefs of participants (Marshall & Rossman). To fully understand a document, the qualitative researcher must study the context in which it was produced, such as the “author’s purpose in writing it, the author’s working conditions, the author’s intended and actual audiences, and the audience’s purpose for reading it” (Gall, et al., 1996, p. 362). The results of an analysis of documents take the form of interpretations and hypotheses (Gall, et al., 1996).

Artifacts that individuals or organizations produce take multiple forms, including documents and other objects such as photographs, clothing, and wall decorations (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). One of the biggest advantages to using documents and other artifacts is that it does not disrupt ongoing events, as generally the materials can be gathered without disturbing the setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Additionally, documents exist independently of any research agenda and are unaffected by the research process, and many documents and artifacts cost little or nothing and are often easy to obtain (Merriam, 2001). Creswell (2003) identified the following as advantages to the data-collection method of document examination: 1) it enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of participants; 2) documents can be accessed at a convenient time and are unobtrusive; 3) documents represent data that are thoughtful; and 4) documents save a researcher the time and expense of transcribing.

Documents analyzed as part of this study included newspaper articles, websites, email and other relevant documents. Information found in documents was compared to the perceptions and understandings of the study participants. Additionally, the researcher

was cognizant of other objects that were relevant to the phenomenon being studied, including clothing and pictures.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic data analysis approach was used for this multicase study. Boyatzis (1998) described thematic analysis as not just another qualitative method but a process that can be used with most, if not all, qualitative methods. Thematic analysis is considered an inductive research approach, which are typically descriptive and exploratory, and is considered a very effective approach to capture the complexities of meaning within a textual data set (Guest, et al., 2012). It is the most commonly used method of analysis in qualitative research (Guest, et al., 2012). Thematic analysis also allows for the appropriate translation of qualitative information into quantitative data when desired by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis was a strategic choice as part of the research design for this study and included consideration of the study's primary questions, conceptual framework, and literature review (Saldana, 2009). The primary goal of using thematic analysis was to describe and understand how people feel, think, and behave within a specific context relative to specified research questions (Guest, et al., 2012).

Boyatzis (1998) described thematic analysis as a way of seeing a phenomenon through inquiry; he identified three general phases of inquiry: observation, encoding and interpretation. A researcher can use thematic analysis to move through these phases. As this was an exploratory study about superintendent visibility, the researcher carefully read and reread the data, looking for key words, trends, themes or ideas that helped to inform the outline of the thematic analysis before the analysis actually took place (Guest, et al.,

2012). Requiring extensive involvement and interpretation from the researcher, thematic analysis is more than just counting explicit words or phrases; rather, the focus is on the identification and description of both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest, et al., 2012). These ideas are identified as themes, defined as an “outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (Saldana, 2009, p. 13). Saldana (2009) defined a theme as “a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (p. 139). Once themes are identified, codes are typically developed to represent the identified themes and are linked to raw data as summary markers to be used for later analysis (Guest, et al., 2012).

The intended data analysis goal from this case study research project was to communicate understanding from data about the phenomenon of superintendent visibility derived from interviews and documents. The researcher created thick descriptions of the phenomenon by using constructs that brought order to the descriptive data and that related the data to other research findings (Merriam, 2001). Additionally, the researcher added depth to the descriptions by identifying themes present in the phenomena (Gall, et al., 1996). The thick descriptions resulted from specific and strategic steps during the analysis of data. These steps were determined after careful examination of various authors’ approaches.

Bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a large amount of accumulated data is “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 207). Generally, qualitative analysis encompasses data organization, theme development and interpretation, and report writing, but the process does not typically proceed in a linear fashion (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By its nature, data

collection in case study research is emergent, which requires a case study researcher to spend time analyzing the data, at least informally, while the data collection is still in progress, which can determine subsequent data-collection activities (Gall, et al., 1996).

Several researchers identified similar analytic procedures for qualitative research. Gall et al. (1996) identified the following steps: 1) segmenting the database, 2) developing categories, 3) coding segments, 4) grouping category segments, and 5) drawing conclusions (Gall, et al., 1996). Marshall and Rossman (2011) identified these steps: 1) organize the data, 2) immerse in the data, 3) generate categories and themes, 4) code the data, 5) offer interpretations through analytic memos, 6) search for alternative understandings, and 7) write the report or other format for presenting the study. Marshall and Rossman (2011) also stated that each phase of data analysis involves data reduction, or bringing data into more manageable chunks, and interpretation, or bringing meaning to the words and acts of the participants of the study. Another set of qualitative analytic procedures was developed by Creswell (2003) who identified the following generic six steps for data analysis: 1) organize and prepare the data, 2) read through the data, 3) begin detailed analysis with a coding process, 4) use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis, 5) determine how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative, and 6) interpret the data (pp. 191-195). The general data analysis process used in this study was arrived at through a synthesis of these various approaches, each of which are described in the following subsections: 1) organize and prepare, 2) review, 3) code and categorize, 4) describe, and 5) interpret and understand.

**Organize and prepare.** The researcher transcribed interview data, finalized field notes, and sorted and arranged data depending on data sources. For example, field notes were kept in a three-ring binder, one for each of the sites. Tabs within the binder separated the interview data of each participant and the field notes taken during interviews, observations, and document analysis. A digital recording device was used to record the interviews. These records were transcribed into written text and organized by site and by participant. This step resulted in organized material called the case study database (Yin, 1994).

**Review.** Obtaining a general sense of the information was the researcher's first priority in this step of data analysis (Creswell, 2003). Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted that there is no substitute for intimate engagement with the data, and the researcher should read, reread, and read the data once more to become appropriately familiar with the material. Notes were taken during this stage in order to record general thoughts about the data.

**Code and categorize.** Coding is the process of organizing material into chunks (Creswell, 2003) and is the formal representation of analytic thinking (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The coding process, generally, is used to generate a description of the setting or participants as well as the categories or themes for analysis (Creswell, 2003). Themes typically emerge from two sources. Themes are often displayed in a study's conceptual framework and are referred to as theory-generated codes. Themes can also emerge from the real-life data through the coding process and are considered *in vivo* codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Theory-generated codes from the study's conceptual framework include 1) visibility as presence, 2) visibility as absence, 3) visibility as

communication, 4) the superintendency, 5) organizational learning, and 6) reflective practice. A significant number of *in vivo* codes emerged from the data. A total of 58 codes were identified in this study (see Table 2, p. 98). A summary of the most frequently coded responses is included in Table 3 on page 99. The identified codes are discussed further in Chapter 4.

The coding process initiated detailed analysis, so as the coding process got underway, so did the analytic process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Far from being merely a technical task, the process of coding resulted in emergent understandings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Coding involved segmenting sentences and paragraphs into categories or themes and labeling those categories or themes with a term, often based on the actual language of a participant (Creswell, 2003). Coding in this study took several forms, including abbreviations of key words, numbers, and highlighted text (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As analysis progressed, the researcher identified clusters, starting with a main topic and pulling any data related to that topic. Marshall and Rossman (2011) referred to clustering as “creative work in which the researcher creates diagrams of relationships” (p. 215).

Table 2: Themes of Visibility

Themes of Visibility				
Major Theme	Minor Theme	Abbreviation	Cluster Themes	Abbreviation
The Superintendent	Role Conceptualizations	SR	Scholar Manager Democratic Applied Social Scientist Communicator	SRS SRM SRD SRASS SRC
	Community Expectations	EC	Large/Small School Expectations School Board Expectations	ELSS ESB
Visibility as Communication (VC)	Characteristics of Communication	ChC	District Face/Spokesperson Public Perception Framing and Rumor Control Appearance/Dress	DFS PP CFRC AD
	Relationship Development	VRD	Internal Relationships Relationships with Staff Relationships with Students External Relationships/Community Connection Relational Leadership	CI RS RSt CE/CoC LR
	Methods of Communication		Written Public Speaking Mass Media Social Media Impact of Technology	CW CPS MM TSM TI
Visibility as Presence	Qualities of Visibility	VQ	Adverse Visibility Accessibility Authenticity Beyond Physical Transparency Trust (or Credibility)	VB VaA VA VBP Tr T
	Distributed Visibility	VDV		
	Engagement (or Involvement)	E	Local Level Involvement Memberships Event Attendance Community School State Level Involvement/Memberships National Level Involvement/Memberships	ILL LLM AEC AES ISL/SLM INL/NLM
	Importance of Visibility	VIO	Community & Economic Development Political Considerations Diversity of Visibility Impact on Groups	CED PC VD PI
Visibility as Absence	Qualities of Absence		Absence Privacy Pressure of Job/Time Demands Tied to Desk/Office Location Contra-Visibility	A P POJ/TD TTD/DOLL CV
	Importance of Absence		Reflective Practice Organizational Learning	RP OL

*Table 3: Summary of the Most Frequently Coded Responses*

<b>Most Frequently Coded Responses</b>		
Emergent Theme	Number of Participants Who Discussed Theme	Total Number of Unique References to Theme
Visibility as Accessibility	36	80
Event Attendance: Community	35	46
Community Connection	34	65
Political Considerations	34	59
Trust (or Credibility)	32	61
Event Attendance: School	30	51
District Face/Spokesperson	28	44
Relationships: Staff	28	56
Involvement: Local Level	27	34
Visibility: Distributed Visibility	25	41
Memberships: Local Level	24	29
Visibility: Authenticity	24	36
Mass Media	22	35
Tied to Desk	22	30
Public Perception	20	32

As previously identified, the researcher analyzed interview data using a thematic analysis approach that dissected both interview transcripts and field notes. Also, several documents were analyzed, including newspaper articles, emails, websites and other relevant documents

**Describe.** Generally, a researcher must determine how the descriptions and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative. Creswell (2003) identified that the most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis, which might include a detailed discussion of several themes or a discussion with interconnecting themes. Both approaches were used in this study. Tables are also common tools used in case studies to convey descriptive information, and several tables were used in this study. Categories that adequately encompassed and summarized the data were emphasized (Gall, et al., 1996).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) encourage the researcher to write throughout the analytic process and referred to thematic and theoretical memos as a means to document thoughts about how the data are coming together in patterns or themes as the data accumulate. A study's literature review can provide some direction to this wondering. Similar to how theory-generated codes based on the conceptual framework informed the coding process, the literature review also provided a basis for themes in this study as several theory-based themes were modifications of concepts derived from the conceptual framework and literature review, although unanticipated categories also emerged from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Throughout the analytic process, the researcher wrote notes about reflections, thoughts and insights. These notes proved to be invaluable for generating insights that

moved the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Advancing the qualitative narrative through writing was critical for this study, and as codes were brought to a conceptual level in data analysis, writing fostered creativity, helped identify links among coded data, helped to identify gaps and questions in the data, forced the researcher to stay thoughtfully immersed in his study, and provided the structure for the constant thinking that the researcher did throughout the analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

**Interpret and understand.** Recall the previous discussion about thematic analysis, which was described as a process of inquiry with three phases: observation, encoding and interpretation. Examining case study data in this manner to find constructs, themes, and patterns can be used to describe and explain a phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998; Gall et al., 1996; Guest, et al., 2012; Saldana, 2009). Marshall and Rossman (2011) discussed generating themes, typologies, matrices, and clusters to aid in the interpretation of data. Specific to this study, the focus was on the generation of themes and clusters. By identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that linked people and settings together, the researcher engaged in what Marshall & Rossman (2011) describe as an intellectually challenging phase of data analysis that integrated the entire endeavor.

### **Data Reporting**

Writing about qualitative data cannot be separated from the analytic process. When a researcher is engaged in the interpretive act, she or he is lending meaning to mountains of raw data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Case studies are “richly descriptive in order to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there” (Merriam,

2001, p. 238). In order for this to occur, the writer must provide a vivid description of the setting and situation. The data are reported in narrative and graphic form in Chapter Four. Perceptions that are significant within and across the case school districts and participants are highlighted. Chapter Four also includes the findings of this study.

### **Delimitations and Limitations: Cautionary Notes**

Delimitations and limitations help to establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications inherent in every study (Creswell, 2003). Delimitations narrow the scope of a study. For example, the scope of the study may focus on a central phenomenon, delimited to specific participants or sites, or narrow to one type of research design (Creswell, 2003). Limitations identify potential weaknesses of the study and derive from the conceptual framework and the study's design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). For example, all statistical procedures have limitations, as do research strategies such as surveys (Creswell, 2003).

#### **Delimitations**

Studies have boundaries, and the overall design of a study will determine how broadly applicable the study may be (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Delimitations derive from the conceptual framework of a study and the study's design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This study was confined to four Midwestern school districts of varying size located. Geographical differences, for example, may exist between Midwestern school districts and other geographic definitions. Limiting the study to superintendent visibility was also a delimitation, as is the method of research, the case study.

## **Limitations**

While there are limits to the generalizability of this and other qualitative studies, the reader should recall a qualitative study's purpose and strengths. A researcher "chooses a qualitative approach to understand phenomena from the participants' perspectives and to explore and discover, in depth and in context, what may have been missed" in other studies or to explore that which has not yet been studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 77). Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted, "Although no qualitative studies are generalizable in the probabilistic sense, their findings may be transferable" (pp. 76-77). These considerations are meant to remind the reader that the study is bounded and situated in a very specific context.

Identifying appropriate sites and working with gatekeepers to obtain necessary permissions are critical steps in conducting case study research (Gall, et al., 1996). This study was limited to school districts in which superintendents allowed access to a variety of participants, and to four school district superintendents who were themselves willing to participate. Additionally, other participants were identified for the study. Individuals who met the study criteria decided whether to participate. The right to refuse to participate or to cease participation at any point during the study can serve as a limitation as key participants might be excluded (Gall, et al., 1996). In this study's four case school districts, the superintendents reported that the individuals who were initially identified as potential participants ultimately participated; none of the superintendents reported that any potential participant refused. Two school districts that were initially identified as possible cases were eliminated due to the superintendents' reluctance to participate. Both

superintendents indicated that at the time the study was to be conducted, a strained relationship with their respective school board made their participation untenable.

Another limitation in a qualitative study is that the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data. Mistakes can be made, opportunities can be missed, and personal biases can interfere (Merriam, 2001). Qualitative case studies are limited by the sensitivity and integrity of the researcher, who must rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort (Merriam, 2001). In this qualitative study, the findings could be subject to other interpretations.

While interviews are a valuable tool in qualitative research, Creswell (2003) identified several limitations of this type of data collection method, including these tendencies: 1) interviews provide 'indirect' information filtered through the views of interviewees, 2) a researcher's presence may bias responses, and 3) people are not equally articulate and perceptive. Interviews rely on self-reporting by participants, and while easy to obtain, many individuals shape the information they offer about themselves (Gall, et al., 1996). Seidman (1998) stated that although the interviewer can strive to have the understanding created in the interview be as much a function of the participant's reconstruction and reflection as possible, the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the understanding gained is, to some degree, a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer, which can serve as a limitation.

Interviews and analysis of documents as qualitative data collection methods involve words spoken or written by participants in their natural setting. The information shared is limited by the participants' knowledge, memory, and ability to convey

information clearly and accurately and by how they wish to be perceived by outsiders such as a researcher (Gall, et al., 1996).

Documents have other limitations as well. According to Merriam (2001), because documents “are produced for reasons other than research, they may be fragmentary, they may not fit the conceptual framework of the research, and their authenticity may be difficult to determine” (p. 126). A review of documents in a qualitative study results in interpretations that need to be weighed in relation to two different contexts: the context in which they were developed and the context in which they are being interpreted for research purposes. The researcher must take into consideration variations in meaning, as documents are studied across space, time, and cultures (Gall, et al., 1996). Further, Creswell (2003) offered the following as limitations to the data-collection method of document analysis: 1) documents may be protected information and unavailable, and 2) documents may require transcribing or optically scanning for computer entry.

## **CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This chapter presents data collected as part of the study and is divided into four sections. Various themes, referred to broadly as themes of visibility for the purpose of the data analysis, emerged from the research and were presented in Chapter 3 (see Table 2, p. 98). The perceptions of participants have been analyzed, and the responses have been organized within the context of themes of visibility in the remainder of the chapter and are organized and presented in the following sections: 1) The Superintendency, 2) Visibility as Presence, and 3) Visibility as Absence.

### **The Superintendency**

The general theme of the “superintendency” came up in interviews with participants. This section includes emergent themes related to this general theme within the broad context of themes of visibility and is divided into two sections: 1) Role Conceptualizations and 2) Community Expectations.

#### **Role Conceptualizations**

Recall the discursive role conceptualizations of the local school district superintendent that were previously identified in the literature review. Kowalski and Brunner (2010) delineated the following five role conceptualizations that have evolved since the mid-1800s: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist and communicator. When participants were asked which role conceptualization was the most important or prominent for the current situation in their school district, the role that most often was reported was communicator; however, all roles were mentioned a minimum of six times. The role of communicator significantly outdistanced the second

most mentioned role, manager. A summary of the number of times that each discursive role was mentioned by participants is included in Table 4.

*Table 4: Summary of Participant Discussion about Superintendent Roles*

<b>Participant Discussion of Superintendent Roles</b>	
Discursive Role	Number of Participants Who Discussed the Importance of Role (n=50)
Communicator	36 (72%)
Manager	20 (40%)
Teacher-Scholar	11 (22%)
Democratic Leader	9 (18%)
Applied Social Scientist	6 (12%)

When discussing the role of the superintendent, several participants had difficulty separating the discursive roles. For example, a district-level staff member noted:

That's a tough one, the most important [role]. It's tough to point to just one because a good superintendent can do all those things very well. And if there's a weakness in any one of those categories, that could make him or her an ineffective superintendent, because you need a balanced approach. You can't just be a good communicator if you're not a good scholar, knowing about educational learning, the social issue thing, if you're not strong at that, that could be terrible, so that's a tough one to say which is the most important. I do think that unique challenges within some of those groups are prevalent. Just the demographic change for districts, I know we've seen it here in the rural area; the increase in the

ESL [English as a Second Language] population has brought a unique challenge that wasn't in existence 20 years ago. And it is really changing how we educate, and the different approaches to have more effective instruction. So, that factor alone has a huge impact on what you consider a successful school or district. So, I guess I would say you really have to be balanced with all.

Most participants were able to narrow down their choices and identified one role as most prominent for their current superintendent, although several participants did not limit their choices to one. What follows is a sample of the narrative data related to the five discursive roles of the superintendent in the order of most often mentioned to least often mentioned: 1) Communicator, 2) Manager, 3) Teacher-scholar, 4) Democratic approach, and 5) Applied social scientist.

**Communicator.** The most frequently mentioned discursive superintendent role, by far, was that of communicator. Thirty-six participants shared views related to this particular role. As was the case with discussions about the other superintendent roles, several participants were unable to clearly separate the roles before ultimately identifying communicator as the most prominent. A response shared by a building-level administrator articulates the discursive nature of the five roles. He stated:

None and all. From my perspective, you can't be excellent at one and lousy at the others. The role of the superintendent in my opinion is that multifaceted, highly dimensional position where you need to be able to think on your feet, and this is what I'm looking for in a superintendent. I want that person that can be all of those, given the situation. And so leadership is situational to me and so you need to be, there's gonna be times in this district, you better understand politics and you

better understand the power structure. But you also better understand IDEA and how that impacts a school or a family and have the politically correct answer for these things. You better have an idea about budget or you're never gonna be able to fund the PD that we need, too, if we're not doing these things. So, I don't think that I can pick one of those things. I would say this, though. The theme that runs through all of those in my mind, the different ones that you pointed out, is communication because in each one of those elements, whether you're the budgetary person or whether you're the visionary leader or whether you're that scholar, you need to be able to communicate through all of those so that your audience, your varied audience, understands the role of what you're trying to accomplish is multidimensional.

A school board member shared a similar perspective on the discursive nature of the superintendent roles while ultimately identifying the role of communicator as the most important, stating:

A leader encompasses most of these. I don't think one has to [be most prominent] because to me you need a manager who understands teaching and is a communicator. I mean those are the three issues, and I think that's why we've been successful here is if you don't have a leader who understands education, there's two things: 1) the decisions they make are going to have less information and be ill-informed to the education piece, which is set aside the rest of it, that's our goal, and 2) they're not going to be able to move employees along because if I'm a teacher and I don't think you know squat about teaching, I don't think I buy it, so that teaching background is just, or that teaching piece, is critical. At the

same time, if you don't have somebody who can manage and there are some individuals who are incredible teachers but they simply can't manage people, which is getting people on the right seat in the bus in the right direction, and empowering them and stepping back, you're not going to have a successful [superintendent]. And I've seen some that I think would be great managers and even may have the teaching, but they can't communicate and that's the worst scenario, see, because you see all this great leadership potential but if you can't communicate, it's meaningless. And that's not fair to that person, but it really is, because I can have the best idea in the world and I can empower a thousand people behind me to come do it, but if I then come out and try and communicate to the public and I can't, it's [bad]. So I think those three if I had to pick are the key. Communication is still probably the single most important key, but I think without those other two, you're in tough shape.

A building-level administrator was relatively succinct in his assessment of the importance of the role of communicator, stating, "I honestly think it all starts as the communicator, everything else builds off of that. If you're going to be successful, you're going to be able to have that work for you. All the other stuff is secondary." A district-level staff member acknowledged that the role of communicator has become prominent more recently, stating, "We have evolved to the point where communicator is the biggest piece, especially lately with levy referendums, bond referendums, and everything else that has to be done. The time he has to spend on curriculum development is diminished."

Each of the participant superintendents commented on the importance of the role of communicator. One stated simply, "You know, I would say, at least half of my job,

seriously, is in communication and visibility.” Another talked about the importance of a varied approach to communication, stating:

The communication piece absolutely. There are different ways to communicate. I mean, we've got Facebook, I've got a blog, I've got emails I send out to the teachers. That's big picture communication. There's getting interviewed, I got interviewed by Channel 19 yesterday, Channel 12 the day before, those are getting out more strategic themes and messages. That's important. But along with the communication piece of it, it's more the relational, relationship balance of meeting with people, talking to them, letting them hear from you one-on-one, or one to a group, thoughts on how things are going. So I think that's very important. And the communication is, it's internal and what's going on with our directors and our principals and our teachers, and it's also external with various factions within the community.

A community member and former school board member put an interesting twist on the notion of communicator being the most prominent role, instead placing a premium on overall competence:

In order to be visible and be out there in the community, you have to know what you're doing. Because if you stood up there and said, “Well, um, um, um,” it wouldn't make any difference if you were visible or not. You'd have to know what you were doing.

Conversely, another community member offered the following, stating that even if a superintendent is competent in all of the other areas, the inability to communicate will not allow a superintendent to have his or her desired impact:

Communication is so powerful that you can be all the rest of them, really good at the rest of them, if you can't do that, if you can't do that effectively and relay the message of where you're going and why it's important or why I'm moving you to this building or why we need to spend those dollars, if you can't do that, as a school district, I don't think you're gonna be as successful if communicator is not the top.

A district-level administrator acknowledged that depending on where a school district might be at a particular moment in time, a superintendent's prominent role might have to change. He stated:

Every one of them is still wrapped up in that position. Depending on the needs for the district might dictate the direction you would go in seeking those people. In our district right now, and it somewhat depends on how the district's organized, I would say, because of where we're at in time, I would go with that communicator. We need someone who can really connect with the people and communicate the needs of the district and garner that support and ownership that says we need to pass these bond issues and move ahead. I would tell you that our current superintendent has some strong skills in that area.

He went on to say that if a superintendent is not an effective communicator, a superintendent's time in a school district would be short-lived, adding that if he were able to choose the two most important roles for a superintendent, he would "want a very strong communicator and someone who really understands teaching and learning. Those would be the two that would stand out for me because they're the most important to the long-term viability and mission of a public school system."

Finally, a community member also stated the importance of having a superintendent who is an effective communicator so that he or she can articulate clearly a vision for the future of the school district, stating, “If you can articulate a vision for the future of the school district and people buy into that vision and you get the community and staff and everybody on the same page, there's no end to what can be accomplished.” He concluded his remark by stating simply “If you can't communicate, you're not going to be a very effective leader.”

**Manager.** Twenty participants discussed the role of manager—the second most frequently mentioned role. One community member shared his perspective that the role of manager is critical for a superintendent, and in particular he emphasized the human resources component of business management by stating the importance of hiring quality people to run the organization:

I actually think by nature of the economy and the state structure, manager is critical. And I look at that from the standpoint of management as a human resources person in the sense that I don't expect a superintendent to micromanage the school district. I expect him to hire the people to perform the roles in the most efficient manner possible, whether it's the finance director, whether it's a principal at the various schools, whatever those roles are. The key role in a manager of a school district to me is the hiring process and those people he puts in his key roles, his management team, because that solves a lot of other things. That frees you up then to wear some of those other hats if you're not fighting the fires department by department. You can work on communicating. You can work on the other aspects of it [the superintendency], so manager to me is the most critical.

Another community member also suggested that the role of manager was most critical for a superintendent. This particular participant shared what he sees as a changing landscape for school districts during an era of scarce resources and that a superintendent who understands the manager role will be in high demand. He also questioned the need to have superintendents in very small, rural school districts:

I think the role of superintendent is gonna change, personally. We are at a point of scarce resources; I'm having a hard time when I look at companies that are as big as Lake Machinery. What I'm saying is, can we sustain superintendents in the really small school districts? I think we're going to have a superintendent of the future that's going to be more of a CEO type, more of a business leader, and he's going to leave the education to educational deans. And this is going to lead to some efficiencies in the budgeting and all the rest of it which shouldn't in my opinion affect education because the educational dean should make sure that the standards are being followed.

As mentioned previously, several participants had difficulty identifying just one role as the most prominent. One community member emphasized both the role of communicator and manager, finally landing on manager as the most prominent. Her comments related particularly to the attributes of an entrepreneur and the ability to deal with scarce resources:

I would probably have to say communicator. That and/or, if I can choose two, business manager, because the reality is, although we all have to have an appreciation for education and the work that our teachers do, that's become so little of what we actually get to do every day. You have to figure out how to do

things differently, more efficiently, all the time, every day that's what we face.

And keeping the student in the focus of what we do, so you have to find ways to create the back-end stuff to be more efficient at the same time that teaching and learning is impacted, and so I think the ability to have authentic relationships and to be a good communicator is critical in that, but I also think innovation, entrepreneurialism, all of those things are key in the business management aspect so I don't think of business management as just going behind and looking at books. I think of it as the figuring out how we're going to keep this facility from falling apart, keep our finances in tact and get the support we need from our community.

One community member discussed the role of business manager with a cautionary tone, stating that in his experience, superintendents who were effective managers were neither accessible nor did they necessarily advocate for a quality educational program. He stated:

I've known superintendents who were famous for holding the line on the budget and that sort of thing. And most of the time, the other side of that coin was a perception that they weren't very accessible. They were business people. And I think in terms of visibility to the community, the community should see the superintendent as an advocate for quality education. They want their kids to have the best education that they can possibly have, and they should see the superintendent, or they want to see the superintendent, out there advocating for the highest quality education that can be delivered to their students. I think that

the business end should be more private or more in the boardroom with the school board.

**Teacher-scholar.** Eleven participants mentioned the role of teacher-scholar. Several examples of these responses are included here. One community member felt strongly that teacher-scholar was the most important role because of the need for a superintendent to understand the educational process. He stated:

I really think that it all comes down to the first one, the teacher-scholar, because if you don't have that, then it's hard to manage and decide what's the most important. When you talked about getting scarce resources, now are you going down there and is it going to sound like it's just because you want more money or are you able to, and I guess this ties in to the communication [role] too, are you able to articulate why it's important that we have these resources for the educational process? Because the bottom line is, if it doesn't impact kids, it doesn't help kids learn, we're not going to get that money from the public. That's what they want. They want results, they want the test scores. And so I think everything that you do has to be towards that learning process, and if you don't understand how a classroom works, how kids learn, best teacher techniques and styles and different things, best practices I guess is the way to put it, you're going to struggle.

Another community member from the same school district tended to agree, pointing out how important she felt it was that a superintendent possess a strong educational background compared to a business manager background:

The individual [superintendent] needs to be a teacher-scholar. It does not need to be foremost, but it means that you needed to have had your hands on and your

hands wet. I do not believe that you can hire someone who has not been in the education field to be your superintendent. I am not one of those ones that thinks that the business manager can run your education.

Two of the four superintendents interviewed discussed their views related to the teacher-scholar role of the superintendent. One superintendent explained that the role of teacher-scholar has been most recently emphasized:

Teacher leader, that's why boards, well, at least politically, that's why they say they hire superintendents, you know, "We want our scores to be best. We want our kids to do the best." And I would tell you though, I've evolved this year into more of the educational side of things than probably any time in my career as a superintendent and we're really doing some great things with our professional learning communities this year. So that has taken considerably more emphasis this year.

Another superintendent commented generally about the importance of the teacher-scholar role for the superintendent, indicating that it is essential for a superintendent to be strong in this area in order to be credible with his or her staff members:

The teacher-scholar piece is important for the internal community, probably the external community too, but you really garner a lot more grease to the skids if you have been a successful teacher who cares about teaching and learning as opposed to someone who kinda went into this to be able to coach, for example, and then just sort of doesn't really care about the teaching and learning piece. That's just supposed to happen by itself. So I think you garner respect from, at least from

people I really want to have the respect from, which are your teachers who are committed to student learning. That's important, and I think it's important for the face of the school district.

A district-level staff member shared a similar view related specifically to the superintendent in her school district, indicating that the superintendent makes a point of communicating to district staff members that the teacher-scholar role is very critical. She stated:

[He or she] refers to [himself or herself] as a “teacher on special assignment.” I come from a different background; I don't think a superintendent can just be a building manager and work on efficiency. It doesn't work. It's a different beast because of that crucial education component. That's what we do; that's who we are. So, I think they have to first and foremost be an educational leader, and then all the other pieces do come into play, but when you get into a bigger district like this, then you can hand off part of the communication piece to the communications professional, you can hand off some of the budget piece to the business manager and those types of things. So, the hat is so big, you just have to have a lot of captains to help you with it, because how can anyone do that? You can't just do one thing well in this job. You have to be able to do all things but you have to have other people and resources to rely on because you can't be an expert in all of them. And if I was gonna pick an expert, I would pick the educational leader because ultimately, it's about the kids and the education that they're getting. The other pieces you can hire.

**Democratic approach.** Nine participants mentioned a democratic approach to superintendent leadership. A typical response was provided by a school board member who stated:

Probably the democratic leader would be part of it. I see that as an administrator, you know, like for the business end of it he certainly has to be knowledgeable on that but we have a business manager that does the actual work. And same with the teaching, he has to be knowledgeable about that, but obviously he's not in the classroom like a teacher. A lot of it is community relations. Or not community, but people relations. Getting people to work together and kind of stop a lot of the sniping that gets done at each other.

A similar view was shared by a community member from a different district when she stated:

I'd have to go with the democratic leader. I think that they have to; in order to lead you have to have the respect of your staff and also the students in your school. They have to look up to you. I think in the community, the superintendent should be someone that the fellow citizens can also look up to, look to for guidance maybe, for leadership.

Another community member focused her response on the struggle to fight for scarce resources, stating, "Democratic. Having to advocate for resources and allocate things, not based on how you want things to be, but how best to use what you have."

A district-level staff member indicated that the public puts its faith in the superintendent to lead democratically. She intertwined the role of manager and teacher-scholar, but she ultimately landed on the role of democratic leader as the most prominent:

I would think the democratic leader or the manager. Because people do look at our superintendent to definitely get the final say to lead us all in the right direction. Our superintendent has talked quite a bit about feeling like [he or she] is almost a teacher on special assignment, so they are always, always learning, always willing to be that teacher and I know they will take a leadership team and get up there just like they are teaching a class. But I think, communicator, we can always get, we have the public relations people who do that.

**Applied social scientist.** Six participants mentioned the superintendent's role of applied social scientist; but it was mentioned the fewest times. One superintendent stated: Causing changes to larger society by creating that change inside the school system is a really, really important part of what we do because that changes the outside society. And if public schools really are the cornerstone for democracy, what kind of democracy do we want to build and maintain?

A building administrator focused on his district's ever changing demographics. He acknowledged that he depends on the district superintendent to keep this as a focus because, as a building administrator, he feels that he is unable to devote energy to that particular area, stating:

What's expected of education right now is reflected in where our society is going in terms of on a real basic level with technology, home structure, demographics, and things like that. And I do know that as a building-level leader, I don't necessarily have the time to think about what role my school might be facing in five years, you know, demographically or technologically. The superintendent's assistance and foresight in those areas is very valuable.

## **Community Expectations**

As the role of the superintendent was explored through the interviews, several comments related to the size of the community or school district and school board expectations. Several participants mentioned the notion of “fit” between the superintendent and the community, school district and school board. Additionally, general comments about community expectations were common. This section is organized into two sections: 1) Large/small school expectations and 2) School board expectations.

**Large/small school expectations.** Nineteen participants discussed the theme of large/small school expectations with 27 unique references to this concept. One district-level staff member shared a self-described “small town perspective” which was typical of several participants. This participant’s comment related to the importance of a superintendent being visible in the community, stating:

From a small town perspective, that's pretty important because of the size and I think there is an expectation that you know who the superintendent is in our town. And you see them, you know who that person is. They are gonna be at different events or leadership positions within the community, on different boards and things like that and that's important. And there are lots of bridges that the superintendent is able to make between, with these organizations and with the school that have helped improve, I'd say, all the organizations. It's not just for the school.

Additional insights were shared regarding the size of the community. A district-level staff member distinguished between large and small communities, describing a

superintendent in a small community as a technician or more principal-like than superintendents in larger communities. He stated:

I think the smaller school district you get, the more the superintendent is probably known. He'll know who's having babies in their school district and vice versa. They'll know what's going on in the superintendent's life without a whole lot of interaction needing to take place whereas when you get to a larger district, it's gotta be more of a broadcast type of communication.

He also added that there is a difference in media coverage in small towns compared to larger communities. He stated:

That's kind of what happens when you're selling levy referendums and bond referendums, is your picture is in the paper, especially small town where you're front page. Here when it's only four sheets of paper, you're constantly front page.

One superintendent shared a perspective about moving from a much smaller school district to a larger school district and the differing expectations in both communities, stating:

You know, and my role here has changed so much from [my previous position in a much smaller school district] in the sense that I have a staff. You know, down there, heck, I was part-time principal, I was the staff development coordinator, I wrote all grants, did all, you know, we had our business manager, so he did the E-rate, and the books and stuff like that. But basically I was more of a big school principal, big big school principal than I was superintendent in many ways.

A school board member offered a similar perspective when commenting on the expectations of the superintendent in his community, acknowledging that the size of the district impacted his perception. He stated:

I think that its important that people know the superintendent, so they're comfortable. That's my biggest thing. We're a small enough school district, so I think it's very important because the superintendent wears more hats in my opinion than a bigger school district. So if somebody's not comfortable with the principal or don't feel they're getting the results, they want to go to the superintendent. And we're small enough that that's kind of the buck stops there with everything.

A community member who is a former school board member in a large school district offered a perspective on the expectations that are placed on a superintendent in a small school district versus a larger school district, stating:

It's a critical, critical position regardless of the size of district. In small towns it's a critical position in terms of this is our seed of learning, you know. This is the person in whom we trust our kids. The larger the district, the more political. Well, I don't know. It's all political stuff in small towns, but there are more things to balance. There's the relationship with the city and the county, you know, there's all of those sorts of realities.

A community member felt that superintendent visibility required more effort in a larger community and was much easier to come by in a small community. She stated:

I think in the smaller communities that [visibility] automatically comes, because if you're part of these little towns, you stick out like a sore thumb and everybody

knows who you are and probably knows all your business as well, good or bad.

So for that, it may be a given but the visibility issue for a larger district, it is really more important because you have to actually be active in doing it. It's not a matter of something that can just kind of come.

Another community member from seemed to concur with this sentiment when she stated, "I think you can only do so much by e-mail or telephone, but being there, being at that place is pretty important. And it's very easy to do in our community because we're so small." A building-level staff member who had previously worked in a district considerably larger than the one in which he currently works shared his perspective about the size of school district and the difference in expectations for the superintendent. He stated:

On a district level, it's different coming from a bigger school. We had a separate administrative building, we hardly ever saw the superintendent. It seemed like his job was just to keep the wheels spinning. In a smaller district, I think it's important for everybody to be able to know everyone, between the common Joe having coffee downtown to law enforcement, you know, all facets of community life.

An employee from the largest community included in the study shared that there were significant differences between smaller and larger school districts, stating:

So for me, it might be different than for someone that's in a smaller community. Visibility there might mean going to basketball games. Visibility here means serving on some of the power boards in the community, like the Chamber, the Economic Development Association, being visible at the legislature. The

superintendent here gets a lot of media attention just because they're here and located here, so if they want a local perspective on an education story, they often call.

A building-level staff member described his district as medium-sized and commented on the level of accessibility to the superintendent in his district compared to larger school districts. He stated:

From an employment standpoint what comes to mind is just being a familiar face with individuals in the district, especially in a mid-sized district like this where compared to some larger districts, there's much more accessibility to the superintendent in this size district. And so you have to be prepared to embrace that.

He also added that at the building level, it is given that people expect to know the principal because that person works closely with the staff and students; however, he also stated that because of his district's size "the employees and the community want to feel connected to the superintendent as well."

A district-level staff member spoke about the potential challenges of having a part-time superintendent, a situation that, according to her, is becoming more and more common in small, rural school districts:

Smaller districts, there are probably a lot of us are looking at maybe not having a superintendent full time, so then obviously he wouldn't be present all the time. He would be absent and, good or bad, the days here he might really focus on whether it be budgeting or visiting with people or it might be that he's here and really getting work done but the conflict to that is there's not as much time to listen to

people and to visit with people and find out the needs. It's like you have to come and frantically get your things done and you're not going to get the perception of what are they really thinking and have the time to visit with people.

A building-level staff member shared his perception that it is important for a superintendent to live in the community in which he or she works. Comments regarding this particular view were limited, but the topic of where the superintendent lives did come up three times throughout the study. It is worth noting that the four superintendents who participated in the study each live in the districts in which they work. The staff member stated:

Yeah, well I think especially when we're talking about passing a referendum. A small community like ours, it's not like you can really hide anything. So I think it's always been important that our superintendent live in the community and be a part of the community, and I just think it adds a lot to the perception of the school district.

**School board expectations.** Fifteen participants discussed School Board Expectations with 23 unique references to this theme. The school board members who participated in the study had a significant amount to say about their expectations of their district's superintendent. One school board member provided an example of such a comment when he stated that his community and his school board were not only expected to hire a superintendent with a specific skill set but that the superintendent should be honest. While the comment referred to the importance of the ability to communicate, it more significantly provided an altruistic example of what a school board expects of a superintendent. He stated:

The superintendent, I think people in society, and me as a board member and I think other board members, when we hired, we were looking for a communicator, an educational leader. And we feel, and I can speak because we've talked about this that it all falls into it, if you're a good communicator, well first of all you better not be telling lies, you better be honest, you better be telling the facts.

A district-level staff member provided an interesting perspective on the nature of school boards trying to get it right with their superintendents. According to him, his district's school board finally got it right after several attempts, stating:

I can tell you the styles of visibility have changed tremendously. Both directed by the school board and also by the personalities of the superintendents. The first superintendent that I worked with was a very hands on, very office-oriented superintendent. Ruled with authority, he was the king of the world so to speak. People were afraid to approach him. From there they went to, the school board wanted more openness and they completely swung the pendulum the other way and they got somebody who was very wide open, very public-oriented, but kind of scattered all over the place with policies and programs and what have you. So then the next superintendent that came in was very process-oriented and so the pendulum swung again in other words. Almost right back to where it was before. And very little communication and so forth took place internally, and it became a grinding point. So the next school board then went the pendulum the other way and got a very wide-open, gregarious person. He did very well in terms of rallying the troops and getting everything going but of course, also made himself very vulnerable to attack from the outside. So then we swung the pendulum down the

middle finally and we found a good balance. So, it has truly been amazing that the visibility piece, depending on the need of the school board, they got what they wanted but it turned out that it was a very disruptive process that caused an aftereffect [that] caused problems.

One superintendent discussed the topic of school board expectations at length. It was very clear to this superintendent what the school board expected, stating:

It's do you need the finance person, we're in finance trouble, we need that. Do you need a policy person, someone who comes in and just, we need to get back in order on all this stuff. Or, do you need the PR person? They clearly hired me and so it was definitely so, they wanted the school district to be thought more highly of, and they needed to get this bond done. So they needed a PR person. And that's not someone who is going to sit behind his or her desk and be in the office all day. They wanted me so I'm on the different executive boards and all of these different things. And it was very intentional, my hire. There was an expectation. They wanted me writing, like I was writing a column weekly at my old district. Oh man, they wanted me to do that. There is a definite expectation of me to do this. So it was an intentional hire to match my skills here.

A school board member from the same district concurred, although indicating that the expectations are more implied than explicit, stating simply "I don't know if we specifically talk about it, but I think, yeah, the general feeling is that it's important for the superintendent to be out." A community member also commented on school board expectations for the superintendent, as she seemed to indicate that the school board has

either established unreasonable expectations the district's superintendent or the superintendent has set the bar very high:

You could set up the school board to set up reasonable expectations, you know, that you're not always locked in your office, some of that, but our superintendent goes to almost every sporting event that's home, some that are away, and stuff like that is above and beyond.

Another school board member discussed his school board's approach during the superintendent hiring process. The interview process included several questions about visibility:

There was discussion regarding and questions on how the superintendent would go about being visible in the community. We had, I think, 25 different questions and there were several that focused on that, and so when the board developed those, it [visibility] was an important part and it's working very well. And I know it is because I've heard it, someone said, "Well I've heard nothing but fantastic things about your superintendent." And I'm hearing that from a lot of different groups. And the fact that they're having a conversation about the superintendent exemplifies the visibility issue.

A school board member discussed not only the school board's expectations of the superintendent, but also the superintendent's expectations of the school board in the area of community engagement, stating that the superintendent "is using some tools to make us more productive in that standpoint and that's really helping." The same board member commented on the current superintendent and the former superintendent, providing a

glimpse at the blurred lines of school board expectations and the tension that exists between visibility within a district and visibility in a larger community context:

Everybody could see him out in the community. I'm not trying to make waves, and sometimes people don't let go. They expect that same style to move through with a new administration. So that's where [our current superintendent is] getting hit. And if [he or she] could improve, that would be where, maybe out at the coffee shops on a more regular basis. But, you know, it's not productive time.

Finally, a school board member offered the following perspective about her school board's expectations were when they hired their current superintendent, stating:

Well, I guess it tells me that our school board has probably done a good job of selecting a leader at our schools when they can step out of the school and also become a leader in the community, are willing to work with others, kind of like being in kindergarten and learning how to play with others, I guess.

### **Visibility as Presence**

This section includes emergent themes related to visibility as presence and is divided into five sections: 1) Aspects of Presence, 2) Requirements of Communication, 3) Relationship Development, 4) Engagement Efforts, and 5) Importance of Presence.

#### **Aspects of Presence**

This section contains various cluster themes that relate to aspects of presence. To begin, one particular comment from one of the participant superintendents sets the stage for this section of the analysis. When asked a question about what counts as visibility, the superintendent responded:

What counts? As I became an administrator, I realized that every single thing I do counts. Every time I talk with a teacher about how their day went, how their day's going, or how their child is doing after being sick or when I see, when I stop at the grocery store and say "Hi" to a little kid who recognizes me, it all counts.

This section related to aspects of visibility is organized into the following subsections: 1) Adverse, 2) Accessible, 3) Authentic, 4) Beyond physical, 5) Transparent, 6) Trustworthy, and 7) Synergetic.

**Adverse.** Thirteen participants discussed the concept of adverse visibility with a total of 25 unique references to the concept. For the purposes of this study, adverse visibility is defined as visibility that has a deleterious effect on either the individual who is visible or on the entity that he or she represents. This definition was derived through the analysis of participant comments.

Several participants from one case district recalled a previous superintendent who seemed to embody the concept of adverse visibility. One building-level staff member described the situation in the following way, "He enjoyed a crowd, drew a lot of attention to himself whether it be positive or negative, really got the community talking, you know, but it was probably more volatile." Another building-level staff member had the following to say about the same superintendent and contrasted that person with the district's current superintendent:

No matter what he [the former superintendent] says, you always feel like you're being sold something, you know, kind of a used car salesman, and not that our current superintendent doesn't have agendas either on things, but [he or she] knows how small towns work, and that's important.

A community member also reflected on the same former superintendent, stating:

We had a superintendent a few years ago that wasn't as truthful or wasn't as clear and concise in his communication, and although he was visible, that was a detriment to him. So visibility isn't always positive if you don't have that relationship piece in tact.

A building-level staff member shared a more general perspective on poor communicators, stating, "I think we've all worked with bad communicators as bosses before, as leaders. And you know, it's not good. Because they may have the best ideas in the world, but if they can't communicate, it's not good."

One superintendent shared a perspective on adverse visibility when answering a question about what counts as visibility. This superintendent challenged what may be viewed as a traditional, albeit ineffective, approach to visibility:

OK, here's something I don't do and a lot of people do it. I don't go sit down for coffee at the Corner Cafe or different places, and I don't go down for breakfasts and different things. And I know a lot of times people [previous superintendents and administrators] had. My thinking on this is, the best PR I can ever do is have a well-run district. And I can't go down town and [do that]. Because I remember the old guard, I mean, literally from like 9:30-10:30, they'd be down at the Corner Cafe shooting the breeze. It's like, that's not how we function. Life's too busy for doing that. There is something to be said, my visiting is at the games. That's my coffee break type thing, where people can come and talk to me. I don't go down that route; I don't go to the table of knowledge and share my thoughts on things.

A community member from another district would likely echo this superintendent's view that the best form of visibility is a well-run school district. He stated, "I tend to think of a kind of negative visibility that, I think that the community, they want a school that runs smoothly. So they don't want to hear about things that are not smooth." He later added, "No news is good news. I don't know that the community cares how much they see the superintendent if everything is running smoothly." The same community member commented on what might be considered an egregious form of adverse visibility, stating:

I think in terms of a certain kind of integrity, a perception of integrity, of moral uprightness. They don't want to, they may not have been there, but they don't want to hear about a superintendent who's been drunk in public. They don't want to hear about a superintendent who's cheating on his or her spouse or something like that. They don't want to hear those kinds of rumors about a superintendent. I think people hold superintendents to a higher standard, whether that's fair or not, I personally think it is fair because they want the superintendent to be kind of a role model for the kids and that sort of thing and for the other teachers. And it's a negative visibility. They don't want that.

Another community member, recalling the superintendent of the school district in which she attended school as a child, shared what she considered a historical or traditional perception of a superintendent. She offered this perspective on adverse visibility, "I remember when I was in school, of course you're just a kid, but I can't remember ever going anywhere and seeing the superintendent there. He was someone to fear."

A school board member, who prefaced this comment with a strong vote of confidence for his district's current superintendent, discussed the delicate nature of public perception:

If you stand your ground too hard sometimes that's looked at as being overly aggressive and, you know, [he or she] is an asshole, something like that, where really it's just, here's your policies, stick to your policies. You know, you're not sticking to your policy on this particular situation, that's where you run into some problems. Our superintendent called somebody on it, you're not doing what you said you were going to do and it's in your policy and, you know, why am I being treated differently. And it backlashed and [he or she] was a jerk [for being honest].

A district-level staff member discussed an either-or scenario in which a superintendent either has a certain type of visibility or not, and if he or she does not, this can be very detrimental to a school district. Here was his perspective:

How the superintendent presents himself or herself is a key to a community supporting the school district. If you don't have the type of visibility and relationship that comes from that visibility with your community that garners community support, ultimately the schools belong to the community and the person who is in charge of that operation, the superintendent, needs to be able to garner the trust of the public and in response to that, if the public trusts the superintendent, has faith in what you're doing and feel like you're a good steward of their school district, it's huge as opposed to the opposite which is wholly detrimental to the district.

**Accessible.** Thirty-six participants (72%) referred to accessibility within the broader concept of superintendent visibility. A total of 80 unique references to accessibility were made, the highest such figure for any of the study's emergent themes. Several examples of comments will be shared in this section. To begin, a building-level staff member stated simply, "The superintendent can't be somebody in a cave." Another staff member stated, "I think for me, it's just someone that is accessible, that you probably see on a, not a daily basis, but on a regular basis I guess would be the best way to put it." Yet another building-level staff member discussed his district superintendent's involvement in various service organizations and the 5:00 a.m. workout sessions at the local YMCA and suggested, "I imagine things come up where there is an opportunity, face-to-face, to talk to people about what is good and maybe even things that need to be improved."

Sticking with the same school district, a district-level staff member commented on the relative approachability of their district's superintendent compared to others with whom he has worked. He stated:

Well, I think from our superintendent's standpoint, [he or she] is a very personable person, I mean, [he or she] is somebody that if you were to look at [him or her] in a crowd, you'd know you'd be able to walk up and talk. [He or She] is not the kind of person that has this presence that says [he or she] is somebody I shouldn't go to until I'm invited. So, that's one thing in [his or her] favor. Some superintendents that I've worked with, they almost have this aloofness about them. Ours is not that way.

The superintendent from this same district offered the following comment regarding accessibility, suggesting that from [his or her] perspective, the effort is well worth it:

I get a lot of comments on just going to games, going to concerts, going to the fourth grade orchestra concert. It just, it definitely makes a difference in the perception you find and I jokingly say this “Well, I'm always looking for votes, you know.” You're out there and you're wanting people to feel good about what you're doing and they can talk to you, and you just open it up that way.

Another superintendent shared the following perspective about why [he or she] considers [his or her] own visibility to be important:

I think it's very important for people to see me, for people to know I'm around. I wanna be available for people. I wanna be able to, and to me, it's important that I know what's going on so it's easier for me to be there than get a report about it later. People have mentioned they like seeing me at the games, they like seeing me around. They like that the back of my truck says, “Highway 47 Motors” They like that. They like that I'm available and around. I've heard that from community members. I've heard that from parents.

A school board member shared his perspective about visibility, using the term approachability in his discussion. He spoke about the need for a superintendent to not tell the public what it wants to hear, but rather a superintendent needs to have the courage to speak the truth and connect with the public regarding the district's vision. He stated:

Visibility. To me, approachability is the first word that jumps to my mind, and the second is, you know, a lot of shoe work. I mean, to me, everything they say and

do needs to be representing the district and so you've got to have that approachability when you're out in the public so people come up and you can connect with them and talk with them and not, you know, I think some people wanna tell you whatever you want to hear. And in any position, particularly a superintendent's position I think that is dangerous. You need to say, "This is the course," and really explain it in a way that if somebody says that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, say, "You know what, I respect and appreciate it." So it's an honesty, a dialogue, but as far as the visibility, it's an approachability and it's getting out there and it's getting out to parent-teacher groups, community groups, business groups, and just telling them your vision of the district and how the district's vision brings them in with it.

Commenting about a former superintendent who gained a reputation of being someone who was very visible, a school board member discussed how important it was for the superintendent to be accessible as a "real Joe" in order to help advance the district's initiatives. He stated:

One of our former superintendents was in the community a lot, you know. He made sure that he was available at all the fine arts events, all the athletic events and he'd walk the crowds when he was out there. He worked very well with the media, both print and news and then also was in service clubs, things like that, so he gave that feeling of, you know, that he was extremely available, and prior to that move towards being out there in the community, he was getting hit a lot with regards to, some of the stances that he was taking on some of the things that were

happening in the school district. And I think just being out there kind of deflected some of that and he started, you know, becoming a real Joe to a lot of people.

A community member shared his perspective that if done well, visibility can break down barriers and help a community move forward. He stated:

And there are certain people, it's really how well he presents or she presents [himself or herself]. If they do it well and they reach out to folks and they show up at the games and they're glad-handing and shaking people's hands and they're in service clubs and all the rest of it. Guess what? You're not a stranger. You're not that educational bureaucrat. You're somebody who's just trying to make the community move forward. And if you can do that, then things go pretty well.

Another community member discussed the need for the superintendent to be someone who understands the community and listens to what community members have to say. He stated:

It's somebody who actually understands the community, listens to what the community has to say, but also, people would feel free to approach him, even before it becomes, something would become a full-blown issue and say, "Hey, I heard this and," and they become more approachable. I think that's a real key in that type of position.

The same community member also discussed the need to be approachable and that sometimes, it is not all that difficult for a superintendent to be visible if he or she lives in the school district. He stated:

You [superintendent] need to be approachable. I think this is another thing that some don't always see. I think, not that it's absolutely necessary, but I think it sure

helps having, in my case, you know, the CEO available and being the superintendent, live and be present in the district or in the area so just, you don't have to even work that hard at it. Just simply going to church, going to the grocery store, going to the ball game, wherever, going to an arts event, whatever one's interests might be, you're gonna be seen without having to actually make a point of it. So that helps.

A community member discussed the importance of superintendent visibility outside of the schools, stating “I think it's important in today's environment to be approachable, to be reachable, and to respond to the demands of the whole environment, not just within the closed walls of the school district.”

Another community member from the same district discussed both accessibility and non-accessibility as concepts related to presence and absence, respectively. She stated:

Presence is not just physical presence. To me, what comes to mind is, when I hear the word presence, I think of the word accessibility. When I think of the word absence, it's not, also not just physical. I also think, when I think of absence, it's non-accessibility.

A third community member from the same district commented on the possibility that a superintendent's being visible might open doors that might not otherwise be open, suggesting that being available is very important, stating:

It just kind of opens that door where if they're not visible, those doors might not be open. If they're not out in the community, then there's not going to be as much opportunity to just strike up the conversation and then build those relationships.

And as the relationship, you know they start on the superficial level and then they can build deeper as, “Oh, can I talk to you about something? This is what happened at school and.” you know, whereas if they didn't have that, that, surfacey relationship first, it might not develop into something where they can really feel like they could talk to the superintendent or come to a school board meeting and talk about something saying, ‘Ok, I talked about this with the superintendent. I, I think I'll be comfortable going to the school board meeting.’ So, I think it opens doors.

One community member shared that superintendent visibility is important to the community, perhaps so that the school could be made available to the community for specific events. Here was her perspective:

A man or woman that would be active in community affairs outside the school district, that would be available to people. Working together with other community leaders for the betterment of your city, which also helps the school. And being available, offering the school, if there's anything that the school can do. Do you need a workforce in the evening to help serve pancakes somewhere? This type of thing. Just being available to people in the school district.

Another community member referred to the ability to “cozy up” to the superintendent if he or she is attending various school or community events, stating:

That has to do with accessibility, you know, that maybe you don't, you wouldn't necessarily think of going and making an appointment to see the superintendent. But, you might appreciate being able to cozy up to him or her at an event of some

kind or at your church or wherever and just say “How are things going,” or “What’s the deal with such and such,” that kind of thing.

The same community member also discussed the importance of a superintendent being an advocate, and by being accessible and by listening, people will believe that they have an advocate, stating:

I think accessibility and ability to listen and to hear what’s going on, that’s really important for superintendents. People nowadays, they want an advocate. Teachers want an advocate, students want an advocate, everybody wants an advocate. And I think that that is something that is an expectation of superintendents and I don’t know, I think it’s an almost impossible position to be in for the superintendent. How do you be an advocate for everybody? But isn’t the key to that listening? Because people will think you’re an advocate, even if you’re not, if you listen to them.

A district-level staff member used the terms “approachable” and “listening” in her comments about superintendent visibility. She also acknowledged that it is not only important for the superintendent to be considered approachable by the community but also by school district stakeholders such as parents, students and staff members. She indicated that others in the organization also need to be approachable. She stated:

Approachable, someone that is willing to listen to concerns from all levels of the community and also the school district, teachers, students, parents. I know there's some sifting of those levels, maybe not immediately that they go to the superintendent, but that there's a feeling that he's there or she's there to listen and support the best interests of kids.

A school board member also discussed the importance of a superintendent being accessible to both the external community and the internal school district stakeholders, stating:

Well, obviously, it's [visibility] very important because it makes the superintendent more accessible to the community at large as well as teachers, you know, the relationship with the staff is important and if [he or she] is out talking and meeting with people on other levels other than just school-related, education-related things, then they become more of just a person that lives down the street and I can go talk to them about anything.

A district-level staff member discussed how being visible simply makes a superintendent easier to approach, stating:

It helps them [the superintendent] seem more approachable. I think it makes people feel like, you know what, just seeing someone, you know, it's kind of like you see the news anchor every night on TV and you see them in the store and it's like, hey, I met, you know, you feel like all of a sudden you're buds or something. But I think people see the superintendent out and about and it does make them feel it's easier to approach.

**Authentic.** Twenty-four participants referred specifically to the concept of authenticity. Terms considered synonyms of authentic such as sincerity, genuine, and down-to-earth were categorized in this particular theme. To begin, a comment from a community member distinguished two different kinds of visibility from his perspective. In his words, "There's visibility in terms of 'Look at me,' and there's visibility in 'I'm

being visible for this community such that I can make this a better place.” The latter form of visibility suggests a level of authenticity and purpose.

One superintendent shared this perspective when asked about the term visibility. The importance of being sincere and honest was stressed, stating:

When you're looking at visibility, you're looking at presence. I think that's sincere leadership. Sincere. You don't want somebody to come in and BS them and pretend that they're somebody that they're not. They want somebody who says how it is and is honest with them, and if you're sincere you're going to get a lot more out of the visibility aspect than if people smell you as a rat.

A district-level staff member would concur. He considers his superintendent a great communicator who is able to “tell it like it is” further adding, “I appreciate that and I think most people do, instead of beating around the bushes.”

One of the superintendents discussed the importance of being himself and that people sometimes have a difficult time reading his sense of humor. As a means to help counter this issue, he suggests that another important reason to be visible is so that he can be viewed as more genuine as people get to know him. He stated:

When you're visible, people know how to take you. I'm not a real smiley guy, and I have kind of a dry sense of humor sometimes and people don't always know how to take that. And sometimes I say things that people don't quite, you know, it's not that I'm being rude or anything. I'll just make kind of an off-the-cuff comment or something and if they don't know me, I try not to do something like that. But, you know, you just make comments here and there or you try to just lighten up the mood a little bit. I mean, it's nothing bad. But if you don't smile

after it, which sometimes I find myself, I don't really smile, not everyone understands that dry sense of humor, but if you have that relationship you can do that. And people take you a lot more genuinely if they can understand how to read you. What is it, 80% of communication is visual, body language and so forth?

A building-level staff member discussed ways in which his district's superintendent has enhanced his perceived level of authenticity, stating:

He writes the columns for the paper, he's in the service group, I see him at church, he's reading at church, he's greeting, you know, just out there doing stuff like that so people know who he is, and I think that's important. He doesn't come off as aloof, especially in a smaller town like that.

A school board member shared his perspective on why he felt so strongly about his district's current superintendent when the board made offer of employment. He discussed "quality visibility" as the ability to genuinely speak with multiple stakeholders. He stated:

Well, you can't develop relationships sitting in your office. I think the biggest thing is that with visibility out there is that the superintendent is obviously listening and asking questions. I mean, to me, I'll tell you one of the reasons that what I was looking for in a superintendent, one of the reasons that drew me right to [our current superintendent] was that at 10:00 in the morning our superintendent could be talking to a second grader and relating with that second grader. At 11:00, [the superintendent] could be at the Chamber of Commerce talking to probably the head of the Chamber of Commerce and you wouldn't notice a difference. There would be a relationship with both of them. And see

that's, when you get into that visibility quality, to be able to talk with a blue collar worker, the guy's working on the street, things like that, and yet being able to talk about anything. And that's where you get into that relationship because right away people feel connected to that and again, I'm talking about an individual here, but that's one of the strengths. And I think that I've seen superintendents that either have it one way or the other. They, they struggle, and people can tell when it's a fake.

Perhaps also referring to quality visibility, a community member discussed her superintendent's very down-to-earth nature and contrasted that with other superintendents that previously worked in the school district. She shared these thoughts:

You go to Kiwanis, and the superintendent is there, calling people by their first name and is developing those relationships with a broad group of people. And that's just one of the groups. We've had superintendents before who have been in all of those things, but, you know, kind of "I'm gonna come in and I'm gonna sit down, I'm not really gonna care to get to know you or what your name is, or who you are, but I'm gonna attend." That didn't work for me. What our superintendent does works for me because [he or she] actually getting to know people, interested in people, very down-to-earth, and so it's easy to build a relationship with [him or her]. That seems way more effective to me from a visibility standpoint than just, you know, checking it off your list. "Yeah, I went to Kiwanis this week, I didn't engage with anyone, you know. I cracked some jokes and left." I think [our superintendent's] style is much more effective long-term.

A community member discussed the importance of the position of superintendent in her school district and also discussed the need for a superintendent to not stay in his or her ivory tower. She stated:

The superintendent is extremely important in our district. The visibility, as far as being out there just to be able to get a level of comfort and authenticity for the individual presenting a message. If it's someone who stays hidden in their ivory tower, the chance of being accepted by the community is less than one who is communicating on the ground and is active and involved and is viewed as being a part of the community as a whole.

Another community member discussed the importance of superintendent authenticity because students will be able to see through anything less, sharing this perspective:

To be a superintendent, you have to be authentic because the teachers need it, the kids can see through you like nothing, you know, so if you're not authentic, they're not gonna, they're not gonna care. And you need the kids to care. And so I think as far as whenever you are visible, to connect meaningfully with people is very, very important.

A building-level staff member discussed an experience with his district's superintendent in which a sense of vulnerability showed was revealed by that person demonstrating a level of genuineness in a response to a question to which the answer was not known. Here is his recollection:

[He or She] listened, had some ideas, but then, [he or she] had this, this vulnerability about [himself or herself] to say, "Yeah, I'm studying that," it wasn't

an “I know” kind of attitude, which is very easy to put off. Rather, “That's an interesting concept. I'm gonna do some reading on that, and you know what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna talk to the superintendent in another district about that.” And I thought, that is fantastic. Not only are you, are you gonna look into an idea, you empowered me by saying, “That's a good idea.”

A building-level staff member discussed what he called a “meaningful presence”, stating, “And that meaningful presence is pervasive. When it's meaningful and it's genuine, it's very pervasive. It sneaks in everywhere and people don't even realize that the culture's changing.”

A community member provides a fitting end to this section. She discussed “authentic relationships” being necessary in whatever medium is used to communicate. She stated:

So to me, visibility takes multiple forms in terms of the way it's delivered, but to me it's the most authentic, or it's about authentic relationships. So when people trust you because the message is clear and the message that you give either via newspaper or in person or newsletter or whatever, that's authentic and people understand that you see issues from the variety of perspectives and that you're not just a salesperson.

**Beyond physical.** Twelve participants discussed visibility as a phenomenon that goes beyond simple physical presence. Several discussed visibility as a level of involvement, such as a community member who stated, “Well, I think being involved, besides just being there.” One superintendent shared a similar view, discussing the need to be “mentally present” by sharing this perspective:

I work so hard to make certain I'm physically present, and when I get to a thing I have to actually be mentally present. I think the worst thing you can do as a superintendent is be physically present and mentally absent. So to go to an event, for example, if I'm gonna go to either a school community event or a larger community event, I need to know a little bit about it so that I can be more than a lump on a log when I'm there so I need to be present in my state of mind and have some degree of care or passion about the topic.

Another superintendent used the term "relational value" to describe a deeper visibility beyond physical presence: "When I'm talking presence, I don't know, there's more. The relational value of the visibility, the relational value of the presence is where it's at. It's not the political just being seen."

A community member shared her perspective that visibility can take many different forms. She also referred to visibility beyond a superintendent's visibility. She stated, "So visibility can be different things. It doesn't have to be personal visibility, but school visibility."

A community member discussed a concept he referred to as "on-call visibility," as if a superintendent's visibility should be treated as a resource to be distributed according to the basic economic concept of supply and demand. When asked about superintendent visibility, he stated:

I think it's mostly on demand. It's where the superintendent surfaces when there's a demand for his or her presence as opposed to making a real effort to go out and be visible all the time. It's when something comes up and something needs to be

addressed, he or she is the voice that speaks on those issues. On-call visibility, I would call it on-call visibility.

**Transparent.** Thirteen participants used the term transparency when discussing superintendent visibility. The sense was that superintendent visibility either can or should lead to a greater perception of transparency by the community. One participant who discussed this was a community member who also happened to be a former news reporter, stating, “In our community it's been expected by the news media that the superintendent is available and transparent. So to me, that's also a part of visibility.”

A community member discussed the need for a superintendent to be transparent during times of crisis. She acknowledged the difficulty in balancing various competing sources of pressure, including the pressure to be transparent, stating:

When I think of the role that a superintendent plays in a crisis situation, which is kind of more looking at the negative side maybe than the positive things, but in those negative situations, the public looks to that superintendent to be visible on the situation and to take a leadership role. And so I'm thinking about that today and how we can balance privacy rights and litigation considerations, but also the need of the public to look at that superintendent and say, “Ok, well tell us, what is the story?” We're so bound by law in what we can say and what we can do, but it's a critical time for a superintendent to be visible.

Another community member discussed the idea of transparency in order to combat a negative perception of secrecy, stating:

Well, I think communication is important. It seems like that sometimes there can be a lot of secrecy going on and a lot of wondering what's happening, especially

among teachers and then they spread that out into the community. And so I think an openness and clarity about what's going on, what's gonna happen down the road, that matters to people.

A district-level staff member shared a detailed perspective about being transparent even when, or perhaps especially when, decisions might garner resistance or might be controversial:

Relationships are a key to a successful school district and that relationship with, you can take it from the student, through the parent, into the community, to the school board all the way throughout. And you'll find out real clearly when you have to float bond issues, build buildings, that type of thing, if your superintendent is establishing those relationships with all of those groups. You know, teachers, administrators, so it is vital. And the key to those relationships is, well I don't know if it's the key to the relationship, but those relationships are slightly different at all levels because you have to be a leader, an administrator, a manager, and so sometimes you're gonna make decisions that are difficult for various groups to accept. But if you do them in a very open, transparent way, very visible way, people are more likely to accept it, especially if they understand the process and why you made that decision, even if they disagree. So, if you try to make decisions in the absence of those relationships, in the absence of visibility, you will be highly criticized and so, to me, visibility...is that whole being very transparent about what you do and providing the information that people need and want to see to understand why you had to make the decisions you had to make, whether they're decisions they agree with or do not.

A building-level staff member shared that transparency might not necessarily mean sharing everything, because that might be difficult if not impossible to do. Rather, to him transparency was more about an approach to communication. He stated:

To constantly be able to tell people and make people feel like you are not hiding anything. I mean, you just can't say everything, but just making people feel that they're getting a straight answer and that you're not hiding.

**Trustworthy.** Thirty-two participants mentioned the notion of trust when asked about superintendent visibility. Synonyms such as honesty, credibility and integrity were included in this particular theme. One superintendent's view about visibility was very clear, stating, "Being visible does increase your credibility, even if that makes no sense. Relationships are so important in our business."

A community member considered trust to be the basis of any relationship and emphasized the importance of trust. She stated, "People need to trust. I mean, obviously trust is a big part of that, not making promises, following through, all those things that develop trust is the basis of any relationship." A school board member shared a perspective about the importance of developing trust with the community, stating, "The superintendent has to explain things to people and develop the trust. That's the bottom line. Does Joe Blow out there trust that superintendent?"

Several participants from the same school district discussed trust extensively given the district's recent history of not being able to pass a bond referendum before ultimately gaining approval once the district's current superintendent was installed. The superintendent was given a great deal of credit by several study participants for the successful bond referendum due in large part to a level of trust that was developed in the

community. A building-level staff member shared this perspective about the current and former superintendents:

Half the reason that the other [bond referendum] didn't pass, besides maybe being too expensive, is because people didn't trust what was being said. You know, he'd go out and he'd talk to them, all these different groups and then after he leaves people are like, "I'm not doing that. Forget that. You know, it sounds great but, I don't believe that." And our superintendent doesn't have that problem. I mean, just in the position [superintendent] people are going to question you, and that goes with the territory, but there isn't that credibility problem, and that goes a long ways in a school like this, there is some credibility and that's a good thing.

Another building-level staff member echoed this sentiment, stating, "It was sold, basically, on the fact that people saw [him or her], and when they heard [him or her], they trusted [him or her]. And that's why the vote went from 30-70 to 70-30." A school board member would concur and offered a board member's perspective, stating:

It was very important for getting the bond passed. And the operating levy, two years ago, we renewed that. And I just think the fact that the superintendent's been out, people know [the superintendent], and they trust [the superintendent]. And so they're willing to believe what [the superintendent] says and, "Well, if [the superintendent] says so, then I guess we'll vote yes." That hasn't always been the case, either.

The same school board member later added, "And to have the trust, that comes from personal integrity and honesty." The school board member also discussed honesty and integrity in a more general fashion, sharing this perspective:

Well I guess the main thing; I'm big on being honest and having integrity. I think that's the main attributes a superintendent has to have. If people can't believe what he or she is saying, then he or she going to have all sorts of trouble.

Trust is not garnered by telling people what they want to hear, according to one community member. He stated that doing so could destroy credibility. Here was his perspective:

When it comes to relationships, it's very situational but it's necessary to build that relationship so that trust develops, and I might not tell you what you want to hear, but you know that what I'm telling you is accurate, is transparent, and too many times I think that's not the case.

Another community member made a specific reference to his district's superintendent and the trust that has been established in his community due to opportunities to interact with the superintendent that exist both formally and informally. He stated:

Being visible presents a lot more opportunities for that interaction and I think it also helps generate those discussions, not only in formal settings but in informal settings, which I think people get to know [the superintendent] as an individual, know [he or she] is a good person, works hard, got a passion for kids and school and the community, and so it's vital to have all those contact points so when things come up, positive or negative, people relate to the individual, just not an entity, they have somebody they can talk to and say, "Wow, I don't know if I agree with what happened at the school, but with at the helm, and [he or she] made that decision, I trust the superintendent." So, therefore, what could have

been a big, blown-up issue in some people's minds or maybe they would have thought of something differently, they would give the benefit of the doubt just because they've gotten to know who [the superintendent] is and what [that person] stands for.

A community member felt that being visible in a community allows a superintendent to gain credibility throughout the community because the superintendent, as she put it, “is not only focused on what's best for the schools but what's best for the community.”

Another community member discussed the importance of being available to the more critical constituents of a community and to meet them where they are to answer their questions and explain the current state of the school district:

I'll go back again to one of the things that the current superintendent does is periodically make visits to service clubs and other organizations and kind of gives, if you will, a State of the Schools scenario and often times those are to service clubs that typically run older, not so much the parents, but they tend to be the most critical. So I think that engagement, that visibility has proven very fruitful, because you get to the naysayers, the ones who when you've got a school bond levy on the ballot that say “Nobody ever paid for my kids when they were in school,” which of course we know isn't true. But, you get those naysayers and you get out ahead of the game. You've engaged them, and once you engage them they can't make up things. They actually know the truth, so at the point that they know the truth, you've disarmed them. So, to some extent, visibility is about keeping your enemies closer.

A community member shared his perspective about where a superintendent should be when there is conflict in the school district. He stated:

You've got a conflict going on, where should the superintendent be? In the middle of that conflict, [he or she] should be the one who's trying to sort it out and not avoiding it or running away from it. That's the superintendent's job and if [he or she] is not there, that's absence. [He or She] might be sitting in his office doing whatever a superintendent does, but if there's conflict going on, people want to know that the superintendent is on top of it and working with it and listening to all the parties and trying to come up with a fair, even-handed way of dealing with it.

A district-level staff member shared a view that the superintendent needs to be visible in order to demonstrate that he or she is supportive of the schools, implying that as building-level staff members discuss building-level initiatives; the superintendent needs to be aware and supportive in order to help the community understand why certain initiatives might be undertaken:

The superintendent needs to be out there being visible, showing that [he or she] is supporting what is happening, the decisions they are making, and being a leader. I mean, truly coming across as the leader of this school so that people put their faith and trust in [him or her] and think, "You know what, it looks like they are on board with this and knows what they're doing and they've done the background work on this" and it helps them put their trust in what other people are telling them.

Similarly, a building-level staff member discussed his perspective that the success of the school district depends on a superintendent's ability to clearly articulate the goals of the district. Here was his perspective:

For the success of our district, and many districts, if the superintendent is visible and is very clear about the goals of the district and keeping it very clearly about the kids and about where our community and our school district wants to go, then people aren't left guessing and then they either agree or they disagree, but they know where you stand. That's really important.

The same participant discussed the nature of administrative positions and the need to gain trust with the staff due to a higher turnover rate in superintendent and principal positions.

He shared these comments:

As a new superintendent, being visible to build that credibility with people is critical, especially in school districts. Teachers tend to be in a district for a long period of time. When superintendents and principals come and go more often than teachers do, in my observation at least, or at least in this community, to be visible kind of builds that trust and credibility back.

A district-level staff member discussed a perceived lack of trust with a former superintendent due a different communication style compared to the style of the district's current superintendent. When asked about superintendent visibility, this staff member stated:

It's pretty important right now. In the past, there was a level of distrust: community, school board, and superintendent. And I think it was because of a perceived lack of communication, maybe compared to the past superintendent's

style of communication, so just opening those doors to the public who supports our district through a referendum, sees what we're doing and understands what we're doing instead of assuming and guessing and causing that distrust. So that's important now and into the future.

The staff member also added the following comment later in the interview:

With visibility there needs to be honesty with issues that are surfacing and not turning the other way, avoiding confrontation that maybe comes with being out in the community and you get caught with a question. One previous superintendent was pretty bad at that, skirting the issues. That's where some of this distrust maybe came from.

Finally, a building-level staff member not only discussed superintendent visibility and the trust it can garner in a community, but she acknowledged that others in the organization also had a significant responsibility to help gain the trust of the community.

Here was her perspective:

With the leadership piece and the visibility piece, you're also impacting trust as the superintendent. [He or She] is kind of the face of our district in a lot of ways to the community and making those interactions with the business community, you know, the media in a lot of ways. And so if the superintendent can establish that trust and that relationship, it makes the rest of us have an easier time doing our jobs. Sort of a generalization, but relationships with those other people impact what we can do and that's really important. And not only the superintendent's visibility, but also the other administrators and the principals and those people who have that opportunity more than those of us in the classroom necessarily do.

**Synergetic.** Twenty-five participants discussed a shared responsibility for organizational visibility, a concept referred to henceforth as synergetic<sup>2</sup> visibility. One superintendent discussed the need to rely on an administrative team in order to effectively connect with the community. Here was this superintendent's perspective when asked about an increased pressure to be visible:

It has at the superintendency level. It hasn't as much underneath the superintendent level and I do think that's something that we need to work at here. We should really strategically map out what are the kind of connections we want to make and who can, who's a natural fit to connect with the Rod and Gun Club and who's a natural connection to the Republican Committee and the Democrat Committee, and we could map it out and strategically build the school's network in a respectful way. Those conduits are a way of sharing information and a way of networking and I really think that's how you sell bonds and ideas, not through a public campaign necessarily, but the hand-to-hand shaking and message exchanging. Our community is too big for one person and you lose out when you aren't listening. The superintendent should be your chief learning officer, and I don't know how you can learn without the listening and the give and take. And so you need your team to be out there doing it for you. Without it, it would be sort of like trying to run a football team with just the quarterback. There's a reason you have the rest of the team.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, *synergetic* (2014) is defined as working together in a creative, innovative or productive manner. Its root word is *synergy* (2014), defined as the interaction of elements that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual elements or contributions.

When asked if his administrative team ever discusses the concept of superintendent visibility, a district-level staff member explained the current superintendent's efforts to strategically place the right member of the team in the right place at the right time to deal with issues that impact the school district. He shared this perspective:

We talk about strategies, particularly with communication and who would be best to deliver a message and at what level and what the timing is, so within the communication side and that visibility, when is it OK for me to talk to the press or do an interview with a TV station and what is the message we want to have out in front? So we'll talk about issues like that. Other times it needs to come from the superintendent, so there are times things get handed off, whether it's a personnel decision, or speaking to an employee, we talk about, when does the superintendent get involved. I think in a lot of different areas, whether that's communication or decision-making or whatever. Usually, behind the scenes the superintendent is always involved, but at what level. "No, that needs to come from you. They need to understand that that's coming from you" and when is it "I need to step in as a superintendent and I need to be out in front on this." So I think on the communication side, that's the big piece where we talk about visibility.

Similarly, another district-level staff member shared a perspective on strategic communications and also attributed the district's ability to make significant change in a short amount of time to the effectiveness that the team communicates with one another and with the community, stating:

The superintendent has a large role and of course all of the admin team as a whole has their role. And we would often brainstorm ways to communicate more effectively, how to reach all segments of the population, not just parents to communicate our message, our need, our issues, our solutions, and things like that. So, an effective team that really wants to make the best impact on education, it needs to be a common topic. Now here at this district the things we've been able to achieve in a reasonably short time span, in my opinion, are tied to the fact that we have really effective communication and visibility on the superintendent's part.

A building-level staff member referred to synergetic visibility when he simply discussed event supervision. He commented, "My ability to be shown at the hockey game doesn't always happen because I'm at the basketball game. So the superintendent is covered for that basic visibility for the district and that administrative presence." The same staff member discussed involvement in service groups, stating, "The superintendent expects all administrators to be a part of a service group, it's unbelievably essential in that superintendency role, because superintendents can't do all the work themselves. They've got to have people working for them."

A building-level staff member shared his view that teachers also must be part of the district's plan for synergetic visibility. He discussed that teachers and administrators must deliver a unified message to the public during an upcoming bond referendum even if there is some disagreement as to the plan design. He shared this to demonstrate the importance of tending to internal staff members who can then help inform the public on behalf of the school district as a form of synergetic visibility. He stated:

Once we come up with a plan, and we're going to have teachers, we're going to have administrators and teachers that are not going to agree with the plan, but just to be able to go out and say the message to staff, teachers, and say "Listen, this is the face we have to put on to the general public now. We need to be as a united front saying this is our agreement." Then we need to kind of go forward with that. And so that visibility from the inside is just as visible from the outside.

A district-level staff member discussed the current superintendent's clear expectation of staff members to attend community events, stating that it has become a priority versus a suggestion:

The superintendent encourages other administrators' attendance at certain community things that would be important to have a school person there representing the district. Definitely more so than the previous superintendent.

That was when I was a building-level administrator. It was kind of, "Yeah, if you can make it that'd be good," whereas now, "No, you need to be there. This is a priority," sort of approach.

A building-level staff member shared that the importance of visibility is "pretty high," but did not identify visibility as solely the superintendent's responsibility, stating:

It [visibility] plays a huge role in being visible in the community at different events, especially if we have students participating in those events. The March of Dimes is coming up and they're doing their walk. If there are students groups, there are teacher groups who are participating in that, to have some visibility or support from our administrators makes a big difference.

Several participants discussed the role of the school board when considering synergetic visibility. One school board member shared a perspective that school board members are extensions of the superintendent, referring to board members as “force multipliers”:

Yes, we're supposed to be overseeing that particular position, but we're really an extension of the superintendent from a public standpoint so that interaction between the superintendent and the board. And is the board out in the community, and do they have the right information? It's force multiplier. That's what our superintendent was trying to do, so first the task was to get them to understand that that was their role, that you are my extension. Yes, I report to you, but you also need to help me and you need to be involved because you signed up for this, and these are the types of things that are expected. So, that's the biggest change between our old superintendent and our current one now, it is the foresight to see that the board members need to be an extension. The superintendent just laid the groundwork for the board members so they could naturally go into it.

A school board member discussed the importance of a superintendent having various others “on board” in order to carry forward his or her agenda. The board member stated, “You've got to have all board members on board pushing that agenda, you've got to have the administrative team, all those aspects. There really is going to be one visible unified face that's moving forward.”

Similarly, a building-level staff member discussed the need for the one designated as the face of the school district, the superintendent, to share this responsibility with school board members. He stated, “Being a recognizable face in the community for the

school district, in terms of big picture items, sharing some of that responsibility with the school board in terms of being the public liaison to the district and the public.”

A community member also discussed the importance of school board members understanding the need to connect with the community and placed the responsibility of ensuring that boards understand this squarely on the superintendent, stating:

The leadership members amongst your board, that's part of what their jobs should be is to help you do that connection with the community. So they [superintendents] need to be able to learn to use their boards effectively and depend on their boards.

### **Requirements of Communication**

This section about communication is organized in the following manner: 1) Characteristics of communication and 2) Methods of communication.

**Characteristics of communication.** This section contains participant responses related to the cluster themes 1) District face/spokesperson and 2) Public perception.

***District face/spokesperson.*** Participants who discussed the superintendent as the face of the school district or the district spokesperson totaled 28, with 44 total unique references related to this theme. One superintendent provided a perspective related to the superintendent as the public face of a school district:

In terms of superintendent visibility, what comes to mind for me is, being, simply said, being the public face of the school district, of a public school district and what that means. And then in every single conversation, even in a restaurant for example, if my spouse and I are out, and someone stops to chat with us, I'm the superintendent and the response I give has to be respectful to the school district,

even if it's not about school district stuff. I mean, I'm less likely to say, "Yeah, that city person, what an idiot," because that has an impact on the entire school district and I think I owe the school district more than that. So I can't say that.

The same superintendent also discussed superintendent behavior outside of the workday and how this behavior could impact the school district, commenting, "You know, if you want to get drunk and sing karaoke, do it in your basement under the bed when you're the superintendent because you have lost that right when you're the face of the district. You just have."

A school board member acknowledged that a superintendent's role is that of the "educational face" of the entire community, choosing a term, community, that implies a broader reach than just the school district. Here was the board member's perspective:

Well I think that person is the educational face of our community. People look at the superintendent, and they associate him or her with being the educational guru or face of the community when they see him or her out there. And the superintendent represents what we're all about, the CEO. Much like if you see an administrator and a CEO of one of the hospitals, you know. Or you see the governor. To me that is what I think about visibility when people see you, that's the face of education.

A district-level staff member discussed a superintendent's role relative to the opening of a school year and the importance of his or her sharing the vision of the district with the entire staff in addition to simply welcoming employees back from summer break. The staff member stated, "When I think of the superintendent, I think being at an

opening day staff meeting, you know, that's kind of my experience. They're out there, the leader, they're the face of the district and they present that opening day.”

A community member shared her perspective about a time when she felt the district lacked a specific face, or spokesperson, which resulted in a failed bond referendum. She recalled that it felt as if no one knew the superintendent, and even though there was a public relations person employed by the district at the time, the district still lacked a specific spokesperson which resulted in a lack of community buy-in, stating that “Nobody knew who the superintendent was anyway, and it was all just too last minute. But I think that's probably the biggest thing. And then we talked about, well, somebody's gotta be the face of the schools.”

Another community member from the same district referred to the significance of superintendent visibility compared to that of school board members stating, “If the superintendent is really engaged, I think they can be a good face for the school, even more so than the school board. I think people probably, at least here in this school district, don't even know who's on the school board.” Yet another community member discussed the importance of a superintendent being an embodiment of the school district, stating that a superintendent represents “the ethics and values of the school district.”

***Public perception.*** Twenty participants discussed public perception, with 32 unique references related this particular theme. One superintendent, when asked about superintendent visibility, succinctly stated, “I think it's actually more than being seen, it's being perceived and people's perception of you.” The superintendent stated further that “Getting to know people and how their perception of you and how you operate and your

perception of them and how they operate is the key to success in an organization and understanding roles.”

Another superintendent also referenced public perception when asked about superintendent visibility, stating that superintendent visibility is important for a community, especially in small towns, because:

They [community members] like to see it. In my mind, they really like to see the leader of whatever they are. The owner of the hardware store works at the hardware store. The owner of the gas station works there. The owner of the grocery store works there. It's not a conglomerate.

A building-level staff member discussed public perception of the superintendent, at first acknowledging that his district's superintendent has established a very high bar for being visible in the community and at school events and that it has become ever apparent to other administrators that they also must be visible. He also commented that it is important for the public to perceive the superintendent as supportive, stating:

And I think that's part of our mission. I've always been visible, but our superintendent made it even more apparent. Our previous superintendent started out pretty good, but then things changed I felt a little bit. I haven't seen that now. This superintendent would be the one that I would say gives the people of our district the most bang for their buck as far as support.

Several community members from the same district spoke about public perception of the superintendent. One stated, “I like to know who that person is, and I like to see them interact in the community, own part of the community and be involved.” Another community member discussed how the superintendent is perceived by the community,

suggesting that perhaps public perception of the superintendent in other communities might be different, stating, “The superintendent here is kind of revered as a pretty powerful leader where in some communities superintendents aren't. But here they are, they're viewed as pretty important people. So we rely on them for the leadership.” A third community member stated, “The school can only be as strong as the community supporting it. And a lot of that comes in line with how much they respect our superintendent and what he or she represents.”

A community member from another district provided a very brief comment that serves as an appropriate conclusion to this particular section. When asked about superintendent visibility from a community member's perspective, he stated simply, “People notice.”

Within this broadly identified category of public perception, two more specific themes emerged: 1) Framing and rumor control and 2) Appearance/dress.

*Framing and rumor control.* Several participants, including two superintendents, identified the theme of framing and rumor control. One commented on the risk associated with an absence of information and also on the notion of truth, stating:

Discontent can grow, and getting the rationale out there quickly is important because in the absence of information, whether it's your internal community or external community, in the absence of info, people make stuff up. So you're better off getting out there with the beautiful truth or the ugly truth.

Another superintendent referenced a leadership training opportunity at which the concept of framing was discussed:

You want to be the first to the table to set out, here's the project, here's the initiative, here's whatever you want to frame, but what happens is when I go to a number of meetings, Kiwanis or Rotary or whatever and I speak, I'll inevitably get questions on things that are misconceptions or rumors, you know. And then what I'll do is in my next column, I'll reframe the issue and I'll take a hold of it and go this is what I'm hearing but this is the way it is. So I use that column to make corrections on peoples' thought processes in the community.

*Appearance/dress.* While only discussed by one participant, the theme of appearance/dress was included as a distinct sub-section of public perception because of the unique nature of the theme. Few themes relating to the actual physical, tangible nature of visibility emerged. One superintendent discussed appearance:

I'll wear sweaters on days and no tie when I want to be more approachable. I don't want to be on this, you know, pedestal, I want to be down there, you know, busy with people. So intentionally at times, when I'm going to talk with students for example, I'll make sure I dress the part a little bit more.

### **Methods of Communication**

Several participants discussed various methods of communication, which are included in this section: 1) Written, 2) Public speaking, 3) Mass media, 4) Social media, 5) Technology impact, and 6) Communication artifacts.

**Written.** Eighteen participants discussed communication as written text. Many considered writing to be an important aspect of their superintendent's ability to communicate and in some cases considered the written word as a form of superintendent visibility.

The most commonly utilized means for written communication by the four participant superintendents was, by far, email. Each superintendent acknowledged that while face-to-face communication is overwhelmingly their preferred means of communication with stakeholders, it is not practical to rely solely on that form of communication. With some reluctance, the participant superintendents rely on email as a communications tools. One superintendent lamented about a bygone era in which email didn't exist. He stated that his workload has increased dramatically over the last 10-15 years because of the reliance on written communication. All participant superintendents discussed the use of a regular email message that would be sent out on a particular day, such as one superintendent who focuses effort on a very in-depth Friday email to the school board and a weekly email to all school district faculty and staff.

One superintendent discussed an overt use of the written word to communicate and to help increase the level of superintendent visibility within this particular school district, stating "Writing a column every week to me is being very visible and you know, my picture is right there in the paper right next to it and you write out everything and so, I use that a lot as well as a communication tool." A building-level staff member from the same district stated the following as if to affirm these efforts: "You know, I honestly think that our superintendent is probably the best example that you could come up with that I've had the opportunity to work with. A weekly column. That's visibility."

A school board member identified the weekly communication that the school board receives from the superintendent as a critical communication tool, stating:

Weekly communication, you know, probably the best thing that the current superintendent has done. The weekly updates and [he or she] gets it all from

direct reports. So it will be a one paragraph, kind of a piecemeal of everything together until we get a good solid report of what's going on in the district on a weekly basis.

**Public speaking.** Sixteen participants discussed public speaking as an important communications tool and as an important aspect of visibility for superintendents. A building-level staff member offered her view of the impact effective public speakers can have on audience members. She stated:

I just think people that are good leaders, if you listen to them, boy you can tell when you hear a good speaker, because they can communicate so well. They can make you feel kind of intelligent even if you don't really know what they're talking about, they can make you feel welcome, not inferior.

Several participants discussed the importance of public speaking related to the passage of referenda. A typical reply related to elections was provided by a building-level staff member who stated:

Just to explain all the finance behind that, but you know, if you have a superintendent that sits in her office and they think they can get that sold, it ain't happening. When we did the levy here, I think it was told at least 60 times by the time the superintendent got done. Just any group that would listen.

**Mass media.** Twenty-two participants mentioned mass media a total of 35 times, identifying this as an important aspect of a superintendent's communications strategy and as a key tool in maintaining a level of visibility in the community. Several participants discussed specifically the importance of a superintendent to be able to use the media effectively. One community member provided an example:

Of course being able to speak professionally to the news media, television stations, being able to give good sound bites to those reporters so that they actually use something that is relevant. You have to be very careful with how you present yourself to the media.

Other participants discussed the importance of using print media and local radio stations effectively as community members rely on these two local sources of information quite heavily to stay informed about the school district. A school board member discussed both the local newspaper and the local radio station, stating:

Well, in the school there is a weekly newsletter that all the teachers and staff get, and the school board. There is a column in the local paper, I think that's once a week. And, well there is the radio show quite frequently. They have the superintendent on there if something's going on.

Several participants discussed the importance of using mass media to get important messages out to the public and that doing so improves the perceived level of transparency for the organization. A district-level staff member shared this perspective:

I think that the school board and some of the more active community members expect the superintendent to be knowledgeable with what's going on in the capitol, and those issues and being able to explain. And I've noticed the media has been in more, or at least our superintendent has been on the news a lot more than our other superintendent with these issues. There is no skirting a phone call. The superintendent will take any opportunity to answer questions or explain things. So, I don't think it's something that's directly expected, but it's been very nice to see.

Observed newspaper articles indicated that in each community, the school district is very much in the public's eye. Articles observed ranged from the relatively minor, such as results of the previous night's student activities, to major issues such as facilities projects and impending referenda. All four participant superintendents discussed the importance of the local newspaper and the importance of maintaining a positive working relationship with media outlets, although at times that may prove challenging.

**Social media.** Sixteen participants shared insights related to the use of social media as a communications tool. Comments were mixed as to the effectiveness of social media. One superintendent shared a perspective related to social media and the availability of video footage of school board meetings, sharing that with an increased level of transparency, more pressure exists to say the right thing:

Our board meetings are public; they're aired on TV. People watch reruns of them, and not wide audiences of people, but, you know, adults that I will run into in the community will say, "I watched the last board meeting again" or something, so I will long have forgotten any comments on there, but they'll remember a line or two, and then with social media today, they can play it back and play it over. So, your need to be first transparent and game on and saying the right thing well is more important I think than at any other time because if you can imagine that would be replayed and replayed and replayed. So, that counts for visibility.

The same superintendent also commented on a perceived drawback of social media.

When asked about the concept of reflection, the answer was crafted to include mention of social media:

It's how we learn. We don't learn if we don't reflect. We don't, and social media doesn't let you reflect. So you get texts and I get e-mailed 24/7 and there's some Facebook stuff, so you have to tell yourself to do the next piece well, disengage for a while.

Another superintendent described the practical aspect of the use of social media and discussed how social media has evolved over the course of two years:

So it might be a game, and I did it a lot more last year, it was more of a novelty thing where I would tape something and I would make a comment, or I'd take a picture of something and make comment. But what I use it for now more is my column gets sent out that way, the school board agenda gets sent out that way, so we've got a number of people, there's a couple hundred at least that are signed up.

Interestingly, a building-level staff member downplayed the use of social media.

He placed greater importance on personal relationships rather than social media, stating:

Yeah, the superintendent uses this medium but more importantly does it in a personal type relationship. That's when you can see how people are acknowledging you, you can see their body language, you can sense their frustrations, whereas if you don't have that and use the social medium type things here, I don't think you see that.

**Technology impact.** Six participants discussed the general impact of technology. One superintendent alluded to the strain that technology can cause in one's personal life and described a blurring of personal and professional lives due to technology, stating:

And especially with my iPhone, and iPad, I'm sitting up I'm doing e-mails, or I'll watch a show and then all of a sudden, oh, I've gotta, I'll just do something at 10

o'clock at night. It's like, what are you doing? Working? Ah, I guess so. But now I don't have to do it in the morning. And so I've found that my life, my home life and my work life are just intertwined now. It just, there's no end, there's no stop. More than ever because of the technology. I don't just stop when I go home. And so Saturday mornings, Sunday mornings, heck, I was in Arizona on Christmas and I was answering e-mails on Christmas day. It's like, it's a sickness. Seriously, it's kind of bizarre. I need to learn to put that away. But like, next week, we're going on vacation. But I will go there; most of the staff won't even know that I'm gone. And then I'll even tell them I'm gone but they'll forget. And I'll be answering e-mails just like I'm sitting in my office.

The same superintendent also discussed the nature of e-mail and a concern that people don't read e-mail messages, stating, "Do they still read my weekly e-mails? Is it just 'blah, blah, blah' to them? Or, that's what my concern is, is when you start losing your voice and your connection." This superintendent also has joined every e-mail group in each building in the school district as a means of "keeping kind of the pulse on everything so you know when you go into a faculty meeting, 'Oh, how did this get resolved?' Or you can talk intelligently about that."

A district-level staff member discussed her district's attempt to increase the district's perceived level of transparency through the use of technology, including televising school board meetings and increased access to documents presented at school board meetings. She stated:

We're really trying to take a very visible approach, you know what, we're not hiding anything, here are the minutes, here are the agendas, here's exactly what

we're discussing. So they're trying to make, really trying to make an effort that, so that the public feels that they can trust us because, you know what, I know exactly what they're, what they're doing here. I mean, they can go on and know who's being hired, what their salary is going to be, who turned in resignations.

Finally, a building-level staff member offered a cautionary perspective on the use of technology. She stated that a superintendent must be seen, lest he or she be suspected of not doing his or her job. She stated:

I think it's just very important that the staff knows that he or she is around, you know, because if the superintendent is not seen, well then what are they doing? And, that might not be fair. I mean, you could have a superintendent that spends a lot of time in their office and does a lot of PR through their computer. Our superintendent is really good with the iPhone and with taking technology wherever [he or she] may go so that people can reach [him or her]. But I think there's a lot more to be said about a physical presence with a voice that goes behind it than through technology.

School district websites were mentioned by all four participant superintendents as well as by a significant number of other participants as an important means for the superintendent to communicate with the public. Specific messages from the superintendent were included on all four websites at various times throughout the study, but the intent of the district website as a communications tool was implied to be much broader. The volume of available information on all four school district websites was pervasive. Communications about the school district events, policies, news items, school

board meeting agendas and minutes, contact information for faculty and staff and student activities were just a few of the more prominent types of items on the districts' websites.

**Communication artifacts.** Primary communication artifacts included in the study's analysis were emails, websites, newspaper articles, and other district-produced documents. Artifacts such as photographs, clothing and wall decorations were also observed and interpreted in the context in which they were developed or where they were observed. The focus of this sub-section is clothing, wall hangings, and consideration of a communications plan document. The importance of clothing was discussed explicitly by one superintendent who commented that on certain days he will "dress down" in order to be more approachable, particularly if he would be spending a significant amount of time with students or if there was a special extracurricular activity such as a school spirit day. Another superintendent discussed the comfort that comes from dressing down at home or for a night out in public in a more relaxed fashion. The superintendent did acknowledge that even in a larger city, people are aware of who the superintendent is, which can impact what is worn even on days off because the superintendent is always representing the school district.

Artifacts observed throughout the study included wall hangings. A wide array of artifacts were observed and included honors from professional organizations or local civic groups, family photographs, photographs of the superintendent with prominent local or state-level politicians, famous or inspirational quotations, professionally produced art and student or child-produced art. In one superintendent's office, a diploma from a very prestigious institution was prominently displayed and was an obvious source of pride. Diplomas also were also displayed prominently in two of the other superintendents'

offices. One additional communication artifact of note was provided by a district-level staff member. The document, a summary of the communications plan for the school district, was revealing in two important ways. First, it was the only case district that employed a communications professional. Second, when used as a tool to analyze the actual practice employed in each district, the document revealed, interestingly, striking similarities of the school districts' communications efforts.

A communications plan with specific strategies was employed whether or not a district produced a written communications plan. For example, each superintendent discussed the importance of regular written communication, face-to-face communication, being involved in civic organizations, and attending school and community events. While the importance placed on the elements of a communications plan were similar, one significant difference between the districts was obvious. The volume of the events, media outlets and civic groups varied greatly between the districts. For example, in the smallest case school district, the superintendent took great care to work closely with the one local media outlet, a weekly newspaper publisher. In the largest case school district in the study, multiple newspapers and television stations made the amount of required effort greater than that of the smallest district.

### **Relationship Development**

Twenty-five participants discussed relationship development with a total of 38 unique references related to this theme. This section begins with a general discussion about relationship development and then branches into the following themes: 1) Internal relationships, 2) External relationships/community connection, and 3) Relational leadership.

Several participants (25; total of 38 unique references) provided concise narrative related to relationship development. For example, a building administrator stated, “Its kind of hard to develop relationships if you aren't visible and out there talking to people.” Similarly, a community member stated, “In order to develop a relationship, you have to be present. And if you’re not out and about talking, visiting, growing with the community, you’re not going to have those relationships. People are going to find you standoffish.” A building-level staff member stated, “You can't develop a relationship if you're not there. And our superintendent believes in being there.”

A school board member discussed the importance of the time immediately before and after a formal presentation as the time during which relationships are established with community members, stating:

When the superintendent goes out to Rotary and makes a presentation...I mean, I can go to a meeting and I can spew forth whatever. But it's the five minutes before and the 10 minutes after where I'm developing relationships with those individuals, you know. They then will take back to their mothers, brothers and sisters their view and perspective. And so, the ability to kind of develop those relationships is, I think, key. It's the integral part of that visibility.

A community member who had been a school board member in a large school district shared her perspective about the importance of a superintendent’s ability to develop relationships when she stated:

I think especially if you define it [leadership] in terms of relationships, you only develop relationships by being with people. It’s a personal one-on-one relationship, and you don’t do it by being inaccessible in an office. You do it by

going out amongst people. In the same way, I think a superintendent's is a very political position. You have to be able to do the meet and greet and, you know, remember people's names and know who those contacts are, and that's very important because you're the visible embodiment of that school district.

A community member who serves as a city council member discussed relationship development by focusing on leadership as a reciprocal endeavor, stating that a leader needs input from the public in order to know where others desire to go:

Well, if they don't know who you are or where you're at, it's very difficult. Be you the school superintendent or the council member. If people do not know anything about you, how to reach you, they're not going to communicate with you. And if they don't communicate with you, then you can't find out what their immediate needs are, what their vision is. And you put all those things together, that's how a leader leads is you put them together, you communicate back out, this is where we're going, and then ask people to follow you. You know? And people aren't going, you're not going to get the input you need if you're not visible.

Discussion about relationship development with a building-level staff member included consideration of the frequency of interactions. She referenced experience as a teacher and coach, sharing this perspective:

I think that relationships are the key to everything. Especially, I mean I look at what I do, my relationships with my students, my relationship with my athletes, and for me, the more visible you are, the more of an opportunity you have to form relationships. If you're not present, you could see somebody once a month and it would be "Hey, how you doing?" If you're present more often, it's, "Hey, how is

your grandchild doing? I heard blah, blah, blah.” So, I think that those things are more important because then you get to know more about people.

A building-level staff member offered a relatively lengthy and impassioned perspective on the importance of relationship development by a superintendent. He stated:

I think the importance of visibility for the current superintendent, well for any superintendent, especially somebody new coming into the district, is to understand the dynamics of the buildings that you're in. I've been a principal in three different buildings, very different demographics. And to come in and to understand my kids and their situation so that you can inform your policy, your procedure, your message to the community, you can be that person that carries the torch for these families. I work in a school right now that has 85% poverty, 90% poverty. These parents aren't gonna show up, they're not gonna show up at your Chamber meetings, they're not showing up at your special meetings, sometimes I have a tough time getting them in. I can get 'em in three times a year, four times a year maybe and that's for their student conferences and for a family breakfast. So if you wanna know what's going on, you as a superintendent in this building, a high needs building, you better be at that breakfast and not just standing back because these people aren't gonna approach you. You better be building conversations with them and have some conversation starters so you can get to know who they are and they can get to know who you are. They're not gonna take the initiative to get to know you. So I think that the visibility is extremely important, but it has to be proactive, it has to be, you have to be approachable,

you have to have something for them. You have to have a message that's inspiring for them so that they know that you have their back. So it's very important that I know, as a principal, where we're headed, so those staff meetings become of critical importance so that I can be that link between our superintendent and these parents. So if I'm out of the loop, it's really hard to keep my parents informed and engaged. So I would say from that standpoint, I think it's a wonderful way to build that relationship, to understand what that school's all about.

A community member discussed his perspective that everybody loves their kids and their money, and school often impacts both, suggesting that when decisions are made regarding either, it is helpful for a superintendent to have a more personal relationship with individuals. The community member stated:

Schools can be lightning rods for different issues because everybody likes their kids and everybody likes their money and sometimes decisions that need to be made by school districts affect at least one of those things, not always positively, but a lot of times it could be too, but I think when those big decisions come or when issues arise regarding a school, if people have that personal relationship, the trust can be built.

Finally, as a means to transition into the themes of internal relations and external relationships/community connections, the perspectives shared by a district-level staff member and a school board member from two different districts are included. Both participants acknowledged the importance of a superintendent paying attention to both internal and external stakeholders. When asked what he thinks of when he considers the term “visibility”, the district-level staff member responded:

Visibility. Well, to me visibility is both internal and external. And be able to communicate very well what the objectives and problems and corrective actions and all those kinds of things that a superintendent needs to do. That's what visibility means to me.

The school board member discussed what he considered to be a key difference between his district's current superintendent and the previous superintendent. While the current superintendent focuses more on internal relationships, the previous superintendent focused more on external relationships. This particular board member used the term "force multiplier" when he discussed the impact of developing relationships with internal staff, stating that the current superintendent understands the value of having internal staff help to advance the work of the school district. He shared this perspective:

Where the prior administration was out in the public, they weren't in the buildings as much. And so that was the kickback. You know, you only have so much time to do certain things. The current administration is the reverse. We don't see them out in the community as much, but they're in the buildings constantly and I think that's the more appropriate role because, again, force multiplier. You've got your board to help you, but also if you're in the building and the teachers are speaking well of you because you're meeting with them on a regular basis, you're listening to them and observing and things like that, that they will go out in the public and be that force multiplier for you. But also, they feel connected, and they understand the vision of the district a little bit more, so if you're doing changes and doing changes quickly, the fastest way to do them is to make sure that everybody knows what's going on and they love hearing it from the person in charge. So, that's what

I see as the, the biggest asset of this current administration our superintendent is in the buildings on a constant basis doing observations and then just having one-on-ones with teachers. We've got a lot of changes that we're gonna be pushing down the pipe, so, building that confidence.

As previously noted, this section began with a general discussion about relationship development. The prominent themes to emerge from this general discussion were: 1) Internal relationships, 2) External relationships/community connection, and 3) Relational leadership.

**Internal relationships.** Several comments by participants related to a superintendent developing relationships with the internal members of the school district, both staff and students. According to a community member, a superintendent must strike a balance between being visible in the community and being visible internally stating, “He or she can't just be community-minded. They also has to function well within his or her faculty and co-workers and bringing the whole thing together.”

A community member who was a former school board member in a larger school district discussed the nature of a principal losing his or her support system, other teachers, when a teacher moves out of the classroom into the role of principal. She extended this concept to the superintendency, stating:

Talking about principals, and one of the biggest problems with principals was that, in becoming a principal, they lose their support system. They don't have the other teachers anymore. And they don't have the wonderful rewards you get from kids in the school classroom. And so, you know, you've got somebody out there

and there are some real losses involved. And I would guess that applies to superintendents at another level, which is all the more reason to be visible.

A building-level staff member stated that he understands the importance of connecting with staff and students and he acknowledged that there seems to be an expectation in his school district that all administrators be visible. He stated: “I want to connect with the kids and the teachers. To me, that's the strength that I have is that I make myself very, very visible. That's what I expect from our administrators as well.” He also referred to his superintendent as “a present kind of person” further adding that if the superintendent needs to be reached, he should just call the superintendent’s cell phone because, invariably, the superintendent is never in his or her office.

Several participants discussed specific themes related to internal relationships rather than a more general narrative, which has been presented in this section. Two related sub-sections reflect a more specific narrative and is organized into the following sections: 1) Relationships with staff and 2) Relationships with students.

***Relationships with staff.*** Twenty-five participants shared perspectives about superintendent relationships with staff members. One participant shared that superintendent visibility was crucial to his being informed. He linked the term “informed” with “visibility” when he stated, “The word informed, I think that word informed and visibility go hand in hand.”

In a similar fashion and with a more specific example, a superintendent discussed the importance of being visible to internal stakeholders. According to this superintendent, visibility was paying off in an effort to improve the professional learning climate in this particular school district:

Just the perception of the education community is, “Wow, this superintendent cares.” I met with phy ed [physical education] teachers last week. We had a district-level phy ed PLC [professional learning community] and I heard some concerns about phy ed that I would never have heard if I hadn't sat down and discussed with that group. “Wow, the superintendent’s not big and scary like we thought [he or she] listens” and that's just internal dynamics. That's really paying off.

A building-level staff member discussed the importance of a superintendent being a “normal person” as it relates to developing relationships with staff members. This particular staff member felt that it was appropriate for the superintendent to attend social events with employees as long as discretion was demonstrated. He stated:

The superintendent can't be afraid to have a beer with people, but you can't be at the local bar every weekend. Once in a while when we have staff gatherings the superintendent will go out there and have a couple and BS with people and that's fine. But then, they'll leave at a decent time and so [he or she] is a normal person in that respect. And I think that's important.

A building-level staff member discussed the issue of respect as it relates to the superintendent’s relationship with staff members. He stated, “You want someone that's going to stand up and make decisions and stand by those, they're going to make hard decisions but they still respect the staff, and that the staff feels like they're appreciated.” He later added, “at least your decisions are a little bit more respected even if people don't agree with you. But the only way you get that relationship is if you're visible.”

One community member felt that she was in tune with the degree to which superintendent visibility has impacted staff members. She indicated that her district's superintendent is more visible among staff members than any of the previous superintendents she has known, stating:

Our superintendent is more visible within the district staff, so I think building those relationships with the teachers that may not have ever met some of their previous ones [superintendents], I don't want to take us that far, but you know, unless they were having some in-service and were forced to meet, this superintendent is different because [he or she] is there and involved and getting their buy-in when making managerial changes or those kinds of things, and I think it's very important.

A community member discussed the need for a superintendent to deliberately visit schools and manage by walking around, stating that in order to do so, a superintendent must delegate other tasks. As part of her perspective, she also provided an example from her experiences as a school board member in a large school district, stating:

And that probably involves being able to delegate, being able to delegate some of the day-to-day sorts of things so that superintendent has the time to be a leader and to be out and to be listening and do management by walking around, visiting schools. If I were a superintendent I'd, in a large district, I'd be out there visiting schools. If I were superintendent of a small district, I'd be out there visiting classrooms. I mean, I did that as a school board member. I just considered, not in an intrusive sort of way, but just to say I'm here and sit down in the coffee room

and have lunch with the teachers and just listen to what was going on. It was no big deal. There were never any issues discussed. But I think it's a presence.

***Relationships with students.*** Fourteen participants discussed superintendent relationships with students. To begin, one superintendent shared the perspective that it was important for students to see the superintendent of a school district, and this particular superintendent took specific actions to be visible to students, stating, "Like this morning, we go out into the faculty area, or go out into the student commons area, so I want the kids to see me, there's another element, too, that I want the kids to see me out there."

A building-level staff member stressed the importance of a superintendent remaining connected to students in some way, offering an example of how a superintendent could connect with students. He shared this perspective:

You do get one more step removed from the students so you have to guard against that, and one way you can guard against that of course is to be out and about and be seen, be heard. So I think, you know, our superintendent tries to do a great job of that, too, of understanding, that every once in a while I've got to set up a meeting with the fourth grade students, for example, at least it's got to happen once a year. They've got to see me to understand that I'm not just some figurehead somewhere.

A building-level staff member suggested that superintendent visibility is very positive for students, stating,

The superintendent stands on the foyer a couple mornings of the week talking so [he or she] is out there. And people know [him or her]. And that's good for

students, too. They may not come up and talk directly to the superintendent, but somehow the superintendent gets to know them and is involved like in what their activities are and is always visible that way.

Another building-level staff member stated that she felt it was important for students to know the superintendent and offered a specific example of how well she thought her current students could identify the current superintendent. She stated:

I think it's really important that people know, first of all, who the superintendent is and by name. I think that that's very important. If I say to the kids when the superintendent walks in the room, I say "Hey guys, who is that?" I bet 80% of my kids can tell me that's the superintendent. In my book, that's pretty good.

The same staff member shared further her appreciation of her superintendent's attendance at student activities, stating:

I appreciate that [he or she] comes to a lot of activities because the kids know that [he or she] is supportive. And I know [he or she] likes it because [he or she] is a former athlete and was very involved in the high school and in the arts as well. So I know [he or she] enjoys those things.

A community member indicated that he has heard other community members comment on his district superintendent's visibility, including that the superintendent is visible to students. He stated, "The superintendent does show up at the other schools and people see [him or her], [he or she] is visible. I think that sends a message that, you know, the staff and the kids are important enough to stop in a classroom."

Another community member shared her perspective as a community leader and as well as a parent. While perhaps more indirect than the previous couple of examples, she

connected a superintendent's ability to develop relationships with teachers, which ultimately impacts students through the culture that is created in a school district. She stated:

The development of relationships really shows me what type of leader a superintendent truly is. And that trickles down to the teachers in the school district and then ultimately to my children, because the way the superintendent builds relationships with people represents to me kind of what the school district would be like to work there. It really represents that type of culture that is being built. And so for me, it's really important because I know that it trickles down to the students because if the staff aren't happy, if the superintendent doesn't build a culture of being authentic at the school district or in the community, either way it impacts the kids.

A school board member contrasted her experience as a student in a relatively large school district where she attended public school with the current situation her school district. She stated, "I never knew who the superintendent was. Now maybe that's just as a student, you don't know who the superintendent is. I don't know. But I think that every student here, if you asked them who the superintendent is, they would know that it is [superintendent's proper name]."

Also recalling her own personal experiences, a community member shared memories from her childhood and recalled with some detail the visibility of the superintendent of the school district where she attended public school. She considered superintendent visibility to be very important from a child's perspective as she prepared

for a special event that she would be attending along with her district's superintendent, stating:

When I was a little girl, we used to have the superintendent come out and visit the schools directly, and so I think that's hugely important because you're not only visible to the teachers but you're visible to the students. I think that made a difference in my understanding of the education system and the involvement with the administration. Our superintendent used to go and read to, during the special days and, I know the superintendent is going to be at the Dr. Seuss Day tomorrow reading along with me and my other staff person, so, I think that is probably the most important as far as the superintendent goes.

**External relationships/community connection.** Thirty-four participants shared a total of 65 unique comments related to external relationships/community connections. A community member discussed the role of the superintendent as a connection to the community, stating:

We do look to the superintendent as the representative of our school. You know, most of the time when you're interacting with the public it seems to be around election time when you're going for a bond or you're going for something like that. And you want your superintendent to be visible, you want them to be part of the community, because then it feels as a school, we're more invested in the community and the community is comfortable with us, and I know personally, that's what I believe. As any administrator, but especially a superintendent, you are the go-to person.

One superintendent shared this perspective regarding the community's desire to have the superintendent at community events, stating:

If I get a compliment, it's about two things. It's about the calm, especially the older people love the calm because they read the newspaper religiously, and it's being at events. I mean, flat out, they love having the superintendent at events. And it's almost, I don't want to sound arrogant, but it's almost like if I'm there, I validate something for them. "Oh, it's important enough that the superintendent's here."

The same superintendent also commented about the importance of a gym membership, stating, "I wouldn't have to go to the Y [YMCA]. But then I would lose a community connection."

Another superintendent also discussed his connection to the community:

I live in town. I go to the church here in town with many of them, with many of the staff. People stop me in the street and in the stores. That's good for community, especially our size, because that's one of the things that people here seem to cherish most is that we care about things. We aren't aloof or unable or don't have time for others. We make the time. We make things work.

A school board member discussed the importance of a superintendent understanding the community:

And, I mean, if it's about visibility, it's also at theater events, sporting events, school activities, plays, all of those things, where they see that you're not just sitting in your office here, dictating out, but you're out there understanding the community. I think that's a big part.

A community member shared his perspective as someone who has lived in a variety of places, stating, “Generally, the communities I've lived in where the superintendent's been visible, there's been usually a lot better relationship between the community and the school.”

The remaining comments included in this section are from participants from the same community. Several very thoughtful and detailed perspectives were shared regarding a superintendent's connection with the community. One community member used the phrase “connect dynamic” when discussing a very explicit link between the superintendent of a school district and the community, stating:

And so you're looking at these real community needs, such as, you know, kids going hungry where it directly affects test scores, but if the superintendent is not willing to work with the community or is not seeing that as a direct connection, as not open to that connect dynamic, then the situation just perpetuates itself.

Another community member discussed the importance of community connections related to school funding and parental involvement. As part of his perspective, he also shared that a superintendent's involvement with the community may serve as a conduit for what might be possible in the classroom. He stated:

I think it's critical with the challenges to education in terms of funding, in particular, with the challenges with parental involvement, I think building relationships and collaborative participation throughout the community can only come with a connection to the school superintendent. Example being business support of an industrial program or business support of an office management program or something, some particular portion of the curriculum that business can

support. Without a connection to the superintendent, that gets challenging. I think that's how you start to build relationships. You make those initial connections and then, depending on the skill of the superintendent, you develop those relationships one-on-one or possibly even connect that person with a person who's directly in, who needs to have the relationship with them. Again, using the example of business, perhaps connecting a business with the person who's running your engineering program, you know, because they're the direct relationship. Lets the superintendent maybe back off, but it's an endorsement for both sides. They get the endorsement of the superintendent to the business and to the teachers so they know that it's a part of a bigger process.

Another community member discussed the importance of collaborative partnerships between and among segments of a community's various organizations, stating:

It is very important now that government, education, non-profits, business, that everybody works together and the school superintendent can make that or break it. And that's the leader of your collaborative partnerships, not that they have to be in every single one, but either they or someone they designate, like maybe the director of community education, they need to be highly visible in those collaborative groups to be an effective superintendent.

Yet another community member offered her perspective on a superintendent's connection with the community. She explained that in order to better impact what happens in the schools, a superintendent must understand what students will experience when they leave school and venture into the community, stating:

I would assume that our school district would do better because the superintendent would have more knowledge about the community as a whole instead of focusing only on schoolwork because the kids in the school, after they leave the school, go out of this community and what do they experience out there. So I guess if the superintendent knows more about what's happening out here, they can do better inside the school walls as well.

Finally, a building-level staff member emphasized a personal connection with the community in order to maintain community support of the school system. He stated:

That personal connection really goes a long way with individuals and a superintendent is a pretty well respected individual in the community and you earn that position through education experience. And so to be a visible and accessible individual keeps that real, and when the majority of your constituency is not necessarily in that same level of education or background, then it just keeps them more supportive of you, you don't lose touch. It's really important to keep that touch.

**Relational leadership.** Seven participants discussed leadership as a relational endeavor and considered relationship development a critical factor for a leader. The participants who discussed relational leadership generally spoke of a deeper level of visibility, while some chose to use the term presence rather than the term visibility. One superintendent discussed visibility as the key means for a superintendent to build relationships, emphasizing the importance of physical presence in order to build relationships:

And the only way that you can really build relationships is by being visible. At one time, I thought it could be handled well through e-mail. I don't think that's true. I think that's a poor communicator. And you know, I know better. 68%, or whatever statistic you're going to make up on the spot, but a whole bunch of a message is made clear through nonverbal, and a good writer can have voice and create some of that, but e-mail for example, a lot of social networking, texting, doesn't allow it. You just really need to show up and show the message by your voice and your passion in your voice and the look on your face and the happiness you have and the excitement about that message and that really is done by showing up. But I think one becomes a much brighter, better leader through listening to people. It is a give and take, very much so. It is with my board. I respect them greatly, and so I'll go in with what I think is a really good idea, but when I listen to the best thinkers on my board, I leave a whole lot smarter than when I came in and that's how relationships are built, and learning is built, quite frankly. I would argue that it would be impossible to transform anything without relationships and I don't see how you could do those without being visible. It's so important.

Another superintendent also discussed the importance of relationships and offered an example of what does not build relationships, using an analogy of a teacher proactively communicating with parents as an example of the importance of building relationships:

Well, you have to be there to have a relationship. And getting a birthday card once a year from your superintendent, which is very nice, doesn't build a

relationship. You always have to have a working relationship in order to get things done. So, you have to be present to build a relationship and you're going to get way more done if you can have that prior. It's just like we tell teachers, "Go ahead and make those calls to parents before you have a trouble, before you have problems with their kid and things will go a lot easier." It's the same idea: building relationships.

A community member discussed what she sees as a direct correlation between the level of visibility and the strength of relationships that are built. She stated:

And I think that the higher the visibility, the stronger the relationships tend to become. And I see that even within the educational system. Again, sitting in the ivory tower just in your own cubby hole and dictating down what's going to be done does not get cooperation and does not get the army behind you that is going to go forward and make the changes and make something happen. So the superintendent needs to be on the ground within the district and with the outside community. And I think that is the best way to build the relationship of being accepted within the educational community. If they know that you have been in the trenches with them and that you realize that this person has been a teacher, that this person has been in administrative roles, I saw the person at church, I saw the person on the United Way board, you know, that those kinds of things build a relationship that goes beyond even just the talking with them.

Similarly, another community member discussed the importance of building a core set of relationships throughout the community in order for a leader to accomplish anything meaningful. Referring to districts other than her own, she spoke of witnessing

on several occasions the deterioration of a superintendent's relationship with the community and discussed the deleterious effect this can have on both a school district and community. She stated:

In a town of this size, having a core set of relationships across the community is going to impact the success of your levies, all of those, anything that you want to accomplish. If you don't have those key relationships behind you, it's a total uphill battle because each one of those people if they believe in you and what you're doing, I think will go out and try to make it happen. And if you don't have that, man, you've got to fight for every single vote, every single one. And I've worked in communities where the relationship between the community and the superintendent has gone south, and it has a way of turning the entire community into a dysfunctional mess. The city, the county, the school, you know, the churches, it's amazing. And I've been through that really intense process three times in three different communities and you just can watch it. And the newspaper starts, and then it's the letters to the editor, and you can just watch this big divide, pro-superintendent, anti-superintendent, and it takes years and years and years for that to resolve itself, if ever.

One community member described her district's superintendent as a problem-solver whose visibility has a purpose in getting things accomplished. She contrasted a "superficial visibility" with the phrase "visible on" to be understood as a more meaningful presence, stating:

Our superintendent is a big problem-solver and is not visible just to show [his or her] face. That's a different dynamic with visibility. You can be superficially

visible, or you can be visible on, and really make a difference. So I think that's important with any leader and I've seen leadership evolve to the point where it is more. We are, we are expecting our leaders to be problem-solvers, which is what leadership always should have been.

She also added that even if a meeting is not considered one of substance, the opportunity still exists to build relationships either before or after the meeting and a leader must be willing to show up for this reason. She stated, "If you're asked to be present, just taking the time out to show up and to talk at a deeper level."

### **Engagement Efforts**

Nine participants used either the term engagement or involvement when discussing superintendent visibility. One community member discussed engagement when asked to consider the concepts of absence and presence. He stated, "Presence is being engaged as part of the community. Absence could mean just behind the scenes, I don't prefer that [in a superintendent]."

Another community member also described presence using the term engaged. He stated:

Presence means being engaged, being open to ideas, being open to people's comments, taking of ones' time, recognizing that the job's more than 8-5 as a leader in a school district. Presence means showing up to the important things in the community and being visible at school events.

The same community member also used the term engaged when the effectiveness of superintendents in the communities he has lived. He stated, "I can tell you, when they're

visible and when they engage the public, they're a lot more successful. When they hide under their desk, they really aren't, because I've seen both.”

Within the broader theme of engagement efforts, participants discussed more specifically the following: 1) Local-level involvement, 2) State-level involvement, and 3) National-level involvement. The following sub-sections are organized in this manner.

**Local-level involvement.** Twenty-seven participants discussed involvement at the local level when asked about superintendent visibility. Several comments related to involvement in local organizations as an important aspect of a superintendent’s visibility efforts. A district-level staff member, when asked to discuss what he thought counted as visibility, stated, “Communication, getting involved in organizations within the community, being involved in the happenings of the community. Those kinds of things. You can't be an office guy in this position, at least not here.”

A school board member shared his perspective about community involvement. He also discussed the importance that a superintendent fit with the community in which he or she is a superintendent. He shared this perspective:

To be involved in the community, probably more than just from the school aspect, but to be active in service clubs and church. And I think the superintendent has to fit the community, which hasn't always been the case here. I think our current superintendent really does fit in very well. We're a pretty conservative community, pretty religious community, and [he or she] fits in with both.

One community member discussed the importance of being engaged when making difficult decisions. He stated:

Leaders sometimes will have to make the tough decision and be prepared to face the community again and provide rationale. So again, it's a visibility, engaging people and gathering and that is more important versus knowing, being visible, and not engaged, and then making some decision.

A building-level staff member shared that if a community member is involved in nearly any event, he or she would know who the superintendent is because the superintendent's visibility is pervasive, stating:

If you're involved in almost anything in this school district that you go to, an activity, a sporting event, or a center for the arts event, music, plays, a task force. You're going to, you'll know the superintendent. Now if you just are a homebody and you read the paper you're going to know if you look at the name and know that it's our superintendent, but if you're out and about you'll know who it is.

In addition to general comments related to local-level involvement, two more specific themes emerged: 1) Memberships and 2) Event attendance.

**Memberships.** Twenty-four participants discussed local-level memberships. One community member discussed the sheer number of service clubs that exist and suggested why it is important that the superintendent be involved in these groups, stating “We have 15 very active service clubs here and they are just kind of like fingers that extend out into the community.”

A community member and former school board member recollected how the school board expected the superintendent to be involved in local groups. She shared that the school board made an effort to pay for membership to the key groups in the

community with the expectation that the superintendent would be the district's representative. She stated:

The board has always ascribed to the idea that a superintendent needed to be out at the forefront. In fact in some instances, well I think back you know with the first superintendent that I worked under, we started making strides to help pay for some memberships and some kinds of things that we wanted him to be involved in. Actually, I think we started with the Chamber first to be able to get to them, so we became Chamber members, and he was the person that was designated to be involved in that.

***Event attendance.*** The sub-section about event attendance is organized into two categories: 1) Community events and 2) School events.

*Community events.* Thirty-five participants discussed attendance at community events as an important part of superintendent visibility. Events mentioned included organizational board meetings, service organization meetings, Chamber of Commerce events and civic events.

One community member discussed the need for a superintendent to attend community events to gain community support for the school. She stated:

If the superintendent just sits at home, goes to work, sits in his office, isn't out and about, people don't support the school as well as they could. But if the superintendent is at the community events, they're talking to them, the public is asking questions because they get to sit next to them, especially if there's a hot topic being discussed. It makes it a much more ease of visibility for the community. A lot of community members won't come to the school, but if they

see the superintendent in the streets or at the drug store, they will talk with them and find out what's going on.

A community member discussed superintendent visibility to include community involvement, making certain to distinguish between community events and school events.

He stated:

Visibility certainly is somebody that's involved in the community. That's important. But visibility, being involved in the community, not just from a "I see you talk about school when I come to a school function." It's somebody who's involved in the community with non-profits, being willing to come anytime for any reason related to school to talk about things. And our superintendent has done the two things I just mentioned, and more, so that's what I think about when I think about visibility.

One superintendent took a moment to share an amusing story of a Sertoma meeting. As luck would have it, the local professional baseball team was in the playoffs:

I regularly speak at all the groups, just depending on what's going on, at least once a year for sure, probably more than once. My favorite was Sertoma when the Mud Hens were in the playoffs and they didn't turn the TV off or the sound down. And I was speaking. It was hilarious. So sometimes they're a little more laid back.

*School events.* Thirty participants mentioned attending school events as an important aspect of superintendent visibility. One community member emphasized the importance of actively participating in community activities but shared that simply attending school activities, however passively, was adequate. She stated, "Participating in the community activities is important; however, at school activities superintendents don't

necessarily need to be very active, but in the crowd, those kinds of things with the body present. That's really important.”

A school board member discussed the importance of her district's superintendent being visible at school events. She stated that the superintendent is “everywhere” and that “It helps a lot with the community that [he or she] is out there. Everybody knows who [he or she] is.”

A building-level staff member compared his district's current superintendent to others with whom he has worked, stating, “Not all superintendents that I've worked with have been that out there. But our current superintendent just thinks it's very important and enjoys those events and is the most visible by way of activities that I've ever seen.”

A building-level staff member discussed the importance of superintendent visibility from staff members' perspective. He stated:

It's really important with our staff that our superintendent is there, that [he or she] is out there being at as many activities as possible. For an example, if we have three or four home events on a night, the superintendent is at every one of them.

A building-level staff member shared that the superintendent actually lists activities on the weekly calendar that gets sent out to staff and that the superintendent generally adheres to the calendar, suggesting that superintendent is very intentional with efforts to be visible. The staff member stated, “The superintendent is always around. Every night, whether it's something in the arts, music or sports. It's written right into [his or her] schedule.”

One superintendent discussed the challenge of being visible at school district events and also discussed keeping a calendar. The superintendent also mentioned extracurricular activities:

What gets paid attention to gets done, so if I put it on my calendar and commit to it, I can do it. But there are only so many 14-hour days in a week that you can work and be any good the next day. I could march through all of those [activities], but I don't know how effective I would be at the real job.

One superintendent discussed the nature of attending events and the reputation that has developed within the school community:

Everyone knows, although especially my buddies, oh, because you always make sure you walk down in front, and then go up and shake a few hands, and it's like, "Oh, you're doing the drive by." And I go "Yeah, yeah. I think I might have something else I have to get to or something." And they chuckle, but everybody knows it, but even if you stop in for a time. It hasn't been as crazy this year for some reason, but there were times where I was going to five different events in a night. What's nice about it is [people think] "[He or She] is at something but [he or she] is just not here right now."

Another superintendent shared a different perspective regarding visibility at school events. This superintendent discussed how the nature of superintendent visibility might have changed in the last several years, at least in this superintendent's school district. The previous superintendent developed a reputation for being very visible, but this person's definition of visibility is quite different from how the current superintendent views visibility, stating:

The superintendent who was here before I came here had been a superintendent for 15 years and I met with him at a conference in April, March I guess it was, a few years ago and, before I took the job, and he said, "You got a high bar to match." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said that, "Well, I go to every event there is, every single event, I go. I go to every basketball game, every hockey game. I attend all those things. I'm not there for the whole event, but I always stop in and make an appearance and then leave." So that was his idea of being visible. Mine is more, I want more value to visibility. I just don't want to show up and "Hey, here I am, here's the superintendent." It's more relationship-based, or there's some more value in the fact, like whether it's reading my blog or making a statement on the web or cable access. But there's some value to being seen, not just being seen physically.

**State-level involvement.** Thirty-eight participants discussed state-level participation. One community member shared a relatively typical response when he offered his qualified opinion about the importance of a superintendent being involved at the state level. He stated that involvement at this level should only occur after he or she has assured that the local district is running well. Here was his perspective:

We as a community would like to see the superintendent being active on a higher level, regional, probably statewide, for the attention of making all schools in Minnesota better. Now, if you have kids in the school district at this very moment, probably your focus is, you know, let's make sure the ship is running well here. Assuming that's happening, I think we want the superintendent to fight for the overall betterment of education in our state.

A school board member very explicitly shared his perspective on state-level superintendent involvement, stating:

It's paramount that a superintendent has not only a regional outlook, and understands what's going on with [other conference schools] and the surrounding area, but also what's going on at the state capitol, because I don't see a lot of board members in these out-state districts having the ability or the time to really know and connect with our state legislators.

One superintendent very explicitly stated that part of the expectations placed upon the superintendent is to work at the state level. "Here, the expectation is that a person will become part of state activities. In fact, part of my evaluation relates directly to the ability to work with legislators and to work at the Capitol."

A school board member discussed the important role that her community plays in the state as the state capital. He stated:

The biggest issue is, as the capitol and as one of the largest school districts, our school district needs to be involved statewide as a leader in a lot of different areas, as driving curriculum and education issues. As importantly, when the legislature meets, our superintendent needs to be visible there and other school districts are going to rely on that as well and so that visibility, in essence from a statewide perspective, is critical.

A superintendent from a relatively small school district shared a somewhat different perspective compared to a counterpart in a larger school district, indicating that the school board does not necessarily expect involvement at the state level, stating:

I don't think they [school board members] expect it. I think they like it. When I went down a couple years ago with a couple of my board members to go to the school board association day at the Capitol, the commissioner of education drove by us. I said, "Oh, there's the commissioner." She parked right there and I turned around and she said, "Hi, [proper name], how are you?" They both looked at me like, "Oh, you know the commissioner." And then she walked us in and we talked about things. I always try my best to say hello to the commissioner whenever I see her. It's very important that small schools are represented.

When asked about superintendent involvement at the regional or state level in either professional organizations or legislatively, a school board member from a small school district did not appear to be overly enthusiastic with the notion, stating:

Well, our superintendent is involved with that with neighboring superintendents. But to go to the next level, to me that's kind of like, I don't know how much good that's going for our district. You know, we're struggling with, as far as a city, we're struggling with dropping students and how do we compete. If the superintendent wants to get legislatively involved, I'd be more for that. And I am all for being with the area, say a 50-mile radius, but it's more local and share ideas and stay into it that way.

A community member who is a former school board member in a large school district and who once served as a member of the state's school board association's board of directors offered a more general statement about superintendent involvement at the state level. She recalled working with several superintendents at the state level in her role with the state association and offered the following:

I can think of the outstanding superintendents that I worked with at the state level and they really stood out and were really well respected. And what made them stand out was their willingness to be out, involved in issues outside their district.

A building-level staff member emphasized the importance of state-level involvement. He commented that it is important for a superintendent “to go to bat for you” and that the superintendent is someone “that's going to go down there [state capitol] and is going to stand up for your school and your area, someone that takes pride in your school, that's willing to represent your school.”

Another building-level staff member stated the following about involvement at the state level:

It can't be a bad thing because when, especially from a rural area, we have some different needs than the metro and so if your superintendent is going to be on the forefront instead of maybe reacting or just kind of going along with people, you're out there trying to do better for your district. That feels pretty good that ours is out there.

A district-level staff member acknowledged that one drawback of a superintendent being involved at the state level is that he or she is potentially less available and less visible in the school district, but still saw value in state-level involvement:

We understand that we're out-state, we're a fairly decent size city but we're not the big boys. If we don't have a presence at the state capital or within the superintendent organization or with our lobbyists, we're going to get left in the dust. To lead that charge, it's got to be that position [the superintendent].

A school board member shared the following when asked about the importance of a superintendent being involved at the state level:

Our superintendent has been involved but whether that's important for our district, I guess it could be, but it's not as important as being visible in the district. You know, it's probably good as far as getting some benefits to the district, if you're known down at the state capitol it probably doesn't hurt.

A district-level staff member offered his opinion about how the community would view a superintendent's involvement at the state level when he stated, "From the community, I don't think they worry about that at all. They probably don't even think it's necessary." A community member from the same district would probably agree to a large extent, but also offered that her perspective on the issue might be atypical, stating:

Being involved outside in bringing new ideas and thoughts, I understand as an executive the importance of that. I don't know that everybody in the community would necessarily understand that. Some people may view that as, "Well the superintendent should be back here doing things." I think people that understand the role better would say, "It's great that he or she got involved and was visible outside the school district." It not only brings credibility to the school district, but it's those contacts that you make outside where you get some ideas and you can call someone up and say "Hey, I've been working on this or I have this issue."

And other superintendents and other people in education may be the only people he or she can talk to about certain issues.

As part of state-level involvement, five participants discussed state-level memberships in professional organizations or other associations. One building-level staff

member discussed his superintendent's involvement in the state's rural education association. He stated:

That's another sign of his visibility that every time he goes to one of those meetings, he comes back and he reports to the district. Being in rural part of the state, that's been basically his roots from the time he grew up to the schools that he's worked at and I think that's one of his pet projects. And I as a taxpayer am very supportive of that in the sense that we need to have some visibility and we need to have somebody's voice that will speak up for us.

A community member discussed that his district's superintendent is quite visible in his profession, but ultimately reiterated the importance of "taking care of business" at the local level. Here was his perspective:

Our superintendent is visible in the professional field and involved in other organizations with superintendents, and I think even at the national level, too. But again, somebody might just say, they don't have to be that visible. They can be just as long as they're educating the kids, taking care of business.

**National-level involvement.** Nine participants discussed superintendent involvement at the national level. The largest district in the study had the largest share of participants, six, who discussed involvement at the national level.

A superintendent shared that that a clear expectation exists to be involved at the national level. The same superintendent also that within various contexts, community expectations will differ depending on the location and type of school district, stating:

On the national scene, that's part of the expectation to be at those events. I asked the board chair, "Am I supposed to go to the national school board convention?"

Because I wanted to talk with him about maybe I'm not needed there. And he said, "Yes." Period. No discussion. So I'm going. Yeah, so there's a national focus. And I don't know what the logic is, but I felt some of the same type of pressure in my former district. You belong to the community, you are representing the school, you create the networks and the linkages that help the school's work get done.

A school board member prefaced this comment, clarifying that he was not speaking for the entire school board when he offered the following:

We think we are a model for the national, I mean, no school is the extreme ultimate model, but we think we're really probably a model, and we want to be, a model for what education should be like. So our superintendent has to be a point person on that.

A building-level staff member offered a perspective about the balance between being involved and possibly even recognized at the national level and being involved effectively at the local level. He felt that a former superintendent who was recognized nationally was perceived to be much less successful at the local level. Here was his perspective:

One of our previous superintendents was named a national distinguished superintendent, and it was interesting having worked for somebody like that for a number of years how that person could rise to that level of national recognition. Having worked with other administrators in a short period of time and seeing the work and accountability that is actually being done and then comparing the two and saying, "Well, who would I rather work for?" you know, or "Who's cutting the mustard?" And "Who [which superintendent] really gets [understands] me?"

If you don't get me, you don't get my staff, you don't get my kids, regardless of what school I'm at, I'll get your message and I'll carry your torch like no other, but it's gonna be hard for me. If I know you're passionate about me and my teachers and my kids and that we have that relationships, you're gonna get so much more out of me, my staff, and my kids.

### **Importance of Presence**

Twenty-nine participants spoke about the importance of presence. A variety of responses are presented here as the responses related to the importance of presence varied significantly. Later in this section, several specific themes are identified and discussed.

Several participants tied a superintendent's success to the effectiveness of his or her visibility. For example, a building-level staff member stated simply, "You're going to have to be out there, exposing yourself, answering the questions, being visible, or you don't have a chance for success." A school board member succinctly stated, "If you're a good educational leader, you're gonna be visible." Another school board member stated, "If you're not visible and connected out there, you're out of touch."

A school board member shared his view that visibility is the second most important factor to a superintendent's success behind only leadership ability. He stated:

I just don't think there's anything that's more critical. I mean I really, I really don't. I mean, well I shouldn't say that because I mean, your leadership ability, but you've gotta be out there and you've gotta be the leader, which means the leader of your internal stakeholders but also your external stakeholders. And if they don't see you, and they don't feel that you're approachable and have that ability to communicate with you, they're gonna get disenfranchised and disassociated. And

once you do that, whatever message you're trying to deliver to them ultimately is lost.

One community member linked a superintendent's competence to visibility, as if visibility and the quality of visibility is a reflection of a superintendent's self-confidence:

The competence of a superintendent, some are a bit apprehensive about visibility because competence comes through. One of the places where incompetence or competence comes through is through visibility and the quality of the visibility. I think that's a place that it really begins to show. Those [superintendents] that are going, "OK, I'm just a manger here, I'm keeping the pieces together, I'll show up at Kiwanis and tell them OK things." They're not really good at holding the mirror up to themselves and saying, "Where are we really at? Let's have the tough conversations." That shows up in visibility because if the superintendent acts like everything's going well, and your test scores are in the tank, you got an issue.

According to a building-level staff member, visibility allows a superintendent to demonstrate that he or she is the leader of the school district. He stated:

I feel like he or she is the person in charge, and being the leader. You know, at staff in-services, they are up there leading the charge; with facilities work, they are up there kind of helping massage, makes sure it's going in the right direction. You should always know that the superintendent is the one that's running the show. The superintendent has to have that presence about him or her and that's important.

Referring to a specific example in his school district, a district-level staff member discussed the importance superintendent visibility in passing a facilities bond referendum. He stated:

Our superintendent came in and said, “OK, fine. Now let's get down to business and get what we really need” and people understood that we needed a new something, but what? And [our superintendent] just kind of moderated that a little bit to say, "No, we don't need this huge thing, but we do need this." And the community came around and rallied around the superintendent. And that visibility piece, that piece to be approachable, the project went through because people believed in the superintendent. So, it's important.

One superintendent discussed how all of the little things add up to something more significant, sharing this perspective:

When I'm at the ball games, I will greet people at the door. I walk around a bit; I get up at half time not just sit down. My [spouse] often accompanies me to these and I'll say, “I'll be back in a few minutes,” so I walk around and say “Hi” to the community members and so forth, try to make an effort to say “Hi.” At the end of the game, I stand at the doorway and thank people for coming, just kind of real basic stuff. Every little thing adds up to a bigger thing.

Several participants discussed the importance of superintendent visibility as it relates to a superintendent's ability to communicate. One district-level staff member stated the following:

In order for the staff, parents and community to believe in the message, the superintendent has to be visible, or how is the message going to be heard? Or

maybe there is no message without visibility being a piece of it, so in order to be successful, it has to be a component.

A school board member's perspective included several ideas about the importance of superintendent visibility. She stated:

The more you're out there the better it is. I mean, that's the bottom line. The easier it is, the easier it is for the community and the teachers to come talk to you. If you're viewed as a person that just sits in your office and you're too smart and people are intimidated by you, some people get that type of reputation. Everything else will fall by the wayside if you're not an excellent communicator and if you can get your ideas and your vision across to everybody else: the school board, the community, the teachers, other staff, everybody. If you can't communicate effectively, then you might as well just hang it up.

A district-level staff member discussed the importance of visibility during a crisis and considered it a crisis for a district if a superintendent is unwilling or unable to communicate and be visible during a crisis. He stated the following:

If you have a huge crisis going on in your building, or in a district, people want to know where the leader is, they want to see that person. And you pick any event, it could be a crisis dealing with needing to put buildings up, it could be a tragic event that has happened in your district, our superintendent has some experience with that, frankly. We all do at some point, where tragic events happen and things that you would rather not have to deal with. But they expect to see that leader out there. That's visibility, and if you can't do that, I think that's a crisis within itself for a district.

When asked where he would rank the importance of visibility for a superintendent compared to other duties that a superintendent might have, a building-level staff member connected visibility to the importance understanding what is happening within the organization and to ultimately communicate effectively about the organization. He stated the following:

When I look at the most important duties, the educational direction of the school, communication and keeping the school, you know, the business aspect of it, making sure it is an efficient school, all of those are very difficult to do without visibility, if that makes sense. So I mean, I wouldn't want to put it fourth or wouldn't want to put it ahead of something, but how do you effectively communicate if you're not visible? How do you know what's going on in your school educational-wise, wherever school it is, and know which direction that you want to try to lead us in, if you're not visible?

In addition to general comments related to the importance of presence, four related themes were identified from the interviews. The themes are organized as follows and are included in the next sub-section: 1) Community and economic development, 2) Political considerations, 3) Diversity of visibility, and 4) Impact on groups.

**Community and economic development.** Fifteen participants discussed the relationship between superintendent visibility and community and economic development. Several comments related to the quality of the school district and the offerings that exist in order to prepare students for the workforce. Others commented on the need for strong schools in communities so that the community may grow as families choose to move into a given community based on the quality of the school system. Still

others discussed the need for a superintendent to help break down barriers that might keep partnerships in the community from being created in the first place.

One community member stated that educators must think about the economic impact that a school system has on a community. She stated the following about school superintendents:

School superintendents can really make an economic difference in your community. We don't think about [this] in education, a good educational system is an economic driver for a state, for a community. The days of working in a silo are over and gone. You know, education belongs at the table when governments are deciding what they're going to do. Not just with education, but when governments are deciding what they're going to do for workforce, for example, because education and workforce are just inner-linked.

Another community member discussed economic development, referring to a superintendent's need to be "involved with different committees and boards and having a voice in what happens with housing, with employment." She went on to state that a superintendent must look beyond just test scores or mandates, stating:

It's not just focusing on No Child Left Behind or whatever policies are coming down and trying to fit yourself into that box, which is one of the biggest challenges that has faced our school districts the past several years. But to continue to be creative and to look into what the community's needs actually are rather than just dealing with curriculum that will get some test scores.

A community member who is involved with economic development for the city discussed the his school district within the context of economic development. He stated:

We are starting to look at the high schools more and more as our first source of early workforce. What's going on in there? Are these students being exposed to careers? And then how can we form relationships so maybe some of these juniors and seniors can start getting some early experiences that might be useful to our employers.

The same community member discussed the importance of the superintendent serving on the leadership committee that is charged with getting community members more involved in economic development in order to create a more inclusive and economically diverse community. From his perspective, he feels that it is critical that the superintendent is involved, stating, “Well, that visibility part plays into the fact that the community views you as a partner in their overall direction of being a more dynamic and vibrant city.”

Another community member stated the following about workforce development:

The superintendent is so key in workforce development. And it can be selfish in some ways because if the superintendent does a great job and all these kids stay in successful careers within this community and then have children of their own, of course we're then pushing the kids back into the district, but I really think it's beyond that. We know not all students are gonna leave and get a four-year degree anymore. That's just not the reality. So how can you help every one of those students be successful in some way in their life?

One community member reflected on her realization that the superintendent is a vital part to her community's success, stating, “So now I'm beginning to see why, why it is important for the superintendent to be a part of the community so that [he or she] knows the needs.” She further stated:

If the superintendent is sort of overseeing the curriculum and those sorts of things then he needs to know what the needs are of our community because our kids will come back to work here and live here and so it's important to see the full life cycle of what those students go through. So I can see an area where in academic development I'd like to have the superintendent participating, too. Like right now we have a need for welders. I think a lot of places do. But then how do we translate that need for job openings here that we can't fill. Our best bet is to fill it with our own.

**Political considerations.** Thirty-four participants linked superintendent visibility to political considerations. While most of the comments related to various forms of referenda, several comments were more general in nature, such as one community member who stated that a superintendent must be “proactive in promoting the agenda of the school.”

Comments related to elections included a community member's perspective on his district's failed referenda that may have ultimately led to superintendents moving on from his or her position, perhaps knowing that it would be difficult to ever pass a referendum. He stated:

We've had failed referendums here, couple of them. Not with this superintendent, with the ones previous. They were all what I would call outstanding people, but a couple of missteps along the way like saying something that offended me, the older me, or maybe could have been said more gently. They found it a hard road, I think. If they would have stayed here, it would have been difficult to get that stature back, so they decided to move on.

A building-level staff member provided a perspective on the current superintendent's primary role when that person was hired. He indicated the importance of a superintendent being visible to all community members during an election, not just the community members who agree with the ballot measure. He stated:

The superintendent came on board as the previous one [referendum] had failed, probably in the previous November. So it was number one on the list, of course, to get our facility project off the ground and the superintendent headed up a community task force that was essential and got all the players to the table instead of just the yes vote players to the table, which was the key. So sometimes you have to be visible to the people that are against you and what you're trying to accomplish as well.

A school board member discussed what he described as a small town perspective on the failure and then passage of a levy referendum. He stressed the importance of superintendent visibility beyond the lead up to an election. In his story of a failed referendum, he discussed what was published in the local paper leading up to the election, and he also discussed the need for a superintendent to not be viewed as aloof in order to avoid a potential rift between the superintendent and the rest of the community.

He shared this perspective:

The misconceptions of that, like the first one that didn't pass and that's a tough thing in a small town, too. We're not a big professional town. What the superintendent gets paid goes in the local newspaper, it's public knowledge. Everything's out there. Well, the perception worked against us in the first levy, like people think they're passing a levy just to give you more money. And you try

to get out there and people don't come to the meetings. In a small community, you'll get 10 people at a levy meeting and you try to explain all this stuff so people can get to know the superintendent, but they don't come to get to know you that way. So the way they can get to know you is at ball games and in church and around town. You have to change that perception that you're not up here and everybody else is down here.

Another school board member shared a similar sentiment and attributed the passage of a referendum largely to the superintendent's visibility in the community while acknowledging the challenging political nature of elections. She stated:

The superintendent being out and doing all those things, there are some people who you're just never going to please and so visibility worked against [him or her] from that aspect. But I think for the most part, it's very important that the superintendent be out there talking to people, that everybody knows who they are.

Finally, building-level staff member discussed the importance of being consistently visible in a community rather than just at election time. He stated, "We can't just be visible in the community during a referendum year or something like that. We need to build that rapport with the community from day one and go from there."

**Diversity of visibility.** Eight participants discussed diversity of visibility, acknowledging that a singular approach is not adequate. A school board member stated succinctly, "It has to be diverse." He cautioned against focusing on one approach to visibility, providing this perspective:

The one word would be diverse and that's why I've got to go to the sporting events and I've got to let parents know they're doing something that affects

extracurricular activities. “Oh, the superintendent is there. He or she understands.” And that act alone creates visibility and a presumption that the superintendent understands because they have been there. Same with the theater arts, same with the swimming, same with going to Rotary, going to Kiwanis where they're a lot older, individuals who may not have kids in the district and yet you have a visibility there and so that when an issue comes up with taxation, they can say, “I don't have kids there but the superintendent has come and talked to us, and I get it.” And there are some who may read the paper only, others with TV, others where when you blog, they're tracking that and following it. And so to me that's the key, it's that diversity and that visibility.

A district staff-member identified a wide variety of activities or actions that he considers important for a superintendent. He shared:

If you're going to be the superintendent of a district, people need to see you and maybe that links to hearing you, so visibility to me for a superintendent is very critical. And visibility can happen in many forms. It can be written, what you publish, and how you communicate is a form of visibility. Just physical visibility, being out in schools, having visibility with your principals, teaching staff.

Accessibility to the superintendent I think is difficult, especially in a large district, and you can alleviate some of that accessibility that people want to you by being visible. Walking into a building, walking through the building, pausing here, pausing there and having those one minute conversations can alleviate some of that visibility issue. People want to see you. They want to see you in the community, they want to see you at community functions, they want to see you at

school functions, and it's a time management issue that is a struggle for a superintendent almost at any level or size of district, and certainly in the larger districts it's more of a problem.

A district-level staff member described a “multi-faceted” approach to superintendent visibility. Here was his perspective:

Folks may certainly be reading the blogs or whatever, but I think a personal presentation has a huge impact with the business community. And as far as with parents, having the superintendent speak to various groups, if it's a parent group or some event where parents are there, that's another way of being visible. So it's multi-faceted. You can't just count or use one method. A superintendent has to be diverse and adept to using many mediums, or ways of communicating, because everyone has a different preference and a different perception of what communication is.

**Impact on groups.** Six participants discussed the impact that a superintendent can have on groups. One superintendent provided a very detailed example of a leader's perception on the impact that he or she has on a group. The superintendent acknowledged that because of one's leadership style, a leader's mere presence sometimes influences groups, stating:

My style of leadership, I'm pretty much, I won't say the 100-pound gorilla, but I'm a strong leader. So when I'm present in a meeting with my administration, it's totally influenced by my presence; what happens in that meeting is completely influenced by me being there. If you take me out of the picture, the dynamic of the room changes completely. I was very honest and candid with them and they

were very appreciative of the fact that I was who I was, but just by my personality, by my nature of being there, I influence, so I try not to be there sometimes. I will purposely tell others, “OK, I’m leaving. You can take over with the principals. You can run with this.”

Another approach that a superintendent mentioned that could be effective was the use of a Chief of Staff to run meetings. With this approach control of the agenda is relinquished and the superintendent is “simply about providing input.”

### **Visibility as Absence**

This section includes emergent themes related to absence and is divided into two sections: 1) Aspects of Absence and 2) Importance of Absence.

#### **Aspects of Absence**

Various qualities of absence were discussed and included several general comments. For example, a community member offered a typical response when asked about the concepts of presence and absence. She stated:

Presence and absence to me would be a superintendent that is active in the community and absence would be one that just is content to stay at school and sit behind their desk. And you would know he was there, but that would be it.

Several participants offered more specific comments related to absence. For example, a building-level staff member compared his district’s current superintendent to the district’s previous superintendent and also referenced an issue that is currently ongoing in his school. He stated:

Our superintendent is more present and visible than the last superintendent, but, as far as absence, sometimes [he or she] kind of selectively pulls away from some

things. I know there's some issues at the high school and I wish [he or she] would be more in the forefront.

Within the broad section of Aspects of Absence, five cluster themes were identified and include the following: 1) Symbolic absence, 2) Job pressures, 3) Tied to desk, 4) Privacy, and 5) Contra-presence.

**Symbolic absence.** The theme of absence was discussed by 33 participants with a total of 49 unique references to the concept. Following a general discussion about symbolic absence, two specific themes related to symbolic absence are noted within this section.

Several participants shared the perception that absence is very noticeable and carries great significance, perhaps greater symbolic significance than presence in many contexts. A community member and former school board member in a large school district provided one such example by contrasting the concepts of absence and presence, sharing that absence can be more powerful and noteworthy than presence:

Absence can sometimes be more striking than presence. If there's something going on and the superintendent is not to be found, that communicates something evasive, something negative. There's nothing like being able to stand up and face calmly something that's controversial.

Similarly, a district-level staff member stated, "I think the lack of visibility would come up more than the actual being visible. That sometimes maybe gets taken for granted that that's what you're supposed to do." Additionally, a community member from the same district stated, "So, absence is, I almost think that absence is a greater detriment than presence in person is a plus."

A community member stated that a superintendent's absence might very well reflect his or her priorities. She stated, "It probably conveys a great deal when you're absent from an event. Yeah, that probably says a lot to those people at that event, and it's a mirror of your priorities, I suppose." Related to priorities, a community member pondered a situation in which a superintendent might be noticeably absent at a time when a school district needs the superintendent to be present. She stated:

When I think of absence, I think of where would the superintendent be noticeably absent? You know, so where are the key things that the school district needs that face, that voice to be present, even if you just sit there and make fun of the speaker like we did today. I mean, even if it really doesn't have a purpose there's so many places that the superintendent needs to be to just show that the school district is part of the conversation and at the table when decisions are made.

A district-level staff member reflected on his many years of experience with a variety of superintendents. He recalled vividly the superintendent whom he considers the least visible. He stated:

Well, you know, of the seven superintendents I've worked under, I'll just take one in particular, he was desk-oriented. To me, he was absent. Not knowing him on a daily basis, I don't know how many people came in to see him, but in the seven years that I coached basketball, I can only remember seeing him at maybe two or three of our basketball games over the course of that time. And I'd watch for things like that to see which administrators were there, so, you know, that one superintendent I would put in the category of being absent, not present.

A district-level staff member also reflected on his career and was able to recall working with several superintendents. He recalled a couple of superintendents in particular whose careers were ultimately negatively impacted because of issues directly related to absence. He stated:

All had their strengths, not all had the strength of visibility or were highly visible in the community. And I will tell you, because of that, I can think of one or two because they kept such a low profile, the type of people who came in very early in the morning and by 3:30 or 4:00 were gone, were not engaged in the community, were not visible in the community, it ended their careers in those communities.

Perhaps the perspective that a community member provided helps to explain why a superintendent's career might meet its demise due to absence. He discussed a connection between relationships, communication and absence, asserting that a superintendent who is absent is not able to communicate well. Here was his perspective:

We have enough of a relationship, and that's how it ties into the visibility. If it's someone that you never see, you just see their name on the bottom of your check or your contract, then you don't have that relationship. Who cares about this guy who comes to talk to us once a year? You know it was a couple superintendents ago, where we saw him maybe at the beginning of the year and then if there's a staff appreciation thing at the end of the year. And if something else big came up he would come in, but that communication wasn't there, so it's almost impossible to, or he wasn't very visible so when he did communicate with you it was like "I don't know this guy anyway."

Related to communication, the importance of a superintendent communicating when he or she is going to be absent was discussed by several participants, suggesting the importance of communicating and framing one's absence in order to minimize the negative perception that might result. For example, one community member stated:

I think when you're absent, people notice, so you know, being intentional about it if there is an event going on that people expect you at, of course giving notice and a reason why you won't be there, that's always a good thing to do.

Similarly, a building-level staff member shared the following when discussing the perception that superintendents are sometimes pulled away from the school district for legitimate reasons and need to specifically explain the reasons. He stated:

Well, the drawback of course is that as a superintendent you would get pulled away from the district for various reasons all the time; yet, you know, your ability to explain to people why you're gone sometimes is important as well. Not that you're just out of the office, [but rather] "I'm attending a legislative session at the capital; I'm going to a conference." So I think sometimes when you're not there, you need to explain yourself.

While participants overwhelmingly viewed superintendent absence negatively, one superintendent shared an alternative view. He stated that at times he is intentionally absent in order to allow other administrators the opportunity to take the lead in certain settings. He stated:

Some of the things I'm doing with absence in mind would be, I won't go to all my principals' faculty meetings for example. Earlier on, I would pretty much attend regularly and because I'm not one to keep my mouth shut, so I'm trying to be

absent unless I'm going for something specific, like I'm going to talk about the calendar, I have agenda items that I'm going to speak on and so, absence to let my principals be leaders without me there.

Another superintendent reflected on the delicate nature of the balance between absence and presence and also included a discussion about superintendent egos. She stated:

I think as superintendents, probably all of us have an ego and maybe we overestimate the value of our presence. What I've learned is to give myself permission to be absent because nobody else is going to give me that permission and I need to be really careful in what I choose to be absent from and what I've found out is the place pretty much survives by gravity if I miss a few things. But that's hard for me as a control freak, and I think it's a statement about the kind of egos we have as leaders.

Another superintendent offered a unique comment related to part-time superintendents and their perceived absence. He stated, "Part-time superintendents of neighboring districts, who I keep getting reports about from people that work there. They say something to me like, 'Well, he's never here.'"

A community member attempted to define absence while also providing his district's superintendent with positive feedback. He stated, "Absence would mean lack of engagement, just kind of showing up doing the job, not engaging the community, distant. None of those would describe, the absence thing would not describe our superintendent at all. He's very present."

A building-level staff member offered a simple view of superintendent absence. She stated, “You have to role model. You can't not be present. You can't.” A district-level staff member's comments would lend support to this simple view. She stated:

From the community perspective or from the parent perspective, they expect to see the superintendent and if there's absence, they would find that puzzling, so I think from the parent, especially the parent perspective, that's important. They want to know who their superintendent is, and I think they would be puzzled if he or she seemed absent.

**Job pressures.** Eighteen participants discussed the pressure of the superintendency. Comments related to the importance of the position, pressure that exists for superintendents, and time demands of the position. A community member and parent offered a perspective that described the importance of the superintendent in her community. She stated:

The superintendent really represents everything about the school district, so if they're making bad choices or not representing themselves well, the future of the school district is at risk. I mean, there are all kinds of other risks that can take place, especially with budgets and all of those things, but really, I mean, they are kind of the voice of the school district and we have a lot of competition here for students, and I'm a public school mom and so it's really important to me as a mother but also as a professional that that school district be as strong as it possibly, possibly can be and the superintendent represents all of that for me.

One superintendent shared several comments about the pressure of the job and was able to contrast it with her previous position. This superintendent reflected on a conversation with the local teacher union president:

And the union president said, “Well, you know, our superintendent is just a workaholic and the rest of us have a life,” so the president of [the teachers’ union] is telling me this. And she said I comforted her, though, because [I wasn’t in my office at 7:00 a.m.]. She said, “You know, when I drive past your office at seven in the morning, your lights aren't on, you’re not there.” And so, I was chuckling about that and thinking, "Really? You know if my lights are on in the morning or not?" So visibility is that important. And in the absence of knowing where I am, people make stuff up. I just found that intriguing that visibility, people wanna know you're gonna show up, you're gonna work hard, and they wanna know where you're at. It's sort of just a comfort maybe for them to know that you're working.

Further, the same superintendent acknowledged a personal struggle with balancing the pressures of the job with one’s personal life, stating:

So I have struggled with that balance and I can do the public piece pretty well, and I’m engaged with it, I’m very passionate about it. But I like my quiet time and my down time. It’s not a lot, but I have learned to give myself permission to just be 100% absent.

A district-level staff member shared his view that a superintendent has to do whatever it takes to do the job. He referenced time as a considerable factor, and also

acknowledged that his district's superintendent is on the right track to leave a lasting legacy. He stated:

That's one of the traits that a superintendent has to have. If it takes fourteen hours to do an eight-hour job or whatever, he's or she's going to do it. You know, our superintendent would probably be the first one to tell you that he takes great pride in maybe the legacy that's going to be left after he retires.

A school board member shared an insight related to a superintendent's personal life. The district's previous superintendent was able to be more visible in the community because he no longer had children at home. The board member contrasted that with the district's current superintendent. He stated:

So after his [the former superintendent] kids left, he had the ability to be out in the district a little bit more. Now the problem that it created for our current superintendent because he has got little kids and can't be out in the community as much, so where he's at are the events when he's watching his kids, which is where he should be in the first place.

The pressure to be at everything and everywhere was mentioned by several participants. For example, one community member, when asked what visibility meant to her, discussed the pressure to be involved in the community, which might create issues back at the district office. She stated:

Community involvement in different committees, which I know is hard because then they have a load of work back at their office that they need to do too, and people need him or her back at their office as well. So it's probably a balancing act.

A district-level staff member also recognized the pressure that is placed on her district's superintendent to attend community events. She stated:

There's always someone saying, "Hey, can they [the superintendent] come speak to our Rotary club? To our Lions club?" We have to keep a track, keep a table. People definitely want the superintendent to be there. So that's been more than anything how we talk about just how in demand the superintendents are to be out in the community.

A community member, perhaps in jest, questioned whether or not her district's superintendent sleeps. She stated:

Our superintendent is a great example of visibility. I don't know when the guy sleeps, or does anything non-school related, honestly. He's at the games, he's on the committees that are unrelated to school in the community, he's on the school committees, I mean, he's everywhere. And in a positive way, you know. But I don't know how he maintains that level of visibility.

A district-level staff member discussed satisfaction that he is not a school superintendent because of the demands to be visible. He stated:

Well, I think its kind of one of the reasons I'm not sure if I would want to be a superintendent. I mean, it's just; there are high expectations of visibility. There are always requests to go to these different organizations and so forth, so obviously they feel it's, you know, the community feels it's important. And I think the school board feels it's important that the superintendent is involved in all that stuff.

An district-level staff member offered a unique insight about the pressures that exist for a superintendent. He discussed the difference between his district's administrative group's contract with his superintendent's contract. He stated:

The superintendent needs to be seen as the leader by the district employees and needs to be seen as the CEO by the community. That is a seat [the superintendency] that is different than other administrators in the district. It's viewed differently. Well, we're having that issue right now. Traditionally, I'm bargaining with the admin group. "Well, we want what the superintendent got because that's what we always get." And I had to tell them this is a whole different ball of wax here folks. That's a three-year contract. There is no severance, no continuing contract rights. This is a market-driven position based upon results and visibility and it's depth and breadth of responsibility and exposure are much different than yours.

Several participants discussed the need for a superintendent to be certain that the district is being run well and that the work of the district if being taken care of before a superintendent should place much importance on being visible in the community. A school board member discussed his own need to justify his district superintendent's absence and also the fine line between being visible and being sure the work of the district is getting done. He shared:

The superintendent got asked to be part of something that would have pulled them out of the district too much, so then if you're out of the district and, speaking as a board member, I have to justify things if people know you're not here. I can justify that, stand up for you if I know you're fighting and doing things for the

district. So then that's a good position for me to be in. It's a bad position if I can't really get in your corner and I think, "Well maybe, yeah you are gone too much."

And bottom line, the works gotta be done.

A community member discussed the importance of a school district to be run well. She discussed the different contexts of districts where staffing levels might vary or where there are great pressures on a district due to financial constraints, which might lead a superintendent to be less visible. She stated:

If you have some stressor in your life or in your district that's going to draw your attention away. There are the ones who, who don't have to do a lot at their district in terms of, you know, it kind of runs on its own. And they have more time to do the other visible things. I can think of one in particular, who is just fighting to get the technical things done because they're so understaffed and under so much pressure financially, and for other reasons that I don't think the guy gets out of his office, period, because he's just in the weeds right now. Would he like to be visible out in the community? I'm sure, but the bills have to be paid first and the students' needs need to be met. So I really see that full gamut. A superintendent can be visible when a school is healthy. And is that chicken or egg, I don't know.

**Tied to desk.** Twenty-two participants referenced the theme of being tied to a desk or being desk-oriented when discussing superintendent visibility. Several participants from the same district discussed this theme. A school board member stated simply, "I don't think you can have a superintendent that sits in his or her office all day and goes home at the end of the day and doesn't ever mix with the public. I think it's very

important to be out.” A district-level staff member reflected on his experiences with multiple superintendents, stating:

I've had the varying degrees of superintendents over the years; some have been more desk-oriented, some more people-oriented like our current superintendent. Of the seven superintendents I've worked under, I'll just take one in particular; I won't mention which one it is, who was desk-oriented. To me, he was absent.

A community member discussed the location of the district office being a factor in a superintendent's visibility and indicated that it takes effort to get out of the office. He stated:

We've had superintendents before that never come out of their office, so unless they have to go to a staff meeting or have to interact with someone, they were pretty closed off. And some of that may have been the physical buildings that we used to be in, that they were kind of secluded. Although our current superintendent always made a point to go to the schools every day and hang out there whether the office was elsewhere or not. But some of them never took that step.

Finally, two employees shared perspectives regarding being tied to a desk. First, a building-level staff member shared what she thought was stereotypical of a superintendent, stating, “Behind a desk is what I think the stereotype is for a superintendent. I don't think that of our superintendent, but if I'm going to put a stereotype on a superintendent, that's kind of what I would say.” Second, a district-level staff member offered this general advice to superintendents, “Stay out of your office as much as possible, get to know as many of the people in your district as possible.”

**Privacy.** Five participants discussed issues related to privacy, including three of the four superintendent participants. One superintendent discussed deliberate efforts to limit socialization with other district employees and school board members, stating:

I consciously do not socialize with the people here. I've got my own golf group; I've got my own dinner club. So, maybe I'll have some of them out and I'll cook burgers and brats and we'll have a beer on my deck or something like that. But I've never been to their house; we just don't associate that way. And same way with the school board, you know, we're at the school board convention, and we're at the bar or we go out for dinner, but I don't socialize with them in that sort of intentional way, I don't do that.

Another superintendent reflected on an experience in a former school district. The experience solidified that some people do not view the superintendent as a person; rather, they viewed the superintendent only as the superintendent:

And you don't want to overstate your importance as a superintendent, but in my previous district, which is a smaller town, you're recognized as the superintendent, not as a person. I don't think anybody much cares about [proper name] in particular except those that I'm close to, but you are recognized as a superintendent from the first moment you're out in the public. And I'm a very private person so that part has always been a challenge for me. When I knew I was no longer just me as the person, but I was the superintendent, that happened when I walked into a video store in my neighborhood to pick up a movie, and the person behind the counter said, "What is the superintendent gonna watch tonight?" And it just was a crystallizing moment for me to realize that now I

wasn't me as the person but I was the superintendent, even in my off time on a Saturday night getting a movie.

Another superintendent indicated that a certain level of socializing was very much appropriate:

I can't be invisible. I will stop down after a game and have a couple of beers. And the coach might be there and some of the parents might be there, and you know, that's the way it is. And, that's the way I am. And I feel that I can do that. I'm not out carousing. I'm not getting blotto drunk. I'm sitting around having a nice time with my spouse, meeting, talking with some other friends. Everyone else in that same establishment is doing the same thing. Nobody's crazy.

A building-level staff member contrasted his current superintendent with another administrator in the district when discussing professional boundaries. He stated:

Our principal keeps his private life completely separate, and that's just fine. But our superintendent is able to go uptown and get along and I don't think that there's ever been any animosity created because someone's like, "Well you know what, I thought we were friends because that's the biggest thing." I mean, yeah, we are, we are social and stuff, but when something has to happen, I have to do it. It's my job.

**Contra-presence.** Seventeen participants (27 unique utterances) discussed a nuanced perspective of the relationship between absence and presence. The term contra-presence was selected to acknowledge this nuanced tension between the concepts.

Absence can be considered a negative or perhaps the opposite of presence; however, in some instances, concepts offsetting to presence were discussed that were not necessarily

absence, were a nuanced view of absence, or were concepts that portrayed visibility in a negative manner and absence as positive.

A school board member discussed a former superintendent whose visibility simply appeared to be more about his ego than about the school district. He stated, “We used to have a superintendent here that, and I liked him, but he said that, ‘I like it when I go in the grocery store and they look at me and say, I’m the superintendent.’”

A school board member discussed the need for a superintendent’s vision to be philosophically in line with the school board in order for his or her visibility to be effective. He stated:

Hopefully we're going to have our superintendent long-term and that's again visibility, it relates right back to visibility. If you have a good board, your superintendent's tenure is likely to be stronger as long as they're focused and their vision is the same. So, you know, I can see [proper name] staying here a long time as long as we're supporting [his or her] vision of the district and doing what we need to do to be able to support [him or her]. When that falters, then we're gonna have a problem and then visibility will turn negative instead of positive.

Several participants offered a contrarian view of presence when discussing one of the superintendents. For example, one community member suggested that the superintendent goes beyond what is necessary, stating that the superintendent is, “...probably more visible than anybody would expect.” Another community member suggested that a superintendent might be visible but that he or she might be an ineffective leader. He stated, “You could have somebody that's very visible, but not an effective

leader.” The same community member suggested that there might be a dark side to visibility. He stated:

I'll use politicians for example. There could be visibility to further some cause or a reason, but it's not directly impacting so there could be a dark side to visibility. So re-aligning the visibility to deal with the business of the community in the school. So I guess that could be the constraint of visibility, not just to be a star.

Yet another community member discussed the visibility as a means to mask real issues that exist in a school district. He was not referring to his particular school district, he instead offered a cautionary note about the superintendent who might be visible but who is, perhaps, not as forthright as he or she should be. He stated:

And if the communication that you're putting out there as being a visible superintendent is “We've got great teachers here, our kids are doing great, things are going well,” but our graduation rate's below state average and so is our ACT scores, well, that's not good.

A building-level staff member discussed the importance of a superintendent being visible to not only those who are supportive, but also to those who might be against the school district and suggested that this approach might be the exception rather than the rule. He stated, “Sometimes you have to be visible to the people that are against you and what you're trying to accomplish.”

A building-level staff member recalled a time when he felt his district's superintendent was too visible. He referenced President Barack Obama's 2009 back-to-school speech and the decision that the superintendent made to not show the speech during the school day. He stated:

One of the faults that maybe our superintendent had right away when [he or she] started was [he or she] actually was almost too visible. You know, the first year that Obama wanted to give that speech, we didn't show it. And all of a sudden the superintendent was on the air live, because [his or her] cell phone number was out there for everybody to see.

Several participants discussed competency in the context of visibility. When asked where she would rank the importance of superintendent visibility, a community member and former school board member stated, “Well, being visible sort of assumes that they’re good at it. I’d rank it pretty high. I mean, being competent, obviously, would be more important than being visible. You’re assuming competence.” The same community member also commented about the magnitude of the effort to be present that could in fact offset, at least to some degree, a superintendent’s absence. She stated, “I think that it’s more than absence even. It’s making that deliberate effort to be present.”

A building-level administrator discussed a superintendent’s need to consider the source of information when making judgments about a particular school in a district. He suggested that relying too heavily on being visible in the community rather than being present in the schools could actually create a false sense of reality, masking what is actually happening in the school district. He shared this perspective:

The community has a perception and they build this perception about what they think about schools and what schools are or what they used to be, not what they currently are. And I have worked with [superintendents] who have assumed that the community knew more, and so they get their information from the community more so than actually being there and saying, “Oh, this is what happens. Oh,

Brookside's a tough school. Oh, there's a lot going on.” Yeah, there's a lot going on but it's not a tough school, these aren't tough kids. These are some of the gentlest kids that you've ever dealt with, the morals and the values that they have, the resilience that they have. But if you're trying to take information from the community, it's a different picture. If you sit in your office and you don't attend school events, if you don't have the relationship with that elementary principal of that building, and you don't take the time to build that relationship, so that it's trusting both back and forth, truly being a listener, then your only perception is going to be what you hear in the community, which is not going to meet the needs of that school. And so I've had that experience, too, that refusal to actually even be a part of it, to really dig in. Yeah, show up, you wanna be the figurehead; I get that, but to really get to know these families, sit down, eat breakfast with a family that's living in a motel with 8 kids in a single room. Go ahead, sit down and have breakfast with them. Ask them how they slept last night. You wanna get to know 'em, that's how you get to know 'em. I think that I've experienced both ends of it from the superintendency.

A district-level staff member described a complex, layered perception of visibility and suggested that in different contexts, the same superintendent's competence might be viewed differently. When asked what comes to mind when he thinks of the term visibility, here was his response:

Community meetings, a presence on the web, whether it's a blog or whatever, obviously, whether it's articles in a newspaper, but you have the whole publicity side of it, the community, briefing the community on what's going on. So you

have that piece, they're the spokesperson for the district and so I think there's several levels. You have the community level, obviously. You have the school community, internal level. You have an external school community of superintendents. Then you have the state level. There are different levels and some superintendents are good at different levels. You probably know some, they can be very visible at the state level; they might not be the best at their own level. Or they might be very well respected amongst their peers of superintendents, but maybe not, so I think that visibility has layers to it.

### **Importance of Absence**

Several participants discussed the importance of absence in a variety of contexts. These contexts are organized into two sub-sections: 1) Reflective practice and 2) Organizational learning.

**Reflective practice.** Six participants discussed reflective practice. When asked to talk for a moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to the role of the superintendency, one superintendent discussed the difficulty of being able to think long-term or big picture because of the day-to-day realities of the job, stating:

Things right in front of us, we've got to get this fixed, get this fixed, get this fixed, and we're so busy fixing the immediate stuff, the immediate fires that need to be put out, that it's difficult at times to look longer term. I would say the reflective practice is not, well, I try to carve out time to do it, to look longer term, bigger picture, and really look at my impact. When you're talking visibility, when you're talking presence. There are important people that I need to be connecting with, whether it's in the legislature, whether it's here in the community, how do I want

to influence this strategically where we want to go with these issues. But in the real world as a superintendent, you got so many fires you're putting out that it's hard to look longer term and try to shape things. And it's really a balance; the reflective side is when you find time for that.

Another superintendent shared a similar view, stating, "I wish I reflected more. But it's just, you know, when things are coming at you all the time, it makes it hard to get that in."

One superintendent discussed how difficult it is to reflect while emphasizing the importance of reflection:

As my [spouse] says, you're hardly ever here so could you just be here when you're here, just let go of the work long enough to do something different. And I can feel it on a week where we've had a couple of board meetings or a board meeting and a retreat and a community meeting and an extracurricular event and then, for example, the school administrators conference over the weekend in Houston and then right back here and we need to go again. It isn't so much that I've been busy, but I think it's that reflection time that I've completely lost and it exhausts a person.

**Organizational learning.** Thirteen participants discussed the theme of organizational learning, which included discussion items intended to illicit responses about the role that a superintendent plays in the future possibilities of the school district. To begin, when asked about what role the superintendent has in helping to shape the future of a school district, one superintendent recognized that in order to reflect, one might need to be absent, stating:

I suspect few of us superintendents do reflect because we have big egos and because we feel pretty valuable to the organization and socially responsible for the organization, we believe we're paid to take care of the organization, I don't believe that we are well taught how to give ourselves permission to simply be absent. And I think that is, for me personally, that is a critical thing. I have to have that time.

The same superintendent also shared a belief that the success of a school system is reliant on many people buying into a common vision and that the only way to get people to buy into an idea is to be visible or present:

So all of our work inside the public school system happens because people care and you get people rallied around the idea of improvement. That can't come through as a mandate and get legs. So any initiatives that we want to get legs to, that we want to have move somewhere, has to happen because people get committed to it. And I think people get committed through personal requests and face time. I think that motivates people to see the initiative as real instead of just a piece of paper.

A school board member discussed the crucial role that superintendent visibility plays for the future of his school district, stating:

Well, it [superintendent visibility] is absolutely crucial because education is a moving target. There's no definitive answer to that, "Ok, we need to be prepared for this in five years." We just can't because it's such a moving target with technology and everything. And I think that the superintendent is the key component to express that and keep that going because it has to be a living,

moving target but yet keep it going so that we don't become complacent. And the superintendent has to be one, all knowing, that can relate that to the community and continue to tell the community that thinks “Nah, we're just sitting there, we've got all of our kids sitting in a square room.” Who thinks like that? That person has to convey the latest things and what the needs of our kids are, and what an education system really is about, today. Not what it used to be when you were in school. And that's crucial for the superintendent.

A community member discussed the impact that his district's current superintendent might have on the future of the school district. He stated:

There could be some objectives that are set out today for years beyond our superintendent's time here. So in a way, there's some visibility and some presence involved in that. If we were to fast forward, we have a different superintendent in five years, but there was something to look in our current time frame that's eight years out, my guess would be, this sounds like something our previous superintendent would have done or would have encouraged to include in here. So, there are some legacy things about that.

A community member discussed her view on what impact her district's superintendent might have on the future of the school district. She stated:

It is going to be a deeper level than just going through the motions. I mean, you set that tone with all your relationships and I think people have that understanding of the superintendent as a leader. And I think it's important for superintendents to have that kind of perspective, too, because I mean, especially right now, you're going to have so many people coming at you with all these requests and all these

frustrations, too, where you have to be very firm about what your vision is and what your intent is behind the things that you're gonna commit yourself to.

A building-level staff member reflected on the impact that former superintendents had on the future of the school district, retrospectively. He stated:

You're rewarded in this district by the work you do and the relationships you build. That's where I see the work superintendents have been paid off the most. The ones that I feel that people are still talking about, I mean, they did the work, they did the heavy lifting and they moved thousands of kids by moving hundreds of staff members. They knew how to move 'em, and they did it by relationship building, by accountability, by saying this is gonna work and this isn't gonna work and you're gonna do this and what do you think about this.

A district-level staff member provided a perspective that her district's current superintendent has already had a significant impact on the future of the school district.

She stated:

And I know as a number of us team members, if we are sharing with our colleagues in other districts, "Well we've done this, we've done that, we've implemented this and we've done all three or four or five of these new ideas or implemented new concepts virtually within a twelve-month period." Other individuals that maybe have been in this business for 30 years or whatever just cannot believe the change we've been able to implement. But the reason we've been able to do that has been through strategizing and communicating and prioritizing. Get this accomplished first, then this. It's huge. It's sometimes hard to

actually describe and explain, but having experienced here, that success, where in other districts to get through some of these improvements, it took us 2-3 years.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Using a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study method, this study sought to identify perceptions about the visibility of superintendents from various perspectives. Following an extensive review of relevant literature, the development of a conceptual framework, and the development of four research questions that defined the concepts to be explored and participant groups whose perceptions were to be examined, four Midwestern school districts<sup>3</sup> were identified for inclusion in the study. The districts represented mainly rural, geographically isolated communities and varied in size<sup>4</sup> as determined by student enrollment. One small school district, two medium-sized school districts, and one large school district were selected as follows: 1) Liberty Public Schools, 400 students; 2) Washington Public Schools, 2,500 students; 3) East Clifton County Public Schools, 3,300 students; and 4) Sandstone Public Schools, 10,500 students.

Superintendents, school board members, community members, and staff members were interviewed and offered various perspectives about superintendent visibility. A total of 50 participants across the four case school districts were interviewed. Once transcribed, the gathered data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Themes mentioned by participants most often were identified, as were themes considered unique, which in this context refers to codes that were shared by few participants and that did not

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<sup>3</sup> Note that pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of participant school districts. Additionally, any references to cities, counties, or individual participants made use of pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this study, school district size was defined by adapting the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categories of school district size (Gray, Bitterman & Goldring, 2013). A district with kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) student enrollment of less than 1,000 was considered small, K-12 student enrollment of 1,000 or more but less than 5,000 was considered medium, and K-12 student enrollment of 5,000 or more was considered large.

fit well into other more broad categories. Codes were collapsed into as few themes as possible with a goal of maintaining the integrity of various discrete emergent themes.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section includes a brief discussion about the overarching results of the research project examined through the lens of the study's research questions. The second and third sections include conclusions derived from an analysis of the results and subsequent interpretation of those results in consideration of the full data set, relevant literature and the study's conceptual framework. Further, the second section includes conclusions that support the relevant literature while the third section includes conclusions that extend beyond the relevant literature. The fourth section reveals a model of superintendent visibility, and the fifth section includes a discussion of the study's implications. In brief, the chapter is organized into the following sections: 1) General Answers to Research Questions, 2) Conclusions that Support the Literature, 3) Conclusions Beyond the Literature, 4) Model of Superintendent Visibility, and 5) Implications.

### **General Answers to Research Questions**

As previously noted, assumptions about leaders tend to place a premium on their visibility, and these assumptions have permeated general leadership literature and educational leadership literature focused on the superintendency (Eller & Carlson, 2009; Petersen & Barnett, 2005; Wilmore, 2008). Some authors have suggested that a superintendent's perceived effectiveness may be significantly impacted by his or her visibility (e.g., Eller & Carlson, 2009). Despite these assumptions and general beliefs, there exists little or no empirical research on the concept of visibility, generally, or

superintendent visibility, specifically. Thus, this empirical study sought to address this dearth.

To address the dearth of literature, the purpose of this study was to explore how the visibility (absence/presence) of school district superintendents is perceived and understood by various stakeholders in a school community. The following questions guided this study:

5. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
6. What perceptions and understandings do school board members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
7. What perceptions and understandings do community members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
8. What perceptions and understandings do staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

The phenomenon of superintendent visibility appeared similarly in the various case school districts as evidenced by the similarity in the emergent themes across cases, but there was some variability by district. While it was evident that superintendent visibility was considered by participants to be a very important concept in all four case districts and that nearly all participants seemed eager to take part in the study, the unique context of the school districts was evident. For example, all participants were asked about superintendent involvement at the national level. Several participants from the largest school district clearly desired a strong national presence, but participants from the

smallest school district in the study did not appear even mildly supportive of a superintendent being involved beyond a local or regional level unless a clear, direct, and quantifiable benefit could be derived by the school district.

While there may have been other nuances between cases, to focus extensively on these perceived differences would detract from the intended methods of the study. Multiple cases were not selected in order to compare cases; rather, multiple cases were selected as a means to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of superintendent visibility. Significant value was derived from the study's multicase design, because, ultimately, the cases revealed different perspectives on the phenomenon being studied.

The summary of the results of the study is true to qualitative methods and reflects these key distinguishing factors. The study was conducted in a natural setting, narrative texts and other data were analyzed, and a complex picture emerged. The intent of the study was to explore superintendent visibility by examining the perceptions and understandings of superintendents, school board members, community members, and various staff members in order to address the dearth of literature on the topic of superintendent visibility. The study met its intended outcome and has led to several conclusions that will be discussed in the next three sections.

### **Conclusions that Support the Literature**

The literature review provided an extensive examination of the history of the superintendent, a historical view of the discursive roles of the superintendent, and a review of relevant leadership literature. This section contains six conclusions that support or enhance previously identified literature.

The first three conclusions all relate to the five discursive roles of the superintendent. Recall that Kowalski and Brunner (2010) delineated the following five superintendent role conceptualizations that have evolved since the mid-1800s: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. Using the lens of these historically defined roles, the study reveals three main conclusions. Conclusions #4 through #6 relate to leadership and communication theories that were included in the study's literature review.

*Conclusion #1: The superintendency is complex.* Several participants articulated a relatively complex view about superintendent roles and struggled to identify just one or even two roles as most prominent or important, providing further support to the notion that superintendent roles are discursive in nature.

*Conclusion #2: The role of communicator is currently the most prominent of the five discursive superintendent roles.* Participants most frequently identified communicator as the most important or prominent superintendent role for their district. This finding supports the notion that the current dominant superintendent role conceptualization is communicator (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2010). Previously, it was noted in the literature review that communication has been identified as perhaps the most critical skill for a superintendent in our information-based society and that success as a school district leader, or arguably a leader of any organization, hinges upon that individual's ability to communicate (Hoyle, et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2006). The results of the study support this assertion.

*Conclusion #3: The role of manager has maintained a high level of relevance since it came into prominence over a hundred years ago.* The second most often

identified superintendent role was manager. The frequency with which it was identified suggests a view congruent with the historical perspective provided in the literature review (Brunner, et al., 2002; Callahan, 1966). The management role of the superintendent became prominent during the Industrial Revolution. In the early 1900s, the role of the superintendent shifted from instructional supervision towards business management as a means to reform inefficiencies and the steadily increasing corruption on school boards, and as a result, superintendents gained executive power and considerable credibility during this period (Brunner, et al., 2002). The finding that this role remains prominent more than one hundred years after the role first emerged is noteworthy. Given the fiscal challenges that have faced school districts in the last decade, it is evident that participants have valued the superintendent's role in maintaining fiscally sound practices in order to ensure that scarce resources are used wisely.

*Conclusion #4: Relational leadership is of greater significance for superintendents than task-oriented leadership, but the ability to perform well the job functions of the superintendency is desired.* One cannot over emphasize the importance of relationship building for leaders in general and superintendents specifically (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Conrad & Poole, 2005). Participants understood that relational aspects of leadership are critical to the success of a superintendent's tenure and perhaps to the fortunes of the school district and community (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005). This conclusion suggests the significant pressure that exists on superintendents to perform well the relational aspects of the position.

*Conclusion #5: A leader's perceived level of authenticity impacts his or her perceived level of effectiveness.* Authentic leaders engender trust and develop genuine

connections with others. In contrast, followers notice a sense of falseness and instinctively distrust a leader who acts disingenuously or manipulatively, thereby jeopardizing hope for success (George, 2007; Goleman, et al., 2002). The findings of the study support this assertion.

*Conclusion #6: As one moves from face-to-face communication towards more impersonal methods of communication, the perceived effectiveness of communication is diminished.* There was significant discussion by participants about the range of possible methods of communication. The most intimate and perhaps the most effective method of communication is face-to-face (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Recall from the literature review that the face-to-face situation is the most important experience in social interaction, and all other experiences are derivatives of it as social interaction becomes progressively anonymous the farther away people are from the face-to-face situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The findings of the study support this notion. While participant superintendents placed great value on face-to-face communication, they understood the need to communicate in a variety of ways. In particular, the effectiveness of written, electronic communication was questioned.

### **Conclusions Beyond the Literature**

This section includes conclusions that represent new learning or concepts that went beyond those based on the study's conceptual framework or on the study's broader literature review. The first conclusion in this section is general in nature, while the remaining conclusions (#8 - #14) relate to aspects of absence and aspects of presence.

*Conclusion #7: Visibility is important, across the four cases in the study, regardless of district size.* This study of four school districts was not designed to calibrate

the relative importance of visibility among school districts; however, as perceptions were analyzed and understood through the discovery of emergent themes, it was evident that superintendent visibility was generally of high importance in all case districts. Also, the broad concept of superintendent visibility was generally understood similarly among the various participant groups within the varied contexts of the four distinct case districts. The results also suggest that superintendent visibility is important for both the school district and the broader community. While the results are not generalizable, the multicase method employed in this study allowed for replication, adding to the overall trustworthiness of the results.

*Conclusion #8: A superintendent who is visible is one who is accessible, and accessibility is something stakeholders value.* The ability to connect with stakeholders on a meaningful level requires the actual physical presence of the superintendent. The results of the study suggest that visibility increases a leader's accessibility to stakeholders; in fact, the most frequently mentioned theme in the study was accessibility.

*Conclusion #9: Superintendent visibility can help to build trust<sup>5</sup> between the superintendent and the public, which also may lead to the development of a sense of trust towards the organization.* Within the broader theme of trust, several participants discussed the trustworthiness of specific leaders. There appeared to be a high level of trustworthiness with the four participant superintendents, but many participants vividly recalled experiences when that was not the case. Participants who questioned the trustworthiness of a former superintendent tended to talk about a lack of authenticity,

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<sup>5</sup> While the concept of trust emerged from the narrative data and is fully discussed in literature on the topic (e.g. Blanchard, 2007; Covey, 2008; Horsager, 2009), a review of the concept is beyond the scope of this study.

which clearly had significant influence on this critical perception. However, for several participants, a lack of trust was not necessarily caused by an associated lack of authenticity; rather, they described an absence of trust caused simply by not being visible. This lack of visibility led to a sense of uncertainty or suspicion.

*Conclusion #10: Superintendent visibility can lead to the development of strong connections between the school district and the broader community.* While it appeared to be important for a superintendent to attend school events and activities, participants perceived that it was perhaps more important that the superintendent attend community events. Participants viewed the superintendent as the “face of the district.” The face of the district is expected to be just that, particularly outside the walls of the school district.

Participants tied community and economic development directly to superintendents. Community members who were local business owners or who were somehow involved in post-secondary education spoke extensively about the importance that superintendent visibility had on the fortunes of a community. Indeed, a superintendent’s visibility has potential to create opportunities for students such as pathways for careers and alignment with post-secondary institutions.

*Conclusion #11: Superintendent visibility can have adverse results.* Even with the best of intentions, a superintendent’s physical presence might not be enough to accomplish a desired positive result. Several themes of visibility were categorized as contrarian, or contra-presence, suggesting that not all visibility is positive. For example, several participants talked specifically about superintendents from the past whose physical presence actually tended to have a negative effect on his or her perceived effectiveness, either because the superintendent lacked the ability to connect

meaningfully with people or because of a perceived disingenuousness. One participant described a former superintendent as a “used car salesman” with uncomplimentary intent.

*Conclusion #12: Organizational visibility can adequately be achieved by practicing the concept of **synergetic** visibility.* The four participant superintendents discussed at some length the importance of organizational visibility, and that it is the responsibility of the superintendent to ensure that the organization is well represented in the community. Being only one person, it is difficult if not impossible for superintendents to individually achieve a level of visibility that best serves the organization. Relying on others from within the organization—board members, other district-level administrators, and others—to represent the school district at key community events and within civic organizations is an important aspect of the visibility. The participant superintendents also discussed the importance of connecting with internal stakeholders in strategic ways.

A strategic approach to increase organizational visibility through the deployment of synergetic visibility was suggested as being one of the most critical strategies in garnering community support and community understanding of the school district. Leaders who are neither willing nor able to trust cabinet members or school board members to serve in this capacity would likely be less effective with his or her visibility efforts than a leader who is willing and/or able to do so. Additionally, a superintendent who underestimates the leverage that can be gained by meaningfully connecting with the school district’s employees would likely be perceived as less effective than a superintendent who maintains a focus on internal visibility.

*Conclusion #13: A thorough understanding of absence by superintendents would prove beneficial as absence may present a considerable blind spot for leaders.*

Participants discussed absence at various times as undesirable, deliberate, and desirable. As undesirable, some participants described absence as simply being the antonym of presence. Within these relatively simple explanations, it was evident that there was a strong reaction to superintendent absence. Some participants layered an additional level of complexity onto this basic concept. Superintendents can be physically visible, but they may appear to be absent, suggesting that a deeper, more meaningful physical presence is desirable.

Relatively few participants discussed deliberate absence, but it is included as a conclusion within the broader context of absence because it is a relevant nuance. Two superintendents discussed the importance of their absence from certain meetings at which they expected cabinet members or building-level administrators to lead. Because their own physical presence had the capacity to create a significant change in the meeting dynamics, they utilized absence to impact their organization.

*Conclusion #14: Superintendent absence is noticeable and carries great significance, perhaps even greater symbolic significance than presence in many contexts.* Generally, visibility and presence were treated as synonyms, but often participants used the term presence to convey a deeper, more meaningful sense of visibility. Absence may convey an even greater, more powerful message compared to a deep, meaningful presence.

*Conclusion #15: Superintendent's must practice strategic visibility.* Context matters, and determining the most effective way to impact one's organization should be a deliberate process. This process should include open discussions with key stakeholders such as school board members so that parameters and expectations related to visibility

can be established. This conclusion suggests that visibility has opportunity costs, and superintendents must be mindful of what must be given up in order to be visible.

### **Model of Superintendent Visibility**

In this section the development of a model of superintendent visibility is discussed. In the first part of the section the conceptual framework is briefly revisited using the lens of the study's conclusions. The second part of the section reveals a superintendent visibility model developed through careful analysis of the data, consideration of the study's conceptual framework and literature review, and the study's identified conclusions. This section is organized as follows: 1) Conceptual Framework Revisited and 2) Emergence of a Visibility Model.

#### **Conceptual Framework Revisited**

All of the literature included in the literature review is relevant, but recall that some of the literature was primary to the development of the study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1, p. 73). A deeper visibility resulting in meaningful absence and presence in the superintendency is the essence of this framework. The conceptual framework was developed using research related to reflective practice, general leadership theory, organizational learning, Theory U, social impact theory, the superintendency, and communication (see Chapter Two: Review of the Literature, p. 24). The concept, *superintendent visibility*, has previously lacked meaningful structure and, therefore, has been described, in the past, through general discussions rather than through an empirical lens.

Several comments made by the superintendent participants were related to the concept of Theory U (Scharmer, 2007). Recall that on the upper left portion of the U, a

leader must be present in his or her organization in order to understand the organization in its current state (see Figure 1, p. 73). The upper right of the U represents the future of the organization, and the bottom of the U represents the connection between the present and the future of the organization. In this model, the organization's leader is the primary link between a school district's past and its future. Leading from the future as it emerges was a phrase used by Scharmer (2007), and the superintendents in the study understood that they were important to the future of their organization. It was unclear, however, if they envisioned themselves leading from the future, or if they simply understood that their current actions would have an impact on the organization's future.

Recall that the concepts of reflective practice and absence inform the bottom of the U. Insights and complex learning result from reflecting on one's own experiences (York-Barr, et al., 2001), and in order to properly reflect, a leader must understand that organizational learning includes presence and absence (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Reflecting requires a degree of absence, and the literature on reflective practice espouses reflective practice as a vital resource for significant and sustained school improvement (York-Barr, et al., 2001). Without meaningful reflective practices, it is not possible to move an organization on the U from left to right, (i.e., from observing and learning from its past and then into the desired state of realizing a new future).

Another component of the conceptual framework is social impact theory (Latané, 1981), which suggests that an individual's mere presence can have an impact on social situations. A leader's presence in a situation can change the entire dynamic of a group.

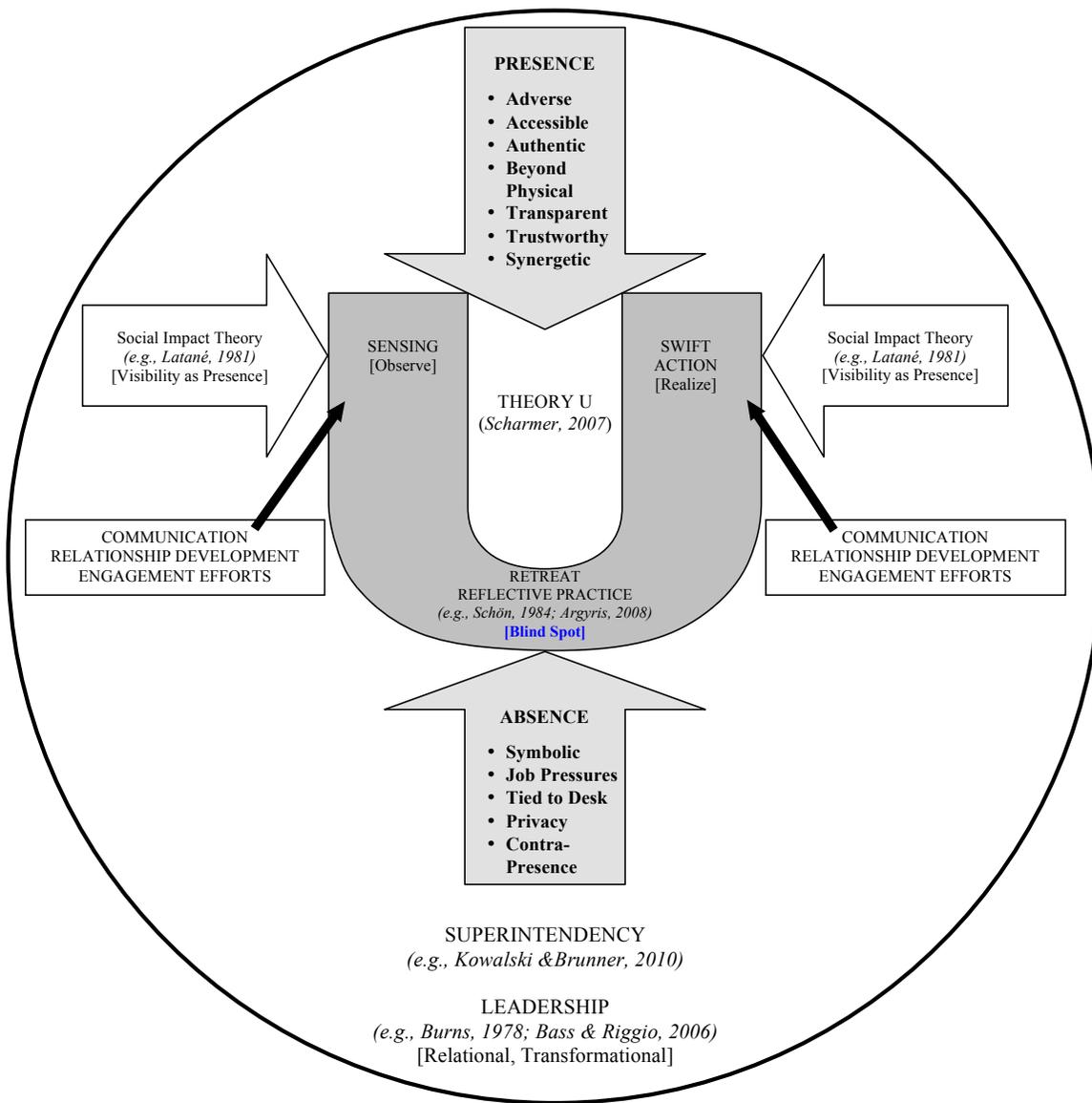
### **Emergence of a Visibility Model**

A model of leadership visibility (see Figure 2, p. 262) is presented in this section as a depiction of the study's conclusions and is structured with a similar framework that was used for the study's conceptual framework. Several theories included in the conceptual framework are key to the model of superintendent visibility, including Theory U (Scharmer, 2007), social impact theory (e.g., Latané, 1981), relational and transformational leadership (e.g., Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006), reflective practice (e.g., Schön, 1984; Argyris, 2008), and the superintendency (Kowalski & Brunner, 2010).

At the top of the Model of Superintendent Visibility is an arrow titled *Presence*. Within that arrow are terms identified as aspects of presence and include: adverse, accessible, authentic, beyond physical, transparent, trustworthy and synergetic. These terms are placed prominently in the model to signify their overarching importance. Their placement within an arrow labeled *Presence*, a term used to suggest a deeper level of visibility, evokes a level of prominence within the context of the model and suggests that presence profoundly impacts leadership.

At the bottom of the Model of Superintendent Visibility is an arrow titled *Absence*. Within that arrow are terms identified as aspects of absence and include: symbolic, job pressures, tied to desk, privacy, and contra-presence. These terms are placed prominently in the model for the same reasons as aspects of presence. Absence profoundly impacts leadership.

Conclusions #8 through #12 relate to aspects of presence and Conclusions #13 and #14 relate to aspects of absence. These conclusions will not be reiterated here, but they represent important concepts that emerged from the study.



*Figure 2: Kazmierczak's Model of Superintendent Visibility*

When leadership theory is distilled, two concepts that may predict success remain: relationship development and communication. A third action-oriented concept, engagement efforts, is also noted in the model. A superintendent who works hard to foster relationships, who employs effective communication strategies, and who makes an effort to engage with stakeholders will increase his or her odds of success. These three concepts are included in two rectangular boxes in the model. The arrow from each box to either side of the U evoke a balance between understanding an organization in its current state (upper left of the U) and leading the organization to its new future (upper right of the U). These actions are necessary for organizational change and improvement.

At the bottom of the U, the phrase *Blind Spot* is included to suggest that reflection can be an elusive concept for leaders. Identified in the previous section as the key to connect an organization's present to its future, the bottom of the U in the conceptual framework was modified for the Model of Superintendent Visibility to depict a blind spot in a leader's efforts to successfully impact an organization. Participant superintendents identified that one of their most significant challenges is that they lack either the time or the commitment to reflect purposefully. They all understood the importance of reflection but also expressed frustration with their own failures to reflect. Without reflection, they acknowledged difficulty in moving the organization forward in a meaningful way.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study are not intended to be generalizable either to other Midwestern school districts or globally; however, data from this study may be used to better inform superintendent preparation programs, acting and prospective superintendents, and school boards about issues related to superintendent visibility. This

section is divided in the following subsections: 1) Educational Leaders and Preparation Programs and 2) Future Research.

### **Educational Leaders and Preparation Programs**

All the implications listed below are intended for policy makers, superintendents, and other educational leaders as well as for instructors in educational administration preparation programs. To begin, knowledge gained from this study could inform superintendent evaluations and superintendent preparation and licensure programs could benefit from careful consideration of the findings and conclusions. Developers of superintendent licensure programs should work to instill the importance of visibility, the components of visibility, the way visibility is enacted to include both presence and absence, and visibility's impact on the future success of a superintendent.

Next, from an organizational improvement or organizational learning perspective, it is critical for a superintendent and other leaders to be aware of visibility's importance. One must move beyond the technical requirements of the superintendent position—policies, finance, curriculum and instruction—in order to effectively lead an organization and focus on one's ability to develop trust within a school community. Visibility can be a valuable tool as superintendents attempt to build trusting relationships.

Third, superintendents must not forsake local-level involvement for state- or national-level involvement. Similar to the previously mentioned notion that the effectiveness of communication diminishes as one moves away from face-to-face communications, an over-emphasis on visibility beyond one's local school district would likely take away from a superintendent's visibility with district stakeholders. Striking a balance between involvement at the local, state and national levels is important, and the

extent to which one may be involved beyond the local or regional level should be determined largely by one's local context.

Fourth, when one considers superintendent visibility, one of the first notions that may come to mind is event attendance. This study bore out the importance that stakeholders place on event attendance. The attending of community events was actually mentioned more frequently by participants than the attending of school events, as the superintendent is largely viewed as the conduit between the broader community and the school district. While event attendance might be considered a significant investment of time for a superintendent, it appears to be one of the most effective ways to enhance one's perceived visibility. Superintendents should understand the importance of event attendance and how this can fit into a broader strategic approach to developing relationships and communicating effectively. Consider the following sequence: Event attendance can increase a leader's visibility, which can lead to increased accessibility, which can lead to the development of stronger relationships, which can lead to a greater sense of trust.

Fifth, understanding the discursive roles of the superintendent has implications for superintendents' understanding of the nature of the position from a theoretical perspective. Blind spots in one's practice might be discovered, might be better understood, or could potentially be avoided entirely if the historical context of the position is better understood. Superintendents should realize that currently, the most prominent role is that of communicator, but that at any time within their district the roles of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, and applied social scientist could move to

the forefront. A superintendent can also consider these various roles when establishing a leadership team to ensure that proper supports exist within each of these areas.

Finally, the implications for superintendents and other educational leaders, and preparation programs are broad. Indeed, the visible superintendent is an accessible superintendent, and as visibility increases, so do the opportunities to develop trusting relationships. This study provides a reminder for leaders that stakeholders have a strong desire to connect with them. It is of great importance for leaders to determine a course that leads to establishing these connections. A deeper understanding of superintendent visibility can yield significant benefit for superintendents, school districts and communities.

### **Future Research**

The results of the study imply that the topics included in this section would be useful for future research by other researchers and include: 1) adverse visibility, 2) contra-presence, 3) synergetic visibility, 4) reflection, and 5) symbolic absence. Extending these topics into new research projects would further add to the literature about visibility, general leadership theory, and reflective practice.

**Adverse visibility.** Research regarding adverse visibility could be beneficial for superintendents, prospective superintendents and school boards. Research could also be effectively extended beyond the field of education. An understanding of adverse visibility could help superintendents avoid behaviors that lead to a diminished level of trust. Designing a study could prove challenging as finding superintendents who might be willing to discuss their own experiences related to adverse visibility may be difficult. A quantitative study that would include a survey might provide enough anonymity in order

to gather an adequate amount of data to analyze. Under the best of circumstances, researchers can face difficulty gaining the necessary access to conduct research. With a topic that may be viewed as controversial, access might prove even more limited.

**Contra-presence.** The term contra-presence acknowledges a nuanced tension between the concepts of absence and presence. Absence can be considered a negative or perhaps the opposite of presence; however, concepts offsetting to presence may not be directly connected to absence, may be a nuanced view of absence, or may be concepts that portray visibility in a negative manner and absence as positive. The term *contra-presence* keeps presence as the focus rather than another term that might detract from the implied qualities of presence. Research related to contra-presence could include a deep analysis of data related to relationships and systems theory.

**Synergetic visibility.** Synergetic visibility was identified as a strategy to improve an organization's visibility. Results from research related to this concept could help inform organizational leaders about the importance of a shared and interdependent approach to leadership. Topics such as distributed leadership and organizational effectiveness could inform a literature review for such a study.

**Reflection.** Reflection and reflective practice are concepts that have been researched and written about, but it appears that reflection is a blind spot for superintendents. A study about reflection might contribute to leadership literature and might help to inform superintendents and other organizational leaders about the importance of reflection as a means for organizational improvement. Organizations viewed as successful could be studied to determine if reflective practice is a concept that leaders understand or is a practice in which leaders consciously engage.

**Symbolic absence.** Absence emerged as a key concept in this study, primarily as it relates to the opposite of presence. The degree to which absence might be considered a more powerful or impactful force compared to presence is worthy of further examination. A researcher could focus on absence and its symbolism, possibly through a qualitative study that seeks perceptions and understandings of absence.

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## APPENDICES

This section of this dissertation includes the following appendices: 1) general recruitment letter, 2) superintendent recruitment letter, 3) consent information sheet, and 4) interview topics and prompts.

### APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date

FName LName

Address

City, State Zip

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota and am conducting research as part of my dissertation. The purpose of my study is to explore how the visibility of school district superintendents is perceived and understood. The following questions will guide my study:

1. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
2. What perceptions and understandings do school board members, community members, and staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

I have contacted your school district's superintendent and together with her (or him) we have identified you as a potential participant in my study. You were selected as a participant because you are one of the following: school board member, community member, central office staff member, or building-level staff member. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will last between 30-60 minutes. I will digitally record the interview so that I can transcribe it at a later time. The recording and the transcription will be destroyed at the completion of the study and will not be shared in a manner that would identify you as the participant.

I will be contacting you within one week to visit about your potential participation and to schedule a time when you could be interviewed. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Wayne A. Kazmierczak

**APPENDIX B:**  
**SUPERINTENDENT RECRUITEMENT LETTER**

Date

FName LName

Address

City, State Zip

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota and am conducting research as part of my dissertation. The purpose of my study is to explore how the visibility of school district superintendents is perceived and understood. The following questions will guide my study:

1. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
2. What perceptions and understandings do school board members, community members, and staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

You were selected as a participant because you are the superintendent of a Midwestern school district with between 2,500 and 7,500 students. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in two interviews that will each last approximately 30-60 minutes. I will digitally record the interviews so that I can transcribe them at a later time. The recordings and the transcriptions will be destroyed at the completion of the study and will not be shared in a manner that would identify you as the participant.

I will be contacting you within one week to visit about your potential participation and to schedule a time when you could be interviewed. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Wayne A. Kazmierczak

**APPENDIX C:****CONSENT INFORMATION SHEET****Deep Visibility: Meaningful Absence and Presence in the Superintendency**

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You are invited to be in a research study about superintendent visibility. You were selected as a possible participant because you are one of the following: superintendent, school board member, community member, central office staff member, or building-level staff member in a school district that was chosen for this study. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by:

**Wayne A. Kazmierczak**  
**University of Minnesota**  
**Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development**  
**(OLPD)**

**Background Information**

The purpose of this multicase study is to explore how the visibility of school district superintendents is perceived and understood, broadly speaking. The following questions will guide this study:

1. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
2. What perceptions and understandings do school board members, community members, and staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

One interview lasting between 30-60 minutes will be conducted. The interview will be digitally recorded by the researcher in order to be transcribed at a later time. The recording or the transcription will be destroyed at the completion of the study and will not be shared in a manner that would identify you as the participant.

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has one primary risk: You may be vulnerable to someone's determining who you are and what you have said, but I will protect you from this possibility as much as possible by using a pseudonym for your name and for the school district you represent.

The benefits to participation are: The study will be shared with my dissertation committee and other appropriate members of the University of Minnesota. The study may contribute positively to the field of educational and organizational leadership.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that might be published, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. Interviews will be digitally recorded in order to be transcribed at a later time. Only the researcher and the researcher's advisor will have access to the data. The data will be used only for the intended purpose of this study. The data will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with any school district chosen for this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: **Wayne A. Kazmierczak**. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at 3620 7<sup>th</sup> Street South, Moorhead, MN 56560; (612) 804-7557; kazm0008@umn.edu. You may also reach my advisor, **Dr. Cryss Brunner**, at 310G Wulling Hall, 86 Pleasant Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455; (612) 624-8527; brunner@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**APPENDIX D:**  
**OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW GUIDE AND POSSIBLE PROBES**

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multicase study is to explore how the visibility of school district superintendents is perceived and understood, broadly speaking. The following questions will guide this study:

5. What perceptions and understandings do school district superintendents have related to their own visibility in their role as the leader of an educational organization?
6. What perceptions and understandings do school board members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
7. What perceptions and understandings do community members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?
8. What perceptions and understandings do staff members have related to the visibility of their school district's superintendent?

**Superintendent Interview Guide and Possible Probes**

**Section 1: Visibility (Absence/Presence)**

- 1.1 For the purpose of this study, *visibility* is defined to include the concepts of *presence* and *absence*. What comes to mind when you think about the concepts of *absence* and *presence* as they relate to superintendent *visibility*?
- 1.2 For a moment, think about the term *visibility*. What comes to mind?
- 1.3 What counts as visibility? (Think in terms of other types of visibility such as memos, newsletters, communications devices, and electronic connections.)

- 1.4 What level of importance do you place on being visible?
- 1.5 Do you purposely engage in activities that improve your visibility in the context of the school district, such as within the schools?
- 1.6 Do you purposely engage in activities that improve your visibility in the context of the larger community, such as with service clubs or chamber of commerce events?
- 1.7 Think for a moment about a typical day. What types of things do you do that contribute to your visibility?
- 1.8 Are there times when you are more visible than at other times, either intentionally or unintentionally?
- 1.9 What impact does your being visible have on others? What about absence?
- 1.10 Are you ever purposely absent?

## **Section 2: Visibility and Leadership, Communication, and Reflective Practice**

- 2.1 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as relational because the concept of leadership can be about relationship development. Does visibility play a role as you develop relationships?
- 2.2 Does visibility impact your ability to lead?
- 2.3 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as a symbolic, communicative endeavor. Does visibility enhance your ability to communicate effectively?
- 2.4 Reflective practice requires a practitioner to retreat in order to reflect, or put another way, one must become absent in order to properly reflect. Talk for a

moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to your role as superintendent.

- 2.5 Talk about the relationship between a leader's visibility and his or her ability to influence.
- 2.6 Does visibility play a role as you consider the future possibilities of your organization?
- 2.7 Does your visibility have any symbolic meaning?

### **Section 3: Visibility and the Perceptions of Others**

- 3.1 Have school board members ever told you that your being visible is important to them? If so, have they discussed the reasons why they feel this is important?
- 3.2 Have community members ever told you that your being visible is important to them? If so, have they discussed the reasons why they feel this is important?
- 3.3 Have district staff members ever told you that your being visible is important to them? If so, have they discussed the reasons why they feel this is important?
- 3.4 Have building-level staff members ever told you that your being visible is important to them? If so, have they discussed the reasons why they feel this is important?

### **Section 4: Visibility and the Role of the Superintendent**

- 4.1 A study of the history of the superintendent reveals that the modern superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and he or she is

expected to know when to transition among the roles. The five roles are: 1) superintendent as teacher/scholar, 2) superintendent as manager, 3) superintendent as democratic leader, 4) superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) superintendent as communicator. Which of these roles do you consider to be most prominent in your current position? (Clarify the roles if asked.)

- 4.2 If you were asked to create a list of your most important duties, where would you rank "*being visible*"?
- 4.3 Is there anything else you would like to share about superintendent visibility?

### Central Office Staff Interview Guide and Possible Probes

The following series of questions relate to superintendent visibility. You may talk about superintendent visibility in general, or you may talk about it specific to your district's superintendent.

#### Section 1: Visibility (Absence/Presence)

- 1.1 For the purpose of this study, *visibility* is defined to include the concepts of *presence* and *absence*. What comes to mind when you think about the concepts of *absence* and *presence* as they relate to superintendent *visibility*?
- 1.2 For a moment, think about the term *visibility* as it relates, generally, to a superintendent of a school district. What comes to mind?
- 1.3 What counts as visibility? (Think in terms of other types of visibility such as memos, newsletters, communications devices, and electronic connections.)
- 1.4 Share with me your thoughts on the importance of superintendent visibility for your school district.
- 1.5 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's visibility (or presence) impacts others?
- 1.6 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's absence impacts others?
- 1.7 Have you as a central office staff member ever told your superintendent that her or his being visible is important?
- 1.8 What, if anything, have other central office staff members said to you about superintendent visibility?

- 1.9 From your perspective, in what types of activities does your district's superintendent engage in order to be visible?

## **Section 2: Visibility and Leadership, Communication, and Reflective Practice**

- 2.1 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as relational because the concept of leadership can be about relationship development. What role does visibility play as your superintendent develops relationships?
- 2.2 Does visibility impact your superintendent's ability to lead?
- 2.3 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as a symbolic, communicative endeavor. Does visibility enhance your superintendent's ability to communicate effectively?
- 2.4 Reflective practice requires a practitioner to retreat in order to reflect, or put another way, one must become absent in order to properly reflect. Talk for a moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to your superintendent.
- 2.5 Talk about the relationship between a leader's visibility and his or her ability to influence.
- 2.6 Does superintendent visibility play a role as you consider the future possibilities of your organization?
- 2.7 Does superintendent visibility have any symbolic meaning?

## **Section 3: Visibility and the Role of the Superintendent**

- 3.1 A study of the history of the superintendent reveals that the modern superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and he or she is expected to know when to transition among the roles. The five roles are: 1) superintendent as teacher/scholar, 2) superintendent as manager, 3)

superintendent as democratic leader, 4) superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) superintendent as communicator. Which of these roles do you consider to be most prominent or important for your district's superintendent? (Clarify the roles if asked.)j

- 3.2 If you were asked to create a list of a superintendent's most important duties, where would you rank "being visible"?
- 3.3 Is there anything else you would like to share about superintendent visibility?

### **Building-level Staff Interview Guide and Possible Probes**

The following series of questions relate to superintendent visibility. You may talk about superintendent visibility in general, or you may talk about it specific to your district's superintendent.

#### **Section 1: Visibility (Absence/Presence)**

- 1.1 For the purpose of this study, *visibility* is defined to include the concepts of *presence* and *absence*. What comes to mind when you think about the concepts of *absence* and *presence* as they relate to superintendent *visibility*?
- 1.2 For a moment, think about the term *visibility* as it relates, generally, to a superintendent of a school district. What comes to mind?
- 1.3 What counts as visibility? (Think in terms of other types of visibility such as memos, newsletters, communications devices, and electronic connections.)
- 1.4 Share with me your thoughts on the importance of superintendent visibility for your school district.
- 1.5 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's visibility (or presence) impacts others?
- 1.6 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's absence impacts others?
- 1.7 Have you as a building-level staff member ever told your superintendent that her or his being visible is important?
- 1.8 What, if anything, have other building-level staff members said to you about superintendent visibility?

- 1.9 From your perspective, in what types of activities does your district's superintendent engage in order to be visible?

## **Section 2: Visibility and Leadership, Communication, and Reflective Practice**

- 2.1 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as relational because the concept of leadership can be about relationship development. What role does visibility play as your superintendent develops relationships?
- 2.2 Does visibility impact your superintendent's ability to lead?
- 2.3 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as a symbolic, communicative endeavor. Does visibility enhance your superintendent's ability to communicate effectively?
- 2.4 Reflective practice requires a practitioner to retreat in order to reflect, or put another way, one must become absent in order to properly reflect. Talk for a moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to your superintendent.
- 2.5 Talk about the relationship between a leader's visibility and his or her ability to influence.
- 2.6 Does superintendent visibility play a role as you consider the future possibilities of your organization?
- 2.7 Does superintendent visibility have any symbolic meaning?

## **Section 3: Visibility and the Role of the Superintendent**

- 3.1 A study of the history of the superintendent reveals that the modern superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and he or she is expected to know when to transition among the roles. The five roles are: 1) superintendent as teacher/scholar, 2) superintendent as manager, 3)

superintendent as democratic leader, 4) superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) superintendent as communicator. Which of these roles do you consider to be most prominent or important for your district's superintendent? (Clarify the roles if asked.)

- 3.2 If you were asked to create a list of a superintendent's most important duties, where would you rank "being visible"?
- 3.3 Is there anything else you would like to share about superintendent visibility?

## School Board Member Interview Guide and Possible Probes

The following series of questions relate to superintendent visibility. You may talk about superintendent visibility in general, or you may talk about it specific to your district's superintendent.

### Section 1: Visibility (Absence/Presence)

- 1.1 For the purpose of this study, *visibility* is defined to include the concepts of *presence* and *absence*. What comes to mind when you think about the concepts of *absence* and *presence* as they relate to superintendent *visibility*?
- 1.2 For a moment, think about the term *visibility* as it relates, generally, to a superintendent of a school district. What comes to mind?
- 1.3 What counts as visibility? (Think in terms of other types of visibility such as memos, newsletters, communications devices, and electronic connections.)
- 1.4 Share with me your thoughts on the importance of superintendent visibility for your school district.
- 1.5 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's visibility (or presence) impacts others?
- 1.6 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's absence impacts others?
- 1.7 Have you as a school board member ever told your superintendent that her or his being visible is important?
- 1.8 What, if anything, have other school board members or other community members said to you about superintendent visibility?

- 1.9 From your perspective, in what types of activities does your district's superintendent engage in order to be visible?

## **Section 2: Visibility and Leadership, Communication, and Reflective Practice**

- 2.1 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as relational because the concept of leadership can be about relationship development. What role does visibility play as your superintendent develops relationships?
- 2.2 Does visibility impact your superintendent's ability to lead?
- 2.3 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as a symbolic, communicative endeavor. Does visibility enhance your superintendent's ability to communicate effectively?
- 2.4 Reflective practice requires a practitioner to retreat in order to reflect, or put another way, one must become absent in order to properly reflect. Talk for a moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to your superintendent.
- 2.5 Talk about the relationship between a leader's visibility and his or her ability to influence.
- 2.6 Does superintendent visibility play a role as you consider the future possibilities of your organization?
- 2.7 Does superintendent visibility have any symbolic meaning?

## **Section 3: Visibility and the Role of the Superintendent**

- 3.1 A study of the history of the superintendent reveals that the modern superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and he or she is expected to know when to transition among the roles. The five roles are: 1) superintendent as teacher/scholar, 2) superintendent as manager, 3)

superintendent as democratic leader, 4) superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) superintendent as communicator. Which of these roles do you consider to be most prominent or important for your district's superintendent? (Clarify the roles if asked.)

- 3.2 If you were asked to create a list of a superintendent's most important duties, where would you rank "being visible"?
- 3.3 Is there anything else you would like to share about superintendent visibility?

## Community Member Interview Guide and Possible Probes

The following series of questions relate to superintendent visibility. You may talk about superintendent visibility in general, or you may talk about it specific to your district's superintendent.

### Section 1: Visibility (Absence/Presence)

- 1.1 For the purpose of this study, *visibility* is defined to include the concepts of *presence* and *absence*. What comes to mind when you think about the concepts of *absence* and *presence* as they relate to superintendent *visibility*?
- 1.2 For a moment, think about the term *visibility* as it relates, generally, to a superintendent of a school district. What comes to mind?
- 1.3 What counts as visibility? (Think in terms of other types of visibility such as memos, newsletters, communications devices, and electronic connections.)
- 1.4 Share with me your thoughts on the importance of superintendent visibility for your school district.
- 1.5 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's visibility (or presence) impacts others?
- 1.6 How do you think that your school district's superintendent's absence impacts others?
- 1.7 Have you as a community member ever told your superintendent that her or his being visible is important?
- 1.8 What, if anything, have other community members said to you about superintendent visibility?

- 1.9 From your perspective, in what types of activities does your district's superintendent engage in order to be visible?

## **Section 2: Visibility and Leadership, Communication, and Reflective Practice**

- 2.1 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as relational because the concept of leadership can be about relationship development. What role does visibility play as your superintendent develops relationships?
- 2.2 Does visibility impact your superintendent's ability to lead?
- 2.3 For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as a symbolic, communicative endeavor. Does visibility enhance your superintendent's ability to communicate effectively?
- 2.4 Reflective practice requires a practitioner to retreat in order to reflect, or put another way, one must become absent in order to properly reflect. Talk for a moment about the concept of reflection as it relates to your superintendent.
- 2.5 Talk about the relationship between a leader's visibility and his or her ability to influence.
- 2.6 Does superintendent visibility play a role as you consider the future possibilities of your organization?
- 2.7 Does superintendent visibility have any symbolic meaning?

## **Section 3: Visibility and the Role of the Superintendent**

- 3.1 A study of the history of the superintendent reveals that the modern superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and he or she is expected to know when to transition among the roles. The five roles are: 1) superintendent as teacher/scholar, 2) superintendent as manager, 3)

superintendent as democratic leader, 4) superintendent as applied social scientist, and 5) superintendent as communicator. Which of these roles do you consider to be most prominent or important for your district's superintendent? (Clarify the roles if asked.)

- 3.2 If you were asked to create a list of a superintendent's most important duties, where would you rank "being visible"?
- 3.3 Is there anything else you would like to share about superintendent visibility?