A Phenomenological Study of Successful Superintendent Retention in a North-Central New Mexico School District

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SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT RETENTION

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
SUCCESSFUL SUPERINTENDENT RETENTION IN A
NORTH-CENTRAL NEW MEXICO SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

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B.S., Engineering, New Mexico Highlands University, 1996
M.A., Educational Leadership, New Mexico Highlands University, 2004

DISSEERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2023
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife, Tricia Delgado. Tricia has complemented me for 31 years and counting. I have accomplished nothing without her unrelenting encouragement and support. I love you, Tricia.

This work is also dedicated to my father, Daniel Leopoldo Delgado. My dad taught me the values of hard work, education, service, and dedication to family. He served his country, state, and northern New Mexico as a soldier and through a distinguished career as a public school educator. I love you, Dad.
Acknowledgments

Completing this work was only possible with the unyielding support of those around me. These people have helped me in countless and immeasurable ways.

My immediate family. My wife, Tricia; my daughters, Adriana and Sofia; and my son Diego. Without their love and support through many years of stops and starts, I never would have finished.

My extended family. My parents, Daniel and Cecilia Delgado. My siblings, Diana and Daniel. My parents-in-law, Joe and Emily Montoya. My grandparents, Orlando and Josefina Delgado, and Toribio and Alicia Flores. My grandparents-in-law, Toribio and Romelia Martinez, and John and Bertha Montoya. My uncles and great-aunts. These family members have always encouraged me and taught me the values of my heritage and culture.

My committee chair and advisor, Dr. Allison Borden. Dr. Borden always found the perfect balance of challenge, encouragement, and timing. I could not have hoped for a better person for this critical relationship.

My committee members, Dr. Viola Florez, Dr. Tyson Marsh, and Dr. Trenia Walker. These professors unselfishly devoted precious time and energy to my dissertation process.

A million thanks to all of you.
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ABSTRACT

Superintendent of Schools is uniquely critical in a school district due to its
tremendous effect on the operational and cultural bearing of the organization (Myers,
2011). Superintendent turnover can hinder district reform and improvement (Grissom &
Andersen, 2012; Marzano, 2006). The United States and New Mexico struggle with
superintendent retention and northern New Mexico is especially plagued with short
superintendent tenure (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; NMPED Stat Books, 2021;
Sawchuck, 2022). In this study, I investigated the initial selection and subsequent
interactions and relationships between school board members and superintendents. Using
a phenomenological approach, I interviewed two superintendents and four school board
members from a northern New Mexico school district with anomalously stable
superintendent retention to investigate their lived experiences. From 1997 to 2023, the
district has had only two superintendents. This study yielded 47 distinct
recommendations in nine categories for superintendents and districts pursuing healthy
relationships.
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A Phenomenological Study of Successful Superintendent Retention in a North-Central New Mexico School District

**Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Short school superintendent tenure is a pervasive problem in north-central New Mexico. Through a unique set of experiences over the past twenty-five years, I have come to know this problem well. Through serving as a superintendent in three of these school districts myself, leading an education service agency with eight of these school districts as member districts, serving on multiple statewide boards and committees, and serving the state of New Mexico’s Public Education Department as its Deputy Cabinet Secretary of Finance and Operations, I have personally witnessed the disadvantages to which this problem contributed. The witnessed disadvantages have included failed reform initiatives, stagnated academic outcomes, failed finances, and inequitable representation in key statewide leadership positions.

The historical, sociological, and political landscapes of northern New Mexico have produced an environment that takes in optimistic new school superintendents and soon regurgitates them out of the region and sometimes out of the profession within a few years and sometimes within months. Serving in various roles during my career has put me in the uncomfortable position of dealing with the aftermath of these challenging situations and has provoked a passionate motivation for contributing to a remedy. This study aimed to illuminate for a broader audience the lived experiences of one set of superintendents and school board members who have evaded this pervasive problem by maintaining only two superintendents over the past two decades.
North-central New Mexico is arguably one of the most beautiful places on earth. Contributing to this beauty are the stark contrasts of a high desert landscape with countless exposed geological epochs juxtaposed against sub-regions of alpine and high desert within a dozen miles of each other. For the purposes of this study, the region included an inverted trapezoidal area of the state, about 150 miles in each direction – approximately bounded by an east-west stretch of Interstate-25 in the south before heading north, Interstate-25 in the east, US 550 in the west, and the Colorado border in the north (a map is included in Appendix A). The relatively large area is home to only a few hundred thousand residents. The predominant makeup of the residents of northern New Mexico includes those with Native American ancestry; Hispanic ancestry, dating back to Spanish colonists who arrived in northern New Mexico several hundred years ago; and Anglo-Americans. This existence is infused with complicated context, conflicted motives, and intense actions.

The school districts that reside within this area are (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2022):

- Bernalillo Public Schools
- Bloomfield Municipal Schools
- Chama Valley Independent Schools
- Cuba Independent Schools
- Dulce Independent Schools
- Española Public Schools
- Jemez Mountain Public Schools
Jemez Valley Public Schools
Las Vegas City Public Schools
Las Vegas West Public Schools
Maxwell Municipal Schools
Mesa Vista Consolidated Schools
Mora Independent Schools
Pecos Independent Schools
Peñasco Independent Schools
Pojoaque Valley Public Schools
Questa Independent Schools
Raton Public Schools
Santa Fe Public Schools
Springer Municipal Schools
Taos Municipal Schools
Wagon Mound Public Schools

It should be noted that Los Alamos Public Schools is not included on this list even though it is located within the defined area described above. Los Alamos is a very unique school district and different in very substantial ways from the other school districts in north-central New Mexico. Examples of the characteristics that separate Los Alamos from the other districts in New Mexico are its low poverty, low English Language Learner count, low minority student count, and the influence of the Los Alamos National
Laboratory, which includes supplementation to the school district’s annual budget from the United States Department of Energy (Craig, 2016).

It has been my experience that the intense history of conflict in northern New Mexico has woven a complex tapestry of distrust, and this distrust has created an environment of defiance that has prevented the development of an environment that supports pervasive collaboration and long-term relationships in our communities (Ortiz, 1994; Sando, 1992; Sawtelle, 2004). I do not contend that this level of conflict and distrust is unique to this geographical region, only that it is uniquely intense in comparison to the rest of New Mexico and most of the United States. I did not investigate the effects of this distrust directly; in fact, I stepped over and beyond the particulars of the distrust through a phenomenological approach. I overtly avoided the extremely complex task of disentangling the knotted aspects of the interface of distrust between neighbors, policies, and systems that attempt to subdue and normalize the defiant spirit of northern New Mexicans.

This defiant spirit was perhaps best captured by the exasperation expressed by one of New Mexico’s most famous governors. While serving as Governor of New Mexico, on December 4, 1879, Lew Wallace (1906) penned a letter to his wife, writing:

I wish my successor, whoever he be, was come. Of course, he will do just as I did, have the same ideas, make the same attempts, and with the same heartiness of effort, soon cool in zeal, and finally say, ‘All right, let her drift.’ Every calculation based on experience elsewhere fails in New Mexico. (p. 926)
This statement is not included in this paper to project a futility in working in northern New Mexico; it serves as an example of a significant leader in New Mexico’s past who dealt with the complexity of getting things done when the very people that he was trying to help were not cooperative and even defiant in being led.

A phenomenological approach permitted me to conduct a study of the lived experiences of the superintendents and school board members who were able to transcend the manifold complexities of their environment and context, including distrust, to achieve a system that allows for extended superintendent tenure in a region that has consistently abhorred extended superintendent tenures (NMPED Stat Books, 2022).

**Roots of Conflict and Distrust in Northern New Mexico**

I present historical context to the region I studied because I believe that the historical context is important to understanding some of the underlying motivations that condition the behaviors of the actors in the mechanisms that govern the study’s phenomena. This is by no means presented as a comprehensive retelling of New Mexico history, only a very limited survey of New Mexico history to provide an unacquainted reader with the unique context present in modern New Mexico and especially north-central New Mexico.

I attempt to retell some of the most influential events of the history of New Mexico. This is a challenging undertaking since there are many competing narratives and perspectives about the very painful portions of the New Mexico’s history. In recounting these events, the most well-documented accounts are from Spanish chroniclers with obvious potential for bias. I have also read information produced by historians with
Indigenous roots, notably Alfonso Ortiz from Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, Joe S. Sando from Jemez Pueblo, and Diné author, Jennifer Denetdale. Despite the difficulty in synthesizing differing perspectives, I believe that these painful portions of New Mexico’s history are a critical part of understanding the present-day challenges facing New Mexicans, especially those in north-central New Mexico.

Generally accepted evidence of human habitation in New Mexico dates to approximately 9,000 BC (Fagan, 1987, p. 177); although recent discoveries at White Sands National Monument have indicated that humans may have been in New Mexico for 23,000 years (Callaway, 2021). This first human occupation was followed by centuries of struggle to initiate agricultural societies in the arid southwest climate (Fish & Fish, 1994). There is clear evidence of the dramatic shifts in available resources that were limited by climate and human influences on the land (Fish & Fish, 1994).

A prevalent historic development affecting present-day north-central New Mexico was the thriving of successful ancient Native American cultures, such as the Anasazi (Fish & Fish, 1994). The Anasazi built and occupied the great site of Chaco Canyon National Park (Fish & Fish, 1994). According to the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, this great culture transformed into the present-day Pueblo cultures (2018); although the presence of Diné ancestors at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde may be part of a more complex continuum of relationship between the Pueblo and Diné people (Denetdale, 2008, p. 16).

The Diné people live in the four corners region of the United States. They live on Navajo Tribal lands that occupy regions of the states of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah,
SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT RETENTION and Arizona. Although only three of the school districts in the area included in this study have a significantly high number of Diné students, the interactions with the Diné throughout the past four hundred years have been very significant. There also exists a concentrated population of Jicarilla Apache Native American people who live on the border of the area included in this study; they live in and around the community of Dulce, New Mexico. Again, the interactions with the Jicarilla Apache have been historically and presently significant.

In north-central New Mexico, the modern Pueblo cultures are made up of the eight northern Pueblos of Taos, Picuris, Okhay-Owingeh (formerly San Juan), Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Pojoaque, Tesuque, and Nambé (Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, 2020). Even the mix of Spanish, Catholic saints, and Tewa language names of these Pueblos reflect the tensions that came to the mountains of north-central New Mexico since the European occupation of North America after the accidental first encounter with the western hemisphere in 1492.

Despite the sometimes-sanitized representations of pre-Columbian North America, there is evidence of significant warfare in New Mexico prior to contact with Europeans (Reed, 2000). Pueblo historian, Joe S. Sando presents what may be a more complete description of Pueblo perspectives on warfare:

One explanation seems appropriate here. The Pueblo people were unique in their peaceful nature before the Spanish conquest, and certainly before the alliance with the Spaniards. Their way of life precluded warfare and conflict. They were hospitable, friendly, and always preoccupied with their agricultural pursuits and
their religious observances. During the period of defending themselves against neighboring Indian raiders, they learned the arts of military action, and became as good at warfare as they had been in the pursuit of peace. A false image of the Pueblos as being passive and docile has emerged as a result of inaccurate books and misrepresentations found in textbooks. Warfare became an important activity when Pueblos needed it. (1992, p. 81)

In *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual*, Chacón and Mendoza (2007) stated, “warfare was ubiquitous; every major culture area of native North America reviewed herein has produced archaeological, ethnohistorical, osteological, or ethnographic evidence of armed conflict and ritual violence” (p. 4). This pre-contact conflict would influence future conflicts with the Europeans (Kessell, 2003). Conflicts with Europeans included alliances and partnerships that were likely influenced by disagreements that began before Europeans arrived.

Recent archeological research is illuminating alternatives to the historically accepted theories of conquest (Burbank & Cooper, 2011). Although advantages of guns, germs, and steel were highly significant in the conquest of Indigenous populations by Europeans (Diamond, 2017), recent discoveries have reinforced the underrepresented influence of alliances with Indigenous populations. Burbank and Cooper (2011) promoted a re-examination of what some describe as the myth of steel and germs as the sole explanation for successful European conquest. Presently, there is little doubt in the very significant influence of fluctuating alliances between Europeans and Indigenous
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people throughout the past 400 years – the reverberations of these alliances and perceived betrayals would be difficult to deny in the present sociology in New Mexico.

Soon after the so-called discovery of the New World by Columbus’s Spanish-funded expedition came 350 years of Spanish occupation of what is now New Mexico. North-central New Mexico was separated from the hub of New Spain’s control in modern-day Mexico by hundreds of miles of barren and inhospitable high desert. This isolation is emphasized in a quote from a 1692 letter from Don Diego De Vargas to his son-in law where he refers to New Mexico; he states, “out of such consideration, I could have done no more than to have exiled myself to this kingdom, at the end of the earth and remote beyond compare” (Kessel, 2003, p. 1). A large part of this area was named Jornada del Muerto by early explorers. According to Simmons (1978, p. 28), “historian Fray Angélico Chávez of Santa Fe has pointed out that the Spanish name-place most accurately translates to ‘Route of the Dead Man.’” On the other side of the Jornada del Muerto was a veritable land of milk and honey compared to the bounty-less land of southern New Mexico in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Although modern irrigation methods have transformed southern New Mexico into a significant region of agriculture, late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century southern New Mexico had no such agriculture away from the Rio Grande River (Wozniak, 1998).

North-central New Mexico features the headwaters of the Rio Grande River and several other critical water sources for the development of agriculture, mountains populated by game animals, and thousands of acres of grassy pastures for game animals and livestock. This bastion of natural resources drew colonization of the area by the
Spanish in 1598, when Juan de Oñate brought 500 Spanish settlers and 7,000 heads of livestock to the banks of the Chama River near modern-day Española (Simmons, 1992). This was the first successful European colony in the interior of what is now the United States, with the only others in the Caribbean coastal areas. The colony was also in the middle of many thriving Pueblo communities, including all modern Eight Northern Pueblos. In 1610, the colony officially moved to the present-day location of Santa Fe; at this point, the full effort of Christianization of the Pueblo inhabitants had begun (Simmons, 1992).

The Christianization and colonization of New Mexico by Europeans is a painful part of New Mexico’s history. The efforts of priests to win the hearts and souls of Indigenous people are mixed with the Encomienda system, in which Native people were enslaved. To complicate relationships even further was the genízaro system, which created a population of Indigenous people who were captured and then brought into Spanish families as servants (Ortiz, 1994; Sando, 1992). According to Avery (2008), this form of slavery was officially allowed because, “the government did not intend the genízaros’ placement in New Mexican households to be a permanent condition but a form of debt, peonage, obligating masters to ensure the genízaros’ assimilation to Hispanic culture through Catholic indoctrination” (pp. v-6).

One very prominent distinction between the cultures of the Native Americans and the Europeans is their relationship with religion. Native American culture fully integrates religion in everyday life. Native American historian, Joe Sando states, “The Pueblos have no word for religion. The knowledge of spiritual life is part of the person twenty-four
hours a day, every day of the year” (1992, p. 30). Conversely, the colonizing Europeans were well down the path of segregating religion from the secular construction of their systems of daily life and especially their governance systems. While this distinction was less prominent in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish European efforts, which laced all actions in themes of Christian salvation, objective assessment of their actions makes clear that Christian motives were overpowered by the quest for non-spiritual returns.

In 1680, the frustrations of Indigenous people violently erupted into the Pueblo Revolt. Indigenous people united to expel the Spanish from New Mexico. The revolt left hundreds of people dead and culminated in a Spanish retreat from Santa Fe to an area near present day El Paso, Texas (Simmons, 1998). According to Dodge, Hendricks, and Kessell (1992), “until 1680, Spain had maintained New Mexico, which lacked readily exploitable wealth, primarily as a missionary colony to convert the Pueblo Indians to Christianity” (p. 47). However, world politics had shifted and by 1692 restoration of New Mexico figured prominently in Spain’s effort to thwart French encroachment in North America (Dodge, Hendricks, & Kessell, 1992). In 1692, Diego de Vargas successfully recaptured Santa Fe. De Vargas was aided by a lack of solidarity between various Pueblos, which had been present during the orchestrated revolt of 1680, and who were now also suffering troubles from the Utes and Apaches (Simmons, 1998).

Pueblo historian, Alfonso Ortiz, describes the reconquest:

But the great Pueblo rebellion was ultimately only a holding action against the inevitable. Widespread drought and famine continued even after the Spanish left,
and the abandonment of their garrisons made the settlements that much more attractive a target for the Apaches; many pueblos had to be abandoned. The Pueblos themselves, accustomed to a tradition of community autonomy, found it difficult to remain unified, particularly after Popé died in 1668. Accordingly, in 1692, the Spanish general Diego de Vargas – summoned, based on one Pueblo tradition, by a delegation of Indians who had asked the Spanish to return – reclaimed Santa Fe with a small force. Although sporadic Pueblo resistance continued, at times pitting those Indians who supported the Spanish against those who opposed them. (1994, p. 55)

More than 300 years after the reconquest, tensions are still strong. The Santa Fe Fiesta celebration used to include a re-enactment of de Vargas reentering the city to a friendly Pueblo leader – the re-enactment is considered a revisionist interpretation by some Pueblo people. On September 1, 2017, a protest to the opening ceremony of the Santa Fe Fiestas resulted in the arrest of eight Native American protesters (Cantu, 2017). One of the protesters faced felony charges. The tensions over the re-enactment eventually led to its elimination from the Fiesta activities for 2018 (Chacón, 2018). Conflicts over the Pueblo Revolt and the reconquest are still very active and were reignited in the wake of social unrest over demands for justice in relation to the killing of Black men by police in the United States in 2020 (Romero, 2020).

Following the reconquest, although hardly equitable, the Spanish were forced to be much more diplomatic in their relationship with cooperative Native Americans (Ortiz, 1994). Evidence of this forced compromise is the fact that many of the modern-day
Pueblos are in locations where they existed at the time of Spanish arrival in New Mexico, although with greatly diminished footprints. Pueblo historian, Alfonso Ortiz states, “the Pueblos had come to realize that they could not drive the Spanish permanently from their homeland, while the colonists had been made painfully aware that their physical presence in New Mexico depended on alliance with the Pueblos in the form of economic and military cooperation” (1994, p. 57).

Many Native Americans carry Spanish surnames, and many native northern New Mexico Hispanos show significant Native American markers in their DNA. These are exceptional indications of the deep and complicated contextual atmosphere in New Mexico with relation to race, ethnicity, and culture. An article recently published in the New York Times describes this realization, coming from DNA testing, about the Native American heritage in many New Mexico Hispanos, where “the revelations have prompted some painful personal reckonings over identity and heritage” (Romero, 2018, p. 2).

Once again, tensions that may have existed prior to European arrival were exacerbated and further complicated by Europeans. Native American Diné author Jennifer Denetdale (2009) describes these occurrences.

The Spanish return into New Spain meant that Pueblos and Navajos would continue to suffer their assaults. Indeed, after 1705, Navajos suffered many reprisals by the Spaniards who continued their raids into Navajo country. The Spaniards enlisted Pueblo auxiliaries in their campaigns against Navajos. Just as the Spaniards creates strife between Navajos and Pueblos, their policies also
caused internal conflicts among the Navajos. In 1787, a band of Navajos who lived in proximity to the Spanish settlements allied themselves with the Spaniards, and later with the Mexicans, and campaigned against their own people. The move alienated their kinspeople, and thereafter this group of Diné was known as Diné Anaa’i – Enemy Navajo. (p. 19)

New Mexico remained under the control of the Spanish for one hundred and twenty-nine years after the reconquest. In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain and New Mexico was then part of Mexico. Mexican rule over New Mexico would be short-lived; only 27 years later, New Mexico would come under the rule of the United States. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, included many commitments from the United States for New Mexicans; many of these commitments were never realized (Oliver, 2017). From 1848 to 1912, New Mexico existed as a territory of the United States. In 1912, New Mexico became a state of the United States of America.

The Territorial period in New Mexico is replete with stereotypical Wild West true stories of murder, mob justice, vigilantism, corruption, and fights against corruption (Bryan, 1991). One only needs to recall the movie Young Guns or Chisum to conjure images of the Santa Fe Ring and gunfights, pitting one antihero with a menacing foe – each of which with conflicted motives.

The backdrop of the tense interface between old New Mexico and the early arrivers to the area from the United States is also chronicled in the biography of one of the first Americans to arrive with the occupation of New Mexico by the United States Army: Henry Lafayette Dodge (Sundberg, 2013). Dodge served as one of the first
government officials in Santa Fe after the occupation. Dodge was the son of a United States Senator from Wisconsin and a veteran of the Black Hawk War in what is now the upper Midwest of the United States. Dodge witnessed the New Mexico Territory through the eyes of an Anglo Easterner and his biography conveys some of the impressions of New Mexico by these first American occupiers. Many of these observations emphasized the stark contrasts of territorial New Mexico life when compared with the more populous areas of nineteenth century United States and from today’s vantage point it demonstrates the complex mix of influences from Indigenous peoples, the Spanish, and the Mexican roots of the territory. Dodge abandoned his life in the East to start a new family in New Mexico. He later became an Indian Agent of the United States, assigned to the Navajo tribe. He purportedly met an unfortunate early demise at the hands of the Apache as he was traveling to Fort Defiance in Arizona.

One of the more provocative stories of the period is that of Las Gorras Blancas, a group of Hispanics, who opposed the political mechanisms used in the County of San Miguel. Las Gorras Blancas were organized in April 1889 by brothers José, Pablo, and Nicanor (Gonzales-Berry & Maciel, 2000). In March of 1890, Las Gorras Blancas distributed a proclamation in the form of leaflets in San Miguel County. On March 11, 1890, the Las Vegas Optic printed the full text from the proclamation (Blackshear, 2013, Exhibit III):

Not wishing to be misunderstood, we hereby make this our declaration.

Our purpose is to protect the rights and interests of the people in general; especially those of the helpless classes.
We want the Las Vegas Grant settled to the benefit of all concerned, and this we hold is the entire community within the grant.

We want no "land grabbers" or obstructionists of any sort to interfere. We will watch them.

We are not down on lawyers as a class, but the usual knavery and unfair treatment of the people must be stopped.

Our judiciary hereafter must understand that we will sustain it only when "Justice" is its watchword.

The practice of "double-dealing" must cease.

There is a wide difference between New Mexico's "law" and "justice." And justice is God's law, and that we must have at all hazards.

We are down on race issues, and will watch race agitators. We are all human brethren, under the same glorious flag.

We favor irrigation enterprises, but will fight any scheme that tends to monopolize the supply of water courses to the detriment of residents living on lands watered by the same streams.

We favor all enterprises, but object to corrupt methods to further the same.

We do not care how much you get so long as you do it fairly and honestly.

The People are suffering from the effects of partisan "bossism" and these bosses had better quietly hold their peace. The people have been persecuted and hacked about in every which way to satisfy their caprice. If they persist in their usual methods retribution will be their reward.
We are watching "political informers."

We have no grudge against any person in particular, but we are the enemies of bulldozers and tyrants.

We must have a free ballot and a fair count. And the will of the majority shall be respected.

Intimidation and the "indictment" plan have no further fears for us. If the old system should continue, death would be a relief to our sufferings. And for our rights our lives are the least we can pledge.

If the fact that we are law abiding citizens is questioned, come out to our homes and see the hunger and desolation we are suffering; and "this" is the result of the deceitful and corrupt methods of "bossism."

Be fair and just and we are with you, do otherwise and take the consequences.

The White Caps, 1,500 Strong and Growing Daily.

The themes in this proclamation from Las Gorras Blancas are still alive and well in northern New Mexicans to this day; in fact, these contentions seem to reflect many of the core conflicts in the United States today. In my opinion, this proclamation includes many of the fundamental challenges of a democracy that strives for the ideals of the free market and capitalism, while simultaneously wishing to maintain certain ideals related to social justice. This proclamation even includes a sentiment of deep-rooted patriotism, “…one brethren, under the same glorious flag” yet juxtaposes that patriotism with a Zapata-esque willingness to die for change, “if the old system should continue, death would be a relief to our sufferings.”
Adding complexity to the history of northern New Mexico is the mostly clandestine history of Judaism. Only recently has the widespread presence of Jewish escapees from the threat of the Catholic Inquisition become clearer. In 1571, the Inquisition came to Mexico, promoting crypto-Jews who had fled Spain to Mexico “to flee to what is now northern New Mexico” (Kelley, 2004, para. 15). According to Kelley (2004, para. 33), DNA testing has revealed that ten to fifteen percent of men in northern New Mexico have Jewish ancestry. Oppression and suppression of religious freedoms can be one of the most influential sources of conflict and resentment in human existence. It would not be unreasonable to believe that oppression of religious beliefs has contributed to the amalgamation of historical resentment that is felt by the people of northern New Mexico today (Chavez, 1954; Sando, 1992).

As projected in the *Gorras Blancas* proclamation, a broad spectrum of societal and economic norms have been part of northern New Mexico’s evolution, ranging from a communal sharing of land to aggressive capitalistic approaches, and to the treatment of land and resources. Madrid-Barela and Gandert refer to *con alambre vino hambre* (2012, p. 60), a Spanish phrase used in northern New Mexico, which alludes to the shift from ancient sharing of land to strict ownership. This rhyming phrase in Spanish translates to *with wire came hunger*, referring to the introduction of barbed wire fences to control the use of grazing lands.

The history of New Mexico is saturated with treacherous competition for scarce resources. This competition likely started before the arrival of Europeans and the introduction of the western form of written recorded history; however, the written
historical record provides a stark telling of the ways that resources were unscrupulously usurped. Perhaps the most notable manifestations of these unscrupulous practices were in the possession of land. Native American historian Joe Sando describes many of these practices, “that is one way the loss of land occurred – through habitual trickery” (1998, p. 131). Many of the lessons learned in terms of the trickery used in the acquisition of government and private lands, leveraging the newly imposed United States legal system, were refined in what is now the United States Midwest region during the march westward as the United States and its citizens manifested their destiny toward the Pacific Ocean (Sundberg, 2013).

The school district I selected for this study was near the setting for one of the most infamous recent domestic disturbances in the state. In 1967, Reies López Tijerina and a band of followers raided the county courthouse in a northern New Mexico village. This raid solidified Tijerina as a pillar of the Chicano civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century (Colker, 2015). Following the raid, Tijerina was invited to collaborate with activists such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Tijerina (2000) chronicles his interactions with the people of the region in his autobiography. This event and support for Tijerina’s rebellious acts are still memorialized by a billboard not far from the school district’s central office; the billboard reads “Tierra O Muerte” (land or death) and features an image of a Pancho Villa-looking man, wearing a bandoleer. It should also be noted that this event is another example of the genesis of disparate attitudes from the residents of northern New Mexico (Bustos, 2005).
When I was a child, Tijerina made frequent stops at my parents’ service station, and I was able to hear him speak of his views and beliefs about land rights in northern New Mexico. Tijerina was an imposing figure in northern New Mexico; however, there are many disparate feelings about his actions among the people of northern New Mexico. I believe that these disparate feelings stem from the conflicted constitution of northern New Mexicans, who are at the same time independent, defiant, and bold while also being extraordinarily dutiful, patriotic, and loyal.

The many complexities of the context of northern New Mexico history are directly projected onto the schools in the region. In my experience working in schools, schools are all at once manifestations of western society, government-funded dispensers of resources, conduits to greater opportunity, imposers of authority, and community centers. Much of the power of the superintendency is reflected in the fact that superintendents are the primary distributors of nearly fifty percent of the state’s annual revenue through jobs and the purchase of goods and services (LFC, 2022; Romero, 2012).

I find it instructive to compare the conditions in northern New Mexico to the paradoxical relationship between policy efforts and the sometimes irrational reaction of the affected people, the so-called Polis (Stone, 2012). The Polis sometimes defy intended policy outcomes through sheer defiance against the policy makers. A clear reflection of this theory was once described to me by a teacher in a northern New Mexico school. This teacher explained that the people of the community possessed a frontier mentality. This frontier mentality was steeped in independence and a desire for freedom. He went on to
explain that the school acts as an impediment to this independence by serving as the only authority in the lives of individuals who live in isolated and sparsely populated mountain communities, where interactions with governmental authority are very limited. This role of authority causes some community members to oppose all efforts of the school, whether or not they are intended for their good. The opposition to this authority is central to Reies López’s Tijerina’s parable of the cricket:

Right now, we look like a cricket. What is a cricket? King of the Insects; a little, tiny animal. All the cricket can do is [say] ‘cricket, cricket, cricket.’ Just a noise, that’s all. But you know, if that cricket gets in the ear of the lion and scratches inside, there is nothing the lion can do. There is nothing; there is no way the lion can use his claws and jaws to destroy the cricket. The more the lion scratches himself the deeper the cricket goes. (Busto, 2005, p. 1)

Joe Guillen is the sitting Executive Director for the New Mexico School Boards Association (NMSBA). The NMSBA’s membership includes all 89 school boards in New Mexico and is an affiliate of the National School Board Association. The NMSBA is the provider of the state’s statutorily mandated training for school boards. I will refer to Joe Guillen as Mr. Guillen to maintain the decorum of our time working together in schools. During an interview with Mr. Guillen, the potential effect of a historical influence was discussed (personal communication, February 23, 2022). This is the influence of what is colloquially called the Patron System in northern New Mexico. Knowlton (1962) writes of this system in northern New Mexico but calls it the Patron-Peon Pattern. The system is a societal system that dates back hundreds of years in northern New Mexico and southern
Colorado. The system can take very different forms, some of which are very much like slavery or at least lord and vassal systems of Middle Ages in Europe; however, in its more benevolent form it was potentially beneficial to the community. The less benevolent form of the system, which was primarily a form of indebtedness repaid through an endless rate of repayment, was abolished by a special act of congress in 1867. Knowlton (1962) described the more benevolent aspect of the system:

The village patron, as long as he respected the customs and traditions of the village, was granted authority and prestige as the village leader. As such he represented the village in its dealings with other villages and with higher political authority. He had the power to call out village members to repair roads and irrigation ditches, to build schools and churches, and to perform other types of communal labor. As a patron he was expected to provide for the unemployed, the hungry, the aged, the sick, the orphaned, the widowed, and for those in trouble. He also settled disputes between villagers, and his decisions were final…patrons were expected to be generous, hospitable, brave, courageous and to display qualities of leadership. They were required to respect the personal dignity and honor of those who followed them. A patron who could not hold the respect of his fellow villagers was in serious danger of losing his position. The patron-peon relationship rested upon the values and attitudes that for the most part still exist and in a large measure still determine the attitudes of Spanish Americans toward government political activities, welfare, employment patterns, and patterns of leadership. (pp. 14-15)
Following the description of the village patron, Knowlton goes on to specifically describe a variation of the patron that is most active in political spheres; he refers to this role as the “Jefe Político” (1962, p. 16). Knowlton writes of these Jefes Políticos being present at the time of his writing in 1962; Mr. Guillen and I recalled the presence of these figures well into the 21st century in northern New Mexico. The history of this system may continue to have lingering reverberations in the behavior patterns of its residents to present day. A desire to reflect this prestigious and powerful position could be influencing superintendent and board member relations in northern New Mexico.

New Mexico historian, Marc Simmons, wrote an interesting article about his personal experiences with the malevolent form of the Patron system. It was an article (2016) about an old man, living by very humble means, who had offered him respite while horse-backing through the mesa lands east of Mount Taylor in the 1960s. The old man had a very peculiar interaction with the patron who arrived in a new pickup truck to bring supplies to the isolated setting. The old man bowed and scraped in interacting with the patron as he said, “Si patron … No patron” (para. 4). A few years later he read a newspaper story about an old man who had walked many miles out of the Rio Puerco basin and claimed to be held in debt peonage and asked for relief and sanctuary. Simmons went on to recount tragic stories from historical accounts of debt peonage, which included a sixteen-year-old girl who had been placed in debt peonage by her father for five dollars and the American military commander who paid to have her freed by paying the debt himself to free her. According to Simmons, debt peonage became nearly impossible to escape due to the repayment rate calculated at two dollars to five dollars a
month for men and fifty cents to two dollars per month for women. The lingering effects of this system in northern New Mexico are difficult to ascertain; however, its presence is of significant note.

This high-level survey of New Mexico history is very personal to me as I see myself as a representation of modern-day New Mexico. My family history includes many New Mexicans for whom I have historical records – these include: my sixth great-grandfather, Francisco Delgado, who was Captain of the Presidio in Santa Fe; my third great-grandfather, Henry Lafayette Dodge, whose father was the first territorial governor of Wisconsin and whose ancestors fought in the American Revolutionary War of Independence and War of 1812; my fifth great-grandfather, who was a Cherokee Native American and was displaced from Georgia to Oklahoma and whose daughter married a United States soldier from Ireland; my great-great-grandfather, Benigno Padilla, a store merchant who was murdered, similarly to John Tunstall in the Lincoln County War, near Santa Rosa, New Mexico by political enemies; and several multiple-great-grandfathers who served in the Union army during the American Civil War. My family DNA also shows evidence of Jewish lineage, and significant Indigenous American lineage from North America to South America. I lament the absence of the stories of my Indigenous ancestors but feel their presence in my culture and identity. I am the melting pot that is New Mexico and all of my families’ stories make up the people and tapestry that is now New Mexico.
The Superintendency in Northern New Mexico

The position of Superintendent of Schools has always played a critical role in public schools in New Mexico and anywhere that the position is present (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Most school governance systems provide for significant oversight of the Superintendent by elected school boards. Up until 2003, New Mexico state law placed authority for nearly all major decisions in the hands of school boards. In 2003, New Mexico’s governor, Bill Richardson, pushed a collection of major education reform initiatives through the state legislature; one of the most significant components of this reform was to shift the executive authority of school boards to the Superintendent – this change in authority is colloquially referred to by the original House of Representatives bill number: HB212 (Stewart, 2003). One of HB212’s primary changes was to remove the board of education’s authority from all personnel decisions except the hiring and firing of the superintendent. Since the superintendent is the only person employed and supervised by the board of education, one of the operational results of the change was to force school board members to act through the superintendent to attain their desired outcomes. This change has created an environment with complex and evolving dynamics between school boards and superintendents. Another significant aspect of HB212 was the relegation of the State Board of Education to a much less potent entity in decision-making and shifting the power to a Cabinet Secretary of Public Education, appointed by the Governor.

The most recent report on national superintendent tenure comes from the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) and indicates that the average tenure of a Superintendent
in the United States is 3.18 years (CGCS, 2014). Without reporting a tenure calculation, EdWeek reported the superintendent turnover problem in terms the percentage of superintendents that had turned over each year in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years as about one quarter of superintendents (Sawchuck, 2022). An analysis of *Stat Books* from the New Mexico Public Education Department indicates that the average tenure of superintendents in New Mexico is approximately 2.62 years (Martens, 2021). According to the *Stat Books*, the tenure average for superintendents in northern New Mexico school districts between 2006 and 2019, the latest date for which data are available, is even lower at 2.22 years. The 2.22-year average is based on one superintendent snapshot per year, so the actual tenure could be well below 2 years. For example, one north-central New Mexico school district had four superintendents in the 2017-2018 school year – multiple superintendents in a single year is far from uncommon. Some associate, at least partially, the higher rate of superintendent turnover to the changes made by HB212 (personal communication, Stan Rounds, March 3, 2022).

New Mexico School Board Association (NMSBA) Executive Director, Joe Guillen shared with me his thoughts on HB212 (personal communication, February 23, 2022). Mr. Guillen is often the first person called when a school board is seeking guidance to deal with challenges. Prior to serving as NMSBA’s Executive Director, he served on the board of education for one school district in the state with a history of superintendent and intra-board conflicts. For six of the ten years, he served as the board’s chairman.
In Mr. Guillen’s experience, during the pre-HB212 world, there were often political factions that were focused on jobs for friends and family. During his time on the board, he tried to move away from the board’s focus on employment and shift to improving schools. One of the problems that he identified was not only Superintendent retention but the cascading effect of principal turnover that came along with superintendent turnover. Although no research could be identified that directly confirms this trend, it does seem to be supported by a study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals’ Learning Policy Institute, which identified support from central office, lack of decision-making authority, and poor evaluation systems as significant contributors to principal turnover (Levin et al., 2020). Although these negative conditions can arise from poor leadership and other influences, they would be difficult to improve in a system with frequent superintendent turnover.

Mr. Guillen recalls a legislative proposal to do away with school boards altogether, because of a perceived lack of focus on academic achievement. In the proposal, school boards would be converted to school advisory committees at each school. These boards would have no authority but instead act only in an advisory capacity. Key statewide school board leadership agreed to a compromise that would allow boards to be removed from personnel decisions, the compromise into the legislation that became HB212. In Mr. Guillen’s opinion, this was a wise move in order to allow the school board to focus on more important priorities, like academic improvement. He recalls that upon the enactment of HB212, two board members on his board decided to exit from board because they were motivated by their ability to be
involved in employment decisions. Mr. Guillen acknowledges that this shift created more pressure on superintendents as they try to work with the issues of hiring and firing, including pressure from board members. Mr. Guillen believes that good superintendents do not shut off conversation about employment decisions but find a useful balance between maintaining ultimate decisions but allowing boards to provide input on the decisions. An example of this was an agreement between the superintendent and board where the superintendent would notify the board of recommendations on hiring and solicit input from the board before making a final decision.

Mr. Guillen emphasizes the respect for roles and “staying in one’s lane,” stating that boards are much more successful if they do—this includes board members helping other board members and board members helping the superintendent. Mr. Guillen states that he gets a lot of confidential calls from superintendents or fellow board members asking how to handle a board member who is acting outside of their lane. Mr. Guillen believes that purposeful communication is key; this communication makes sure that everyone is working toward success for superintendent and success for the board.

Mr. Stan Rounds is the Executive Director of the New Mexico School Superintendents Association. I will refer to Stan Rounds as Mr. Rounds to maintain the decorum of our time working together in schools. Mr. Rounds also has more than two decades of experience as a Superintendent in New Mexico. Mr. Rounds confirms (personal communication, March 3, 2022) the added pressure on superintendents created when school boards lost their authority on personnel issues, recalling that before HB212 board members felt that they had a more direct path to affecting decisions made on these
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issues. Mr. Rounds, however, mentioned an additional factor that arose not long before HB212 removed the boards’ authority on personnel – the change in term lengths for school board members from six years to four years. According to Mr. Rounds, this change was a very dramatic shift in the cycles of school boards because it created a situation where you have swings in the majority much more often. When there were six-year terms, the number of board seats up in every two-year election cycle were two, then two, then one. With four-year terms, the cycle alternates between three and two seats every two years. The latter cycle creates much more frequent changes in board majority, which according to Mr. Rounds is highly correlated to changes in the majority vision and priorities – these assertions are supported by literature on school leadership and reform (Alsbury, 2003; Bryan & Grady, 1991; Fullan & Miles, 1992). The cascading effect of these changes are situations where a superintendent is hired by one majority, with selection of a superintendent based on one set of objectives, and then the shifting of the objectives in opposition to the direction of the last majority. This situation often leaves the superintendent held responsible for the priorities that the new board majority was elected to change. The short time cycle between these shifts with four-year terms creates an environment where a natural side effect is superintendent turnover, while the longer terms tend to modulate this effect on superintendents. Mr. Rounds vaguely recalled the reasons for the change in terms being related to the reluctance of potential board members to want to commit to a six-year term and the fact that many potential board members use the school board as a steppingstone to higher political offices and a six-year term is too long to pause their political trajectory. Each of these concerns are very
understandable reasons for the shift, in terms of a system that seeks the best potential candidates for board members, but a side effect may have been an amplification of superintendent turnover. Although no research could be identified to support this assertion, there are clear logical connections in the factors identified by Mr. Rounds.

Mr. Rounds described the added pressures exerted on superintendents in more recent times. He stated that many of these pressures are societal issues that everyone is dealing with but that these issues manifest themselves more concretely in our schools. According to Mr. Rounds, these tensions are exacerbated by the fact that the state has moved schools into an environment where more decisions are being made by politicians at a state level and not a local level. As mentioned above, HB212 not only removed the authority of the board to make personnel decisions but also shifted authority over the state’s K-12 schools from the State Board of Education to the Cabinet Secretary of Public Education. This shift has amplified the Executive Branch’s authority over schools and has created an environment where more decisions are made at the legislative and executive branches of state government and fewer at the local level by school boards and superintendents. The tensions between local control and state control are well documented (Scribner, 2016). Before HB212, Mr. Rounds recalls state laws providing very general boundaries around what schools were doing and many more decisions being allowed at the local level and even giving the superintendent much more deference in attenuating the effects of state law through local interpretation and implementation. This shift has put boards, and especially superintendents, in the position of having to roll out state mandates that may be extremely unpopular with local stakeholders yet having little
ability to mediate the effects for the local environment. Scribner (2016) writes extensively about this tension and the most recent tendency for state politicians to usurp the local control of school boards in critical issues. Control of funding, ideological issues, and influences of special interest groups are prominent in the factors driving this shift. Scribner describes this shift: “influenced by professional interest groups and an increasingly active judiciary, by the 1980’s the school governance debate had shifted from an argument over whether there should be any state or federal involvement in education to an implicit acceptance of those roles and a struggle to define them” (2016, p. 4).

According to Mr. Rounds and supported by the literature (Copeland, 2013; Education Writers Association, 2003), a fundamental goal of the superintendent is to become part of the tapestry of the community and to find common mores and issues in the hearts of the community. One important path to the community is through personal relationships with the school board.

As mentioned by Mr. Guillen, an important challenge for the superintendent is to include within a communication plan to the board a uniform weekly communication, which allows for the avoidance of a perception of favoritism – this is especially important when there are split factions on the board. This uniformity of information sharing thwarts the assumptions of favoritism that are inherent in the power dynamics of a school board. According to Mr. Rounds, this is the “art craft” of being a superintendent.

Mr. Rounds also made a point regarding the important role of the superintendent of being skilled in translating the decisions of the board and the state to downstream
relationships with district staff. The superintendent serves as the connective tissue between governance and operational staff who are going to make things happen on the ground. This role is critical to a healthy organization (Tarter & Hoy, 2002).

Recent increased scrutiny on schools, school boards, and superintendents was reaffirmed by John Sena, who was the Director of Policy at the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) (personal communication, February 22, 2022). Sena spent time as a reporter for a northern New Mexico newspaper prior to a career change into public education, as a teacher and school administrator, and then as a staff member of the NMPED. According to Sena, he has witnessed a shift in the attention of the media to the schools. In his time at the newspaper, he saw infrequent in-depth articles on the schools. Lately, it seems that there is a much greater focus on the day-to-day operation of schools from the media. Sena interfaced with this new environment as he developed and promoted policy initiatives at the NMPED.

With these considerations in mind, the selection of a superintendent is an absolutely critical decision for any school board in New Mexico. Unlike many organizations, school districts operate on a distinct annual cycle that is built around student calendars, budgets, and board election cycles. A vacancy in the position of superintendent presents a critical decision point for school board members. Since the district cannot operate without a specifically identified superintendent, the board is faced with a time-sensitive decision about how to fill the vacancy.

NMSBA Executive Director Guillen (personal communication, February 23, 2022) suggests that the board look at someone in house, at least on an interim basis.
According to Guillen, this has been especially valuable in recent years when there is a shortage of good applicants. There are also a few retired, veteran superintendents that will take an interim assignment. If an interim superintendent does not turn into a permanent assignment, the next option is opening the position to outside applicants. The NMSBA recently started a superintendent search service to meet the needs of the school districts. The NMSBA service has made a priority of keeping the cost of the service controlled and currently charges $5,000 for a basic search. According to Guillen, this amount is usually acceptable to even the smallest school districts; although, some districts are willing to spend more than $20,000 to get more aspects of the process provided.

For school boards in rural school districts, the decision includes a unique secondary set of challenges. The selection of a superintendent in a rural school district may not garner the same level of media attention as a selection in a non-rural school district; however, there are many additional complications of the decision in a rural setting. Superintendents “in most smaller rural school districts” may not have “the layers of administrative supports found in larger districts; therefore, they become deeply involved in, and often solely responsible for, district change initiatives” (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014, p. 424). In particular, a rural district is less likely to have an abundance of individuals who could potentially be reassigned to fill the role of superintendent. This lack of available personnel is based on two factors that are more likely to be a complication in a rural district. First, the small administrative pool makes it unlikely that an administrator with ample experience and skillset is immediately available. Second,
due to the smaller administrative pool, a move from a lower tiered school administrative position is likely to create an un-fillable void that could create a new set of unmet needs. The alternative to locally available personnel is to bring in someone new to the district; a challenge for these individuals is the steep learning curve in getting to know the often very unique district – sometimes, once the superintendent gets to know the district, it quickly becomes apparent that the fit is not good, and a departure is soon to follow.

School districts in New Mexico have recently faced increasing criticism over several highly publicized superintendent contract buyouts and separation-based litigation settlements (Grijalva, 2021; McKee, 2015). A story from KRQE news stated, “New Mexico school districts have collectively paid out more than $1 million in superintendent buyouts (or contractual settlements) in the last five years” (McKee, 2015). These buyouts have even caused legislation to be introduced to limit the ability for New Mexico school districts to offer multiple-year contracts to superintendents (Rhem, 2016). This change could significantly impact the ability of New Mexico school districts to compete for top talent, as many highly qualified superintendents would not accept a contract on these terms. These facts increase the criticality of school board decisions to select the right superintendent.

**Problem Statement**

To address the need for strategies to minimize the effect of the conditions that encourage superintendent turnover, I used a phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of past and present New Mexico superintendents and school board members’ experiences in challenging situations from their respective positions. The
phenomenon I studied was the participation in a superintendent-school board relationship that successfully maintained a superintendent for seven or more years from both the superintendent and board perspectives. Methods of inquiry included a phenomenological approach to data collection through interviews and phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts, including Phenomenological reduction. I utilized a phenomenological, lived experiences approach using a semi-structured interview process. The interviews focused on the description of how the superintendent and board navigated difficult situations.

Through systematic analysis of interview data, I identified and reported common themes. I structured the interview process and analysis in alignment with the Descriptive Analysis structure developed by Husserl (1983) and expanded by others, including Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994). Identified themes create a collection that could inform the superintendent selection process, the decision of a potential superintendent to apply for a specific superintendent position, and to inform superintendent-board relation efforts to increase the likelihood of retention.

The superintendents and school board members I invited to participate in this study possess more than seven years of experience as a superintendent or one or more full four-year terms as a school board member between 1997 and 2021, which is the period I selected for this study. I invited two superintendents and four school board members for inclusion in this study. These superintendents and board members represent a single autonomous school district in New Mexico, which I have identified as having achieved anomalous success in terms of superintendent tenure over 24 years.
Purpose Statement

This phenomenological investigation was intended to capture the experience of school board members and superintendents in a north-central New Mexico School District that has defied the prevalence of high superintendent turnover. Once I captured these experiences, I analyzed them using a systematic process of phenomenological reduction to identify emergent essential themes in the experiences. This phenomenological process relies on eidetic reduction, where the meaning units are identified within the lived experiences of the study participants. Finally, I report these distilled themes as characteristic experiences in a district successfully retaining superintendents.

Research Question

What are the essential themes in lived experiences in the relationships between superintendents and school board members in a north-central New Mexico school district that successfully achieved low superintendent turnover over a twenty-four-year period from 1997 to 2021? I used nine interview questions to investigate this research question; the interview questions are included in Appendix B.

Conceptual Framework

There are many available approaches and methodologies available to guide research in education (Murnane, 2010). The first major choice is between quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). Although possible in unique circumstances, in an educational setting, quantitative research that is able to identify causality is challenging to implement effectively (Murnane, 2010). The main reason for
this is the fact that most quantitative methods that are able to claim the identification of causation require a controlled study. Rarely do educators have the motivation or ability to allow for a control group if they believe that a treatment is available that will benefit students. Whitmore Schanzenbach found,

Some of the most important questions in educational policy cannot feasibly be evaluated via experiments, even though one could in theory design an experiment to test a particular question ... it is difficult to imagine states or school districts agreeing to the random assignment of collective bargaining rights or randomly laying off teachers. (2012, p. 221)

The development of a controlled study for a school board and superintendent relationship is nearly impossible to fathom, because the control group will have a potentially beneficial treatment withheld for the purposes of the study. The challenges to the validity and the clear value, and even irreplaceability, of qualitative study were subjects of intense consideration by venerable foundational researchers, such as James, Titchener, and Piaget (Giorgi, 2009).

My investigation into the conceptual framework for this study was very complex and conflicted. My first field of study and career was in engineering. Engineering is the epitome of empirical work in that it is a real-life manifestation of scientific theory. My second career, in the field of education, has included over a decade of school superintendent experience and two decades of education administration. My doctoral coursework energized my interest in research surrounding the school superintendency in northern New Mexico. This is an under-researched topic, despite the tremendous effects
that the superintendent can have on the success of educational systems (Waters & Marzano, 2006). My engineering background steered my initial inclinations toward the pursuit of a quantitative study. I soon realized that three factors would steer me away from a quantitative study. The first is that there are limited available data that could do more than provide basic correlations between the superintendency and other factors of school effectiveness. The second was the fact that pilot studies conducted during my doctoral coursework indicated that much of the critical data informing this topic would be obscured in a survey collection process, due to the fact that much of such critical data would not be revealed in a survey because it is more nuanced than what can be easily captured through Likert-type scales, nor would a survey participant be likely to invest in the work that it would take to explain the complexities of the issues through a survey. Lastly, in my experience, school superintendents and school board members operate under constant public scrutiny, public transparency, and a litigiously charged environment (Antonucci, 2012) and therefore I felt it was unlikely to reveal deep and complex aspects of the critical topic unless the data collection process is well-framed and investigated in a personalized process by a trusted researcher. These facts steered me toward a qualitative study. In considering the various conceptual frameworks and approaches, it soon became clear to me that a phenomenological framework would be the most appropriate to investigate the essence of the experiences of superintendents and board members. The greater complexity came in selecting the techniques that I would use to undertake the tasks of data collection and analysis. There are complex and
controversial philosophical aspects that underlie Phenomenology and some aspects of the operational mechanisms used for the approach (Georgi, 2009).

The framework for this study is based on phenomenological concepts. Although Phenomenology came into its own with the work of Husserl (Smith, 2018), there is much overlap with the philosophical work of foundational philosophers. According to Stanford University’s Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

When Hindu and Buddhist philosophers reflected on states of consciousness achieved in a variety of meditative states, they were practicing Phenomenology.

When Descartes, Hume, and Kant characterized states of perception, thought, and imagination, they were practicing Phenomenology. When Brentano classified varieties of mental phenomena (defined by the directedness of consciousness), he was practicing Phenomenology. When William James appraised kinds of mental activity in the stream of consciousness (including their embodiment and their dependence on habit), he too was practicing Phenomenology. And when recent analytic philosophers of mind have addressed issues of consciousness and intentionality, they have often been practicing Phenomenology. Still, the discipline of Phenomenology, its roots tracing back through the centuries, came to full flower in Husserl. (Smith, 2018, sec. 4)

Early interpretations of phenomenological concepts included fundamental ontological and epistemological conflicts and disparate perspectives, most notable is the divergence of transcendental concepts from hermeneutic concepts (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2021). Phenomenological approaches require the researcher to carefully
consider one’s own perceptions and prejudices as potential influences on the research; in Phenomenology, this is often called bracketing or Epoché (Giorgi, 2009). As a researcher with a background in engineering, where there is little consideration of ontologies and epistemologies that are based on anything but directly observable and measurable empirical variables, the consideration of alternative perspectives can be a truly disruptive experience. One example of this disruption is the debate over the ultimate validity of knowledge acquired through empirically observable or measurable phenomena versus the fact that all observed and measured phenomena are processed through an observer’s mental schema (Ananthaswamy, 2020). This consideration changed my perspective that formerly minimized the validity of qualitative research. Husserl (2017) directly attacked the complex structures of consciousness in terms of their relationships to real and irreal objects. Husserl’s proposed structure endeavored to develop a descriptive science of consciousness that treated pure consciousness as the foundation of investigation (2017). Husserl’s contentions go so far as to make the argument that the intention of the conscious activity can include traditionally real objects but also includes objects that are wholly in the mind – this approach, steps over all philosophical debate and contention over the objective versus subjective debate that often hinders other epistemologies (Husserl, 2017; Morley, 2010). Even modern physics has revived some of the ancient debates over reality and some metaphysical concepts. A fundamental concept of modern quantum physics has theorized and even measured the ambiguous nature of the photon, which behaves as both a wave and particle in the double-slit experiment (Thornton, 2013, p. 162). The wave function that is used to characterize the photon has a nature that defies
many concepts in classical physics. Modern physicists are bound by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (Thornton, 2013, p. 168), which defies the simultaneous measurement of location and momentum. This principle is a very close parallel to a concept applicable to human research, the Observer Effect, which has been demonstrated to show that seemingly passive measurement can influence experimental results (Ananthaswamy, 2020). In the double-slit experiment, the concrete empirical world and the metaphysical world of consciousness come crashing together.

If unknown effects exist in the measurement of seemingly unconscious physical particles, how much more uncertainty must be present in the qualitative study of the conscious and even sometimes actively diversionary human subject? Significant research has been conducted on the effects of subconscious beliefs and thought structures and the relationships between conscious and purposeful survey responses (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). Husserl (2017) devoted much of his effort to the investigation and classification that reconciled the natural sciences with conscious experience. All of this is stated to reinforce the need for the deep one-on-one nature of a phenomenological investigation of lived experience by research participants through a trusted researcher to gain a meaningful representation.

Speaking from my own experience, informed by interactions with hundreds of school board members and superintendents over the years, I have developed a deep understanding of the relationships between superintendents and school board members – especially in northern New Mexico. The superintendent-board relationship is a complex
and sometimes hidden relationship. The relationship is made up of a complex network of group and individual interactions with complicated dynamics in each.

According to NMSBA Executive Director, Joe Guillen (personal communication, February 23, 2022), private conversations between the board and superintendent are very important. Generally, the closer the relationship with individual board members, the better; however, there needs to be caution taken to keep parity in relationships with all board members. There is danger in getting too close to only some board members because it can cause disharmony on the board; this danger is especially present in the relationship between the superintendent and the board chair, since they often need to work more closely as they develop board agendas. Mr. Guillen also believes that it is important to take individual perspectives of board members into consideration, as it can help ensure that the superintendent is considering important community perspectives as they make critical decisions. According to Mr. Guillen, there is a good reason for five member boards because it can give a good cross section of perspectives from the community. Private conversations help avoid public conflict because disconnects can be sorted out or at least identified before a public conflict takes place in a public meeting. This process allows the board members and superintendent to know generally what to expect when entering a board meeting – there are no major surprises. Mr. Guillen also emphasizes that it is important that all board members get to express their perspectives even if the vote does not go their way; this can help maintain harmony on the board.

NMSSA Executive Director Rounds had thoughts regarding the superintendent–board relationship (personal communication, March 3, 2022). Mr. Rounds repeated a
sentiment that I have heard in many places: “New Mexico is a relational state.” The primary job of the superintendent is to establish a relationship not only with the board as a whole but also with each member individually. The ability to counsel boards in decision-making often comes in more informal relationships. These informal relationships often happen in meetings with each board member, individually, at least once per month. Often these meetings are over a meal or cup of coffee. Less formality allows for the expression of thoughts and not be so committal and public on what is said. An example given by Mr. Rounds was a situation where one board member felt that he was not in tune with the experience of minority Hispanic students in the district. A series of personal interactions allowed the board member to realize that despite surface appearances, Mr. Rounds had grown up in rural New Mexico and had many shared experiences with Hispanic students and appreciation for their educational experiences and that the two actually aligned nearly identically on their views of issues that were important to the board member in terms of student equities and staff equities – the two are good friends to this day.

Many of the relational interactions between superintendents and boards are driven by righteous motivations, best-intentioned – yet also sometimes misguided motivations, misinformed motivations, selfish motivations, and sometimes unethical motivations (Mayer, 2011). Adding to the complexity of this system is the fact that many of the variables that affect the superintendent-board relationship are difficult to quantify and even more difficult to measure with any hope of accuracy and validity. Efforts to measure these variables with a quantitative measure would face an enormous challenge to validity
since the measurement would be rooted in an interpretive selection of quantified scores by the superintendent and board member being studied. Superintendents and boards are individuals who operate in very a public political setting. Those who operate in a public political setting are forced to consider perceptions of competence and righteousness in every response that they give; therefore, collecting honestly scaled responses is especially complicated for public figures.

As previously mentioned, another complicating factor is the fact that many of the most consequential interactions take place in closed sessions of the board, as allowable by law, or during private conferences. These closed and private conferences are usually closed and private because they include topics that are not intended for public exposure. Gathering data from these interactions is likely unethical or even illegal and therefore would not be included in any legitimate data gathering process. Of course, it is required that an ultimate decision must be made in an open and publicly announced meeting through a vote of the board but much of the information that board members will use to determine their votes come from personal interactions with the superintendent and with their constituents.

According to NMSBA Executive Director, Guillen (personal communication, February 23, 2022), the board and superintendent need to recognize that some media outlets attending board meetings are often not looking to focus on anything but disagreement. According to Guillen, it is important to have disagreements in retreats or in private conversations and not in a more publicly attended meeting. Mr. Guillen recalls a fellow board member complaining when he was the chair of the board because Mr.
Guillen always wanted 5-0 votes but felt that he needed to demonstrate the will of his constituents when they opposed an action of the board. According to Mr. Guillen, there is much value in presenting a united front, to the extent possible.

Mr. Guillen went on to explain that identifying and publishing goals and objectives for the board and superintendent is critical because it gives the board something to refer constituents back to when a decision seems to conflict with their desires; according to Guillen, this is most important when trying to pass a bond election. Mr. Guillen also emphasizes that board meetings are a good time to set a positive tenor to meetings by focusing on things like praise for students and staff - letting people know about all of the good things happening in the district.

Speaking generally about the reasons for superintendent turnover, New Mexico School Superintendents Association, Executive Director Stan Rounds (personal communication; March 3, 2022) provided insights on superintendents leaving the position on their own. New Mexico saw a lot of this in 2021 when 37 superintendents were lost. Some got “gunned out of the saddle” but there were many who just did not want to deal with the overload. According to Mr. Rounds, in addition to the extra load during the pandemic, a lot of times it was because they did not find a way to fit in the local fabric. Additionally, the constant strains of budget, loss of local control, and social media contribute to the desire for some to want to leave. According to Mr. Rounds, much of this is getting worse and not better. Another challenge is the mechanism that some want to get into the superintendency to increase the average of the five highest salary years for retirement, as this is the way that their state pension is calculated. Some of these
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Superintendents have their hearts in the right place but are not going into it for the long haul, which naturally affects tenure length. No method could be found to confirm this motivation, but it is a logical conclusion, based on the rules of the system.

To avoid many of the pitfalls of the potentially litigious items mentioned above, I selected a phenomenological approach focused on the lived experiences of the research participant in relation to the common positively oriented phenomenon of a successful superintendent history. In this study, the unit of analysis is the phenomenon to be studied, which is the common experience of serving as a participating member in the superintendent-board relationship that accomplished a tenure of greater than seven years in a district in northern New Mexico. The focus on a positive outcome, instead of a negative outcome, also minimized the effects of limitations imposed by pending or potential litigation, which is very often associated with superintendent separation.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Based on recommendations from Vagle (2018), I carefully undertook the process of reviewing existing literature with consideration of efforts to maintain the phenomenological attitude. This approach is meant to “strike a balance between the customary research practice of conducting a literature review and not setting up an a priori explanation of what the phenomenon ‘is’ or ‘should be’ according to empirical explanations” (p. 79). A more intentional limitation of literature review, as proposed by some, is not considered practicable because of the requirement of those overseeing the research to validate the conduction of a study (Peoples, 2021).

Phenomenology is rooted in the bracketing of perceptions influenced by prior experiences to attain the phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2018). The greatest challenge I faced in this study was the bracketing of experience related to the subject being studied. Moustakas (1994) lays out in-depth instructions on how to implement the practice of Epoché, which is the process that allows for effective bracketing.

Superintendent Tenure

Superintendent tenure in the United States is famously notorious for its brevity. There is a saying that has been spoken to me on many occasions and makes the rounds in educational circles that, “Superintendents are the highest-paid migrant workers in the country,” although few would be willing to be the source of this quote. Data on superintendent tenure are sparse. The National Center for Educational Statistics distributed a School and Staffing Survey (SASS) from 1987 through 2011 and then
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redesigned SASS and named it the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS).
Neither of these surveys included school superintendents. The most recent and comprehensive national survey of superintendent tenure data was conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools (2014), Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary Eighth Survey and Report. In 2014, it was determined that the average tenure of current CGCS superintendents increased from 2.8 years in 2003 to 3.18 years (p. 2).

I could not find national school superintendent tenure data, specifically for rural superintendents in the United States. An analysis of Stat Books (2021) from the New Mexico Public Education Department indicates that the average tenure of superintendents in New Mexico is approximately 2.62 years (NMPED Stat Books, 2021). According to data in the Stat Books, the tenure average for superintendents in north-central New Mexico school districts is even lower at 2.22 years. EdWeek’s article on the superintendent turnover problem reports that about one quarter of superintendents turned over in each of the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years (Sawchuck, 2020).

Increased Complexity and Tension on Superintendents

A recent anthology of articles written by educational leaders on the topic of educational leadership is replete with the ever evolving and compounding implications of the major issues facing educational leaders; these include, accountability measures, state and federal bureaucracies, teacher shortages, equity in education, culturally responsive instruction, social media, remote learning, and school finance (English, 2015). The challenges are described by Bush, O’Brien, and Spangler:
The challenges facing school leaders have become increasingly abundant:
The standards movement, with its focus on measurable student outcomes and accountability, has resulted in societal demands for fundamental changes in the nature of schooling. Consequently, expectations for school leaders have changed significantly and school administrators, who previously were primarily expected to manage organizational processes and facilitate incremental change, are now being held accountable for student outcomes. They are expected to possess leadership skills to inspire, encourage, and empower individuals to perform at high levels of effectiveness and efficiency. (2005, p. 95)
The complexity of problems challenging school boards and superintendents are described by Fusarelli:
Several distinct issues [that] have served as lightning rods for school-community conflict, including an increasingly tough fiscal situation; proposed budget cuts; declining test scores; public mistrust; weak rapport between parents, district officials, and board members; high administrative turnover; and unpopular budget proposals, especially those from [the superintendent]. (Fusarelli, 2006, p. 46)

**Superintendent – Board of Education Role Conflict**

Even though New Mexico is still in the process of adjusting to HB 212’s changes to governance, conflicts over roles are not unique to New Mexico; other states are witnessing similar conflicts regarding roles. The problem is “that when both the board and superintendent share decision-making at the operational level, role confusion should not surprise anyone. Confused roles are an inevitable byproduct of such a process”
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(Dawson & Quinn, 2000, p. 12). In a battle involving role confusion, the board of education has ultimate authority; in many cases this leads to non-renewal of the superintendent or the superintendent choosing to leave a conflicted relationship.

A search for comprehensive national analysis of the role of school boards in personnel decisions yielded no results; however, there seem to be consistent references to the limited role of school boards in personnel decisions in many states – this is consistent with New Mexico’s shifting of authority over personnel to the Superintendent. The absence of the role of school boards in personnel decisions, other than for the superintendent, is evident in the list of key responsibilities of the school board identified by the National School Board Association; these key responsibilities are:

- Employing the superintendent.
- Developing and adopting policies, curriculum, and the budget.
- Overseeing facilities issues.
- Adopting collective bargaining agreements. (National School Board Association, n.d., para. 5)

This category of decision-making generally falls into the category of school boards determining the what, while superintendents determine the how (Freidman et al., 2021).

Antonucci (2012) studied the role of the superintendent in a qualitative study focusing on superintendent perceptions of their role. Study participants were current or recently retired superintendents in the New England area. Antonucci’s study yielded the identification of four key leadership roles served by superintendents: “1) superintendent
as CEO, 2) superintendent as politician, 3) superintendent as instructional leader, 4) superintendent as community leader” (p. 2). Antonucci also concluded that the job is “immensely complex and challenging” and “complete with conflict, public scrutiny, unreasonable expectations, complex relationships, and politics” (p. 3). The superintendents also expressed the fact that the job had taken both a personal and professional toll on them. Other findings included the fact that superintendents must possess a wide range of skills to be successful, including skills in curriculum and instruction, personnel management, communication, and relationship-building. There was also consensus from study participants that superintendents would benefit from better preparation including incorporation of more case studies, scenario-based instruction, and hands-on experiences.

Weiss (2016) studied challenges, conflicts, and effective practices of the superintendency but focused on superintendents in east Texas. Weiss’s findings were similar to those of Antonucci (2012) in terms of the general categories of importance for the superintendent. Weiss identified the fact that finances in a rural setting often overcast many other domains of the job; this is especially true in Texas, since in Texas school district funding is heavily influenced by the property wealth of the districts’ residents. In addition to school finances, other critical challenges were community relations, politics, and planning. Weiss also found that community relations and politics in rural communities are further complicated by the fact that sometimes public and private issues become school issues and affect decisions in the school.
There are many reasons that superintendents leave their positions; however, the literature indicates that there are clusters of issues that encourage turnover. Among 215 superintendents studied beginning in 2006, 45% exited within 3 years (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Factors such as how highly the school board rates its own functioning, the superintendent’s performance, and whether the superintendent was hired internally, strongly predict non-retirement exits three years later (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Interestingly, short-term district test score growth was found to be uncorrelated (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). This study indicates that hiring practices and superintendent-board relations are critical to affecting the problem of short superintendent tenure.

**Superintendent – Board of Education Relations**

Complicating superintendent-board relations even further is a transition of membership on the school board. Public schools in the United States are deeply rooted in the ideals of the country (Graham, 2005); this relationship is evident in the contentious nature of changes to curriculum relating to reflection on the state of the nation with regard to equity, including social studies curriculums and Critical Race Theory. Conflicts related to these issues have spiked extreme behaviors across the country (Villarreal, 2021). This conflict is clear and present in New Mexico, as the state works through the public input phase of adopting new social studies curriculum content standards (Cyr, 2021).

Based on the research, the challenges of these issues are very likely to lead to much transition in superintendencies and school boards. Such transitions in school boards are complicated because “most newly elected board members see themselves as change
agents. They promised improvements; now they feel obliged to deliver. And because they had no part in the selection of the superintendent, they may have no personal stake in the superintendent's success” (McAdams, 2009, p. 6).

Casey (2007), in a rare example of research on the superintendency in New Mexico, studied superintendent-board relations in a northern-New Mexico school district. Casey’s recommendations included the importance of board member training to include a focus on roles and responsibilities in addition to open communication and mediation principles. Casey (2007) also recommended that board members have access to more opportunities to learn about specific programs being offered in the schools.

In this literature review, I have found that much of the recent research and authorship around the school superintendency has focused on relations with the school board. Within this research and authorship are themes such as identification of roles and a focus on students.

Quesnel et al. (2021) identified seven critical categories of collaboration between superintendents and school boards. These categories are emphasized as being even more important during the stresses created in schools by the COVID-19 pandemic. The seven categories are: respect for all, clarified roles, responsibilities identified, practiced realism, exhibited resiliency, shared results, and reflection on practice.

Capullo (2021, p. 6) emphasizes the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the importance of fundamental elements of relationships between superintendent and school boards, recognizing that superintendents resigned in record numbers during the pandemic. The five fundamental elements identified are:
Community input – including administrators, teachers, students, parents, businesses, government agencies and residents – on the development of the district’s vision.

• Clearly defined responsibilities.

• Mutual respect.

• Flexibility and collaboration rather than authoritiveness.

• Prioritization of student achievement.

Cohn (2021) dissected the extraordinary pressure exerted on superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021. This pressure strained school board and superintendent relations in unprecedented ways. Often, superintendents would be placed between their boards and politically motivated directives from governors and state and federal health organizations. Once, a superintendent had an administrative court judge rule that he had broken the law when a school board voted to remain in a remote setting despite the state’s governor mandating that all schools open for live instruction at the beginning of the year. These stresses were more than many superintendents were willing to endure and a significant number of superintendents left their jobs during the pandemic.

The National School Board Association (Dervaries & O’Brien, 2019) has published a guidebook on effective school boards. The Association states that there are more than 90,000 elected school board members serving on 13,809 elected or appointed school boards in the United States (p. 1). The authors point out that despite the pivotal role of school boards in the nation’s educational framework, comparatively few research
studies are available on effective school boards. Despite the lack of volume, they contend that there is a body of work that supports a common set of practices for effective school boards. The authors define effectiveness as boards operating in high-achieving districts, particularly those that are making significant strides despite serving large numbers of disadvantaged students. Their work is primarily based on meta-analyses and case studies. The eight characteristics identified are:

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.

2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.

3. Effective school boards are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.

4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.

7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts. (p. 3)

Velez (2020) studied superintendent perceptions of board relations in a qualitative study. She interviewed 10 superintendents and developed a list of themes and sub-themes. The themes she identified were:

(a) Theme 1: Culture; Sub-theme 1: Trust and respect; Sub-theme 2: Shared vision; Sub-theme 3: Servant leadership, (b) Theme 2: Communication; Sub-theme 1: Informed; Sub-theme 2: Chain of command; Sub-theme 3: Open and transparent; Sub-theme 4: Good Steward of District Resources, (c) Theme 3: Team of Eight Training; Sub-theme 1: Develop an interpretive leadership; Sub-theme 2: Quality vs. Quantity. The key findings suggest that a successful relationship between the superintendent and the school board is based on understanding the culture, the need for open communication, and the importance of relationship-building training. (p. ii)

Bowers (2016) studied strategies for building trust in the mistrustful context of K-12 public education. Bowers highlighted the experience of two newly hired superintendents who inherited a damaged and contentious superintendent board
relationship from the prior superintendent. These two superintendents were able to cultivate improved board relationship as evidenced by displays of mutual respect and recognition of competence. The primary method for this improved relationship was a focus on finding balance between uniform treatment of board members as members of a unified board but also on the customized needs of each board member. Bower’s primary conclusion was that superintendent-board relationships are malleable and not static. With careful and deliberate intention, superintendents and board members can repair damaged relationships for better outcomes. Despite this optimistic finding, Bowers cautions that superintendents and boards that become too close can become insular or out of touch with their constituents. Bowers also presents the scholarly underpinnings of the importance of trust as a precondition for collaboration and reform in schools. Bowers notes that significant researchers in this field include Bryk (2002), Lenz (2006), Marsh (2007), and Tarter and Hoy (2004).

Another critical aspect of relations between the superintendent and board is the process of evaluation of the superintendent by the school board. This process is typically directly related to the tenure of the superintendent as it often, by definition, codifies the perception of the superintendent’s ability to meet the expectations of the board (Davidson et al., 2019).

**Trust**

An important factor in the navigation of the complex and tension-wrought power dynamic between superintendents, school boards, district faculty/staff, and community is the factor of trust (Bowers, 2016).
Bryk and Schneider (2004) investigate and promote the importance of trust in the success of academic organizations in *Trust in Schools*. Their work around trust as an organizational concept is rooted in the extensive research on social capital developed by Putnam (2000). Putnam meticulously analyzes data reflecting the drastic shifts in the relational fabric of the United States, mostly in the direction of loss. Bryk and Schneider point to examples of success in Catholic schools and investigated the differential success and lack of success in Chicago elementary schools after a major reform effort. Bryk and Schneider posit that schooling is an inherently social enterprise and that the intentional effort to develop and nurture trust must be at the heart of any school improvement effort, pointing to John Dewey’s observation that a good elementary school is more akin to a family than a factory (2004, p. 19).

Marsh (2012) focuses on the issues of trust and the historical context of school community connections. Marsh examines the school-community relations in two K-8 school districts in southern California. Marsh identified the need for deliberate strategies that exist within a framework of democratic joint work, which includes identifying purpose of meetings, identifying who will participate in meetings, how participants are engaged, negotiation of roles, mechanisms for making decisions, and decisions about the eventual actions that will be taken. Marsh also discusses the need to deal with the existing culture and entrenched bureaucracies of the school district and actively planning for the navigation of this culture and bureaucracy. Marsh concludes that the active pursuit of trust is a precondition for a high likelihood of successful school improvement efforts.
Issues of power dynamics, trust, and relationship are important at the level of interface between the school and community but are also critical internally within the school district. Tarter and Hoy (2004) use an open social systems model to conduct a quantitative investigation of four system elements in a school to determine their effect on two sets of school outcomes: student achievement and teachers' assessments of overall school effectiveness. The four system elements were structure, individual, culture, and politics. These investigations were rooted in work by Senge (1995), in his best-selling book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, and subsequent follow-up books about organizational systems. Tarter and Hoy present concrete recommendations as a result of this study:

1. What can administrators do to create more ES [Enabling Structures]?
   - empower teachers by involving them in decision-making in which they have expertise and a personal stake;
   - involve teachers in the creation of important rules and procedures; and
   - view all organizational procedures as merely guidelines to make professional judgments.

2. What can administrators do to develop high CE [Collective Efficacy]?
   - provide teachers with challenging tasks in which they can succeed, and support their efforts; and
   - provide teachers with professional development activities that demonstrate successful models of teaching and learning.

3. What can administrators do to develop a CT [Culture of Trust]?
4. What can administrators do to limit invidious politics?

- build a CT [Culture of Trust]; and
- treat all teachers fairly and justly – do not play favorites. (p. 55)

**Recommendations for Navigation of Challenging Environments**

White and Lineburg (2021) discussed the importance of school boards and superintendents working in concert on some of the most challenging situations facing school districts. The authors join the cacophony of voices on the unprecedented set of challenges facing schools in the last few years, including COVID-19, rights of non-binary and transgender athletes, and racial issues. The authors use an interesting analogy of the role of Cici from the Godfather Part II movie. Cici’s role was to serve as a buffer between the head of the family and the action on the ground. They propose that the superintendent should not alone be required to absorb political blowback, acting as a buffer to protect teachers, staff, and administrators from controversies that could disrupt their work. They contend that that job should fall on the entire district leadership team, including the school board. This challenge takes on many important steps in achieving this goal. Some of these steps require that superintendents and board members step outside of their comfort zones. For superintendents, this approach is especially challenging because the board has the power to hire, evaluate, and fire them. The superintendents know that if they antagonize, stir up controversies, or make unpopular decisions, their performance
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evaluation and their job security may suffer. Compounding this tension is the fact that the superintendent has specific training and experience running schools, while many school board members are lay people with limited understanding of the intricate details of the day-to-day functioning of school districts. Furthermore, many of them have full-time jobs that limit their ability to invest in learning about these intricacies. These facts often lead superintendents to feel that board members are unable to appreciate the real effects of policies and decisions on the ground. These facts often lead to superintendents hoarding information and responsibility, missing opportunities to develop allies. A better path requires trust. Due to the precarious nature of the superintendent’s position, the authors place the burden of the first steps in developing trust on school board members.

White and Lineburg (2021, pp. 67-68) present four concrete recommendations for navigating the challenges, the recommendations are summarized here:

1. Understanding the issues – board members must do the work of understanding the issues at hand by educating themselves deeply about the challenges facing the schools. If the superintendent recommends a course of action, it is not enough to understand the plan but they must understand why the superintendent has recommended the course of action. Understanding why will allow them to fully evaluate the pros and cons of different options. This understanding will then lead to the board member’s ability to help meet the shared expectations of public interface on the matter.

2. Centering on students - board members must appreciate the fact that despite their responsibility to the voters who elected them, they must balance that
responsibility with responsibility to ensure an equitable education to all children in their community. School board members must be ready to defend decisions that are challenged by constituents when they are not first considering the best interests of the students.

3. Developing common language for communication – because mixed messages often derail effective communication to stakeholders, board members must work hard to ensure that they are aligned with district communications on critical issues. An example strategy was to use a shared electronic online document to capture responses to challenges on a decision and to make sure that any inconsistencies were deliberately addressed.

4. Protecting the superintendent – just as the superintendent has a role of buffering school personnel from the challenges to their work, the school board members have a primary role of acting as a mediator between the superintendent and the community. The filling of this role allows the superintendent to maximize the time that they spend on the effective operation of the school district and minimize the time that they spend devoted to responding to criticisms from the community. By absorbing some of the criticism, they express their respect for the expertise of the superintendent and demonstrate that they are true partners in the governance of the district. They also take advantage of an opportunity to protect the community by absorbing any difficult communications that come from the superintendent’s office, figuring out how best to communicate it to the public, explaining the rationale for the superintendent’s actions, and
creating a health feedback loop between their constituents and the district office.

This tenuous nature of the superintendency with relation to school boards highlights the importance of courageous and ethically driven leadership when striving for school improvement (Cuilla & Garnier, 2018). The importance of this can also be witnessed in the work of popular author and lecturer, Simon Sinek (2017). Sinek has authored books such as *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (2017) and *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2009). In these books, Sinek pushes leaders to challenge their motivations and find ways to think altruistically about their special opportunity to serve their subordinates and reap the benefits of well-adjusted teams. Although servant leadership has ancient roots in many traditions of leadership, the term was popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970’s following the publication of his essay, *The Servant as Leader* (Mazzei, 2020). Ten characteristics of servant leadership are:

1. **Listening**—servant-leaders should listen closely to team members without interrupting them. They should also provide feedback after the team members have finished speaking.

2. **Empathy**—having an open mind and understanding the perspectives and needs of team members are vital characteristics of servant-leaders.

3. **Healing**—servant-leaders should strive to create environments that support the physical and mental health of team members by ensuring that they have the knowledge and tools necessary to work effectively.
4. Self-Awareness—servant-leaders should be able to reflect on their feelings and actions. This reflection forces servant-leaders to realize their strengths and weaknesses and to think about how their behavior affects others.

5. Persuasion—servant-leaders should try to use persuasion to get team members to take action and lend their support. However, this should not be done in a way that is harmful to working relationships.

6. Conceptualization—servant-leaders should strive to see the big picture and set goals that are high, which can include developing strategies for their teams.

7. Foresight—the ability to determine what might happen in the future is an important tool for servant-leaders. They can develop foresight by learning from the past, analyzing the present, and ascertaining the potential outcome of their decisions.

8. Stewardship—servant-leaders must be accountable for their teams, which includes taking responsibility for their team members' performances.

9. Commitment to the Growth of People—team members should be given the opportunity to grow both professionally and personally. Servant-leaders should be committed to ensuring this growth by providing team members with occasions to acquire new skills and helping them achieve their goals.

10. Building Community—a sense of community is important in any organization. Servant-leaders can build this community by encouraging
interaction among team members throughout the organization. (Mazzei, 2020, para. 7)

**Superintendent Evaluation**

The school board’s evaluation of a superintendent is one of the most critical aspects of the relationship between the superintendent and the board. Davidson et al. (2019) utilized an Internet-based survey of superintendents in a southwest state to investigate the perceptions of superintendents related to their evaluation by the school board. The state is comprised of 206 school districts that are categorized as:

- Common school districts, serving pre-K through eighth grade.
- Unified school districts, serving pre-K through twelfth grade.
- Union high school districts, serving grades nine through twelve.

From the 206 district superintendents invited to participate, 63 completed surveys were received. The results from the survey analysis indicated that the six most important factors in board evaluations of the superintendent include (Davidson et al., 2019, p. 225):

- management of the financial affairs of the district;
- maintaining the quality of the educational program;
- relationships with employees;
- developing and implementing long-term plans for the district;
- student performance, measured by state-mandated assessments;
- maintaining a safe environment for students.

In terms of the school board’s perceptions of superintendent competency, they are often affected by the board’s perceptions of the principals working under the
superintendent. It is more common for parents and board members to interact directly with principals than with central office staff as they navigate the educational experience of their own children within schools.

**Superintendent Evaluation of Principals**

Hvidston and McKim (2019) investigated the perceptions of the superintendent regarding the supervision and evaluations of principals. Researchers solicited participation from 48 superintendents in a rural mountain west state. All superintendents from the state were invited to participate. Out of the superintendents solicited, 23 agreed to participate. This mixed-method study included a survey instrument with 20 Likert-type scale items investigating perceptions of agreement with statements regarding supervision and evaluation. The statements were rooted in principles of effective supervision and evaluation of principals determined by a survey of existing research. The survey instrument also includes two open-ended questions that were analyzed through a coded system of analysis. Finally, the survey instrument collected demographic data. The findings concluded that superintendents agreed with all 20 of the items, indicating that their perceptions aligned with the authors’ determination of collective best-practices in supervision and evaluation. A difference noted between novice and experienced superintendents was that novice superintendents more often provided support to principals whose performance was unsatisfactory. Strengths noted were communication and relationships with principals. Recommendations for improvement included increasing the opportunity for more formative supervision opportunities by building trust and increasing coaching and mentorship.
Superintendent Tenure and Student Outcomes

Although extensive research connecting superintendent tenure to student outcomes is limited, there is evidence of its importance. One of the most notable studies (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 4) on the correlation of superintendent tenure and student achievement found:

Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement, McREL found two studies that looked specifically at the correlations between superintendent tenure and student achievement. The weighted average correlation in these two studies was a statistically significant .19, which suggests that length of superintendent tenure in a district positively correlates to student achievement. These positive effects appear to manifest themselves as early as two years into a superintendent’s tenure.

Despite the fact that Waters and Marzano’s (2006) work focused on urban and suburban schools, Forner et al. (2012) made clear and distinct connections to the Waters and Marzano leadership correlates in their study of rural schools. Of interest to this study, they discussed an effort to take advantage of the rural challenges and turn them into assets.

In addition to quantitative comparisons of tenure and student achievement are qualitative analyses of superintendent effects on student achievement. Kruse and Richards (2008) used the LBDQ—Form XII instruments to measure the perceptions of a leader’s ability to attend to people within the district environment, known as the
Consideration sub-scales, and his or her ability to attend to tasks within the district, known as the Initiating Structure sub-scales, determining:

The results indicate that the strongest conclusions from this study are that board members with a high level of experience may perceive their superintendents more positively than do those board members with a low level of board experience on the construct of Initiation of Structure … ANOVA results indicate that the real score significantly differs for years of experience (F(3, 169) = 3.545, p < .05). Results also indicate that board members perceive their superintendent more positively on the construct of consideration when a high level of superintendent experience exists. MANOVA results indicate that the main effect of experience (Pillai’s Trace = .059, F(6, 382) = 1.920, p < .10) had a significant effect on the dependent variables of ideal and real scores of consideration. (2008, p.12)

These results (Kruse & Richards, 2008) suggest useful, yet discouraging implications for the recruitment of inexperienced superintendents. It is unclear from Kruse and Richard’s (2008) research how much of the board members’ perceptions are caused by the board members’ presumptions about competence and how much is about objective evidence of competence. The expectation of “a healthy school board-superintendent relationship is more likely to exist when lengthy tenures of superintendents and board members are expected and encouraged, especially for school board presidents and superintendents” (Thompson, 2007, p. 121) is challenging for boards of education lacking this lengthy tenure.
Attitudes and Motives of Superintendents

Board members who are micromanaging district operations, in violation of HB 212, often create challenges to the relationship with the superintendent; however, the relationship can also be challenged by poor attitudes from superintendents. The presence of damage-control philosophy has been supported by empirical data (Eadie, 2007). The nature of poor attitudes on the part of superintendents is characterized as a “damage-control philosophy,” where “many superintendents see a large part of their CEO job as keeping their boards from meddling in matters they feel are best left to the professional educators and administrators” (Eadie, 2007, p. 46).

In a study investigating power and motive of school board members, Mountford (2004) determined that “the motivation continuum suggests that 11 of the 20 board members in this study were motivated to join the school board for altruistic reasons, and that 9 of the 20 board members in this study were motivated to join the school board for personal reasons” (p. 719). The small sample of twenty primary participants for this data analysis was supplemented by a total of 50 interviews. In addition, Site documents such as board meeting agendas, minutes, and newspaper clippings were used as corroborative evidence. Reciprocity with the participants was also practiced. In other words, participants were asked to give feedback on the researcher’s transcriptions, interpretations of the data, and emergent themes. (Mountford, 2004, pp. 712-713)

In another study identifying challenges in relationships and roles, Parker (1996, pp. 76-77) investigated superintendent vulnerability and mobility and the study’s
conclusions cited the difficulty of superintendents who must deal with school boards “who wished to be able to hire and fire, choose Coke vendors, and rule on which students could graduate.”

**Job Satisfaction**

It may be assumed by some that superintendents only leave their positions when a school board chooses not to rehire them – this is an inaccurate assertion. Some superintendents leave their positions when they are dissatisfied with their job (Grissom, 2012). Some of these superintendents leave to retirement, some leave to other superintendent positions, and some leave for more personally desirable jobs in a different role. Insights on general trends in employee satisfaction presumed that even if there is a difference between employee “satisfaction” and employee “preference,” that the two constructs are very tightly correlated (Booker et al., 2014) such that employees are highly motivated to be mobile if they are dissatisfied with relationships with their supervisors.

Employee satisfaction can be an elusive target for leaders of organizations, and it should be a concern for conscientious school board members. Factors influencing these issues are becoming evident in the movement that is being called the Great Resignation (Cook, 2021). The Harvard Business Review points to the many factors associated with employee satisfaction (Cook, 2021) and these satisfaction issues will likely be amplified for school leaders facing the unprecedented challenges of the global pandemic. More recent analyses of the Great Resignation question some of the initial assumptions but remain focused on the complexity of motivations for shifts in the workforce (Weinstein & Hirsch, 2022) A national study of over 3,000 executive directors of non-profit
organizations investigated executive satisfaction and concluded that boards remain unprepared to support executives in their desire for employee satisfaction (Cornelius et al., 2011). There are many reasons that school board members would pursue superintendent satisfaction; these reasons range from purely ethical reasons to purely results-driven reasons. Most leaders would likely fall somewhere within the spectrum, with some balance of altruistic and selfish motivations. These concepts related to the effects of a manager’s perceptions of employee motivations are expounded upon in a foundational leadership theory known as Theory X and Theory Y, which are well developed in a seminal body of work largely attributed to McGregor (2008).

In an educational setting, the importance of employee satisfaction may be even more critical than in many other settings. If a dissatisfied employee can stamp one thousand widgets per day, while a satisfied employee does the same, then employee satisfaction may be more negligible to the bottom line and therefore may be less critical to leadership. In an educational setting, dissatisfied employees will almost certainly have manifestations of their dissatisfaction affect interactions with students – these principles are clearly tied back to the foundational theories of hierarchies of need developed by Maslow (David, 2014). A recent study conducted by EdWeek concluded that only nine percent of teachers surveyed never or rarely feel stressed and that forty-one percent of teachers said they feel like they are less effective at their job when they are stressed (Will, 2021). These negative interactions will almost certainly interrupt the foundational securities necessary for student success – for this reason alone, educational leaders must be concerned with employee satisfaction.
Increasing superintendent compensation can be a significant factor for superintendent retention and “may be especially important in smaller and rural districts and districts with lower student achievement whose superintendents are more likely to move to higher paying positions in larger, higher performing districts in more urban areas” (Grissom & Mitani, 2016, p. 352).

There may, however, be an increasing trend away from the power of compensation. A common assumption is that compensation is the most potent factor affecting employee satisfaction; however, investigations (Booker et al., 2014) have found a greater effect known as “softer” factors. A rank-ordered list of softer factors includes:

1. appreciation for your work;
2. good relationships with colleagues;
3. good work-life balance;
4. good relationship with superiors;
5. company’s financial stability;
6. learning and career development;
7. job security;
8. attractive fixed salary;
9. interesting job content;
10. company values. (Booker et al., 2014, p. 16)

Educational institutions seem to be perpetually fighting the battle of adequate funding for employee compensation (Pollard, 2021) – the elimination of this obstacle does not seem imminent. Nevertheless, school systems can create targets for organizational changes that will improve employee satisfaction through features other than compensation. While schools fight for the funding that will allow for appropriate compensation for educational employees, we can focus on some of these other factors that significantly affect employee satisfaction. There is no reason to exclude the superintendency from these considerations.
Impossible Job?

Big-city public school superintendents, and police commissioners for that matter, may have jobs that are impossible to perform successfully. Martano and Wolf (2012) explored this idea in a case study of two high-profile leaders who led major efforts to make dramatic changes in their respective organizations, New York City Police Commissioner, William Bratton and District of Columbia Public Schools Chancellor, Michelle Rhee. This study responds to arguments (Hargrove & Glidewell, 1990) that public agencies with limited legitimacy, high conflict, low professional authority, and weak agency myths have essentially impossible jobs. At the same time, unique examples of success in these jobs have proven the jobs to be operationally possible (Martano & Wolf, 2012). The very complex task of measuring the success of a leader can be undertaken by considering both straightforward effects on the organization’s outputs and on the greater consideration of reproducibility. In this case (Martano & Wolf, 2012), both of the leaders were ultimately fired from their leadership roles at their respective organizations. This led Martano and Wolf (2012) to posit four hypotheses for further investigation:

1. Over time the increasing penetration of data driven management into organizational culture will make large-scale, long-lasting agency reform more tenable.

2. Because the public has only a certain tolerance for the kinds of disruptive strategies that are necessary to substantially improve public outcomes in controversial policy areas such as education and crime control, aggressive
reforms and reformers will tend to appear in times and places where outcomes are completely unacceptable and be dismissed or moderated once outcomes reach a merely acceptable level.

3. Organizational innovations in public management will diffuse more through entrepreneurs and their deputies transferring to new places than through adoption by other leaders.

4. Organizational innovations in public management occur more readily when entrepreneurs control agency personnel policy. (pp. 237 – 238)

The topic of leadership success is so complex that there are no definite conclusions that a unified theory will predict the likelihood of a successful outcome; however, if a specific set of rare preconditions exist, then an impossible job may become possible (Martano & Wolf, 2012). The preconditions include:

- Support from a powerful mayor and other political actors; public and media recognition that the status quo is unacceptable; unusual power over personnel policy in the organization; substantial talent already within the organization or the chance to recruit it; usable and timely data systems (or the ability to develop them); capable bureaucratic entrepreneur with a coherent vision for improvement.

(p. 238)

These preconditions could be useful considerations in school board and prospective superintendent considerations when filling vacancies, despite the fact that these preconditions rarely coexist when a vacancy develops. Along with the discussion of impossible or near impossible challenges for superintendents, additional or replacement
complications can be considered for rural school superintendents. Despite the challenges of recruiting and retaining high quality leaders to rural school districts, rural school districts outperform urban school districts in educating students experiencing poverty and “in most instances they can generate better results than a student’s SES status would predict” (Surface & Theobald, 2014, p. 577). This conclusion challenges many preconceptions about rural schools and the migration of quality leadership from rural to urban settings.

**Dissatisfaction Theory**

Another body of research that is related to superintendent turnover is connected to Dissatisfaction Theory (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). According to this theory, superintendent positions are necessarily affected by the political winds of a community. As the political climate shifts, community members become dissatisfied with the efforts of the school district, then an incumbent school board member is displaced, the new school board member builds a coalition and eventually the board of education replaces the superintendent. The mechanisms of dissatisfaction theory give the superintendent the ability to delay, but not eliminate, the eventuality of leaving his position through masterful orchestration of community and board relations (Perry, 2008).

The factors influencing superintendent turnover are varied and complex, as are the tangible and quantifiable estimates of correlation, causality, and estimation of superintendent tenure on student achievement. Leading a school district through the “alchemy” of superintendent leadership (Bird, 2010, p. 46) is as an appropriate
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description as any, I believe, when it comes to the identification of practices with predictable outcomes in relation to superintendent and board relations.

**Contribution to Body of Research**

Through this literature review, I did not identify any examples of research related to superintendent turnover in New Mexico. I conducted this research to help inform superintendents and school board members about strategies that have proven successful in supporting a long-term superintendency in the state of New Mexico. After analyzing the data, I was able to identify consistencies with and parallels to research from other states.

One national study summarized the elements of a successful superintendent-board relationship as being accomplished through continuous training, involvement of community stakeholders, a commitment to self-assessment of goals and standards, and a strong focus on learning (Weiss et al., 2015). The study I conducted helped flesh out the particulars of the recommendations from Weiss et al. (2015) in New Mexico. New Mexico is undeniably different from other settings. These differences are due to manifestations of complex historical events, co-existing and conflicting cultural views, exceedingly poor student performance on standardized measures, low socio-economic conditions, and multiple gubernatorial terms of aggressive education reform policies that fundamentally changed the framework of public education administration. Through this study, I have extended existing research by identifying a set of common themes experienced by a set of superintendents and school board members who were able to overcome the tremendous challenge of hiring and keeping a superintendent for an
extended tenure within the unique context of New Mexico’s public education environment, during a time when extraordinary stresses have been placed on the system by shifting budgets, major reform initiatives, and extreme partisanship. This study has both fill gaps in existing research and provided new research recommendations for a state with minimal educational research on this topic.
Chapter 3 – Research Design

Through the investigation of existing research practices in the area of qualitative research, Phenomenology is generally classified as one of five of the most fundamental approaches (Creswell, 2014).

During the process of investigating specific methodologies to be used within the Phenomenological approach, I reached a key decision point: Husserl or Heidegger (Peoples, 2021). The Phenomenological movement is a branch of philosophy and research that is generally considered to have its roots in the work of German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl, in the early twentieth century (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2014). It was through Husserl’s work that the concepts were first used in a significant way to frame the investigation of human experiences for applicable purposes – beyond abstract conceptualizations (van Kaam, 1969). Husserl’s work displayed evolution from early writings to late writings and then went on to undergo tremendous interpretation and re-creation in future work by other famous philosophers (Giorgi, 2009). Husserl’s flavor of Phenomenology is typically categorized as Transcendental Phenomenology. Foremost among those who transformed Husserl’s phenomenological concepts was Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger developed the Hermeneutic approach to Phenomenology that is ubiquitous today (Peoples, 2021). The most significant departure that Heidegger made from Husserl’s work came in the presumptions related to the ability for a researcher to bracket his preconceptions away (Peoples, 2021). Not only did Heidegger believe that the bracketing away of preconceptions was impossible, but he was also convinced that the
experiences and knowledge of the researcher provided immense enhancement of the analysis of lived experience (Peoples, 2021). Another famous philosopher who transformed phenomenological concepts was Jean Paul Sartre (Georgi, 2006). Sartre’s interpretations and utilizations of phenomenological concepts were, perhaps, most relatable by those who were not academic philosophers (Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenological concepts were soon adopted into qualitative research methodologies (Giorgi, 2009).

The most intriguing aspect of the transcendental phenomenological approach to a qualitative researcher is the idea that the researcher does not attempt to create a predictive model as part of the research process (Moustakas, 1994). In fact, the researcher is encouraged to “bracket” potential influences from his or her own experiences to prevent contamination during the pursuit of pure experiences as perceived through the subject’s own consciousness, which is made up of billions of past experiences and the subject’s own contextual landscape. Considering the complexity of the contextual landscape that makes up the decision-making schema of a school board member in a north-central New Mexico school district, I believe that it would be utterly impossible to try to identify the effects of the countless elements and variables within the contextual landscape that affect the relationship between a superintendent and school board members in order to create a model. A phenomenological approach to the problem allows for the capture of the subject’s own personal experiences that have already been filtered by their own consciousness and analyzed for common distilled themes among participants (Moustakas, 1994). My hope is that these themes have created a collection of valuable commonalities
that can be considered by superintendents and school boards that are striving to improve the amount of time a superintendent serves in that role in a particular district.

As mentioned above, early investigations into the Phenomenological approach to qualitative research yielded two primary possibilities in terms of more specific implementations. Within Phenomenological research there are two major camps; the first is the Husserlian descriptive or transcendental camp and the second is the Heideggerian Interpretive or Hermeneutic camp (Peoples, 2021). The eponymous Husserlian descriptive camp has deep roots in the work of Husserl. Husserl painstakingly developed his structure of *Epoché*, in which the researcher strives to set aside preconceptions and presumptions about the research. Methods used to accomplish this task include bracketing and bridling (Dahlberg et al., 2008). This can be done by explicitly writing out preconceptions to identify them. It can also be accomplished through the intentional minimization of influence of prior research about the expected outcomes of the research – this technique is extremely counter intuitive for most researchers, since a foundational aspect of most research is to spend a great deal of time investigating prior research conclusions to help inform the researcher in areas that should be starting points for their own research. The underlying premise in this strategy is that the minimization of base content knowledge about the outcomes of the research will help improve the likelihood of unbiased outcomes (Dahlberg et al., 2008):

It is to the researcher’s advantage to be acquainted…with published research reports and other types of literature. However…it can even be advisable not to read too much… existing literature on the very phenomenon. Knowing…much
about “how it is” can make it hard to “bridle” enough to enable the research to see something new. (p.174)

This statement captures the contradiction between typical literature review processes and those of the Phenomenological process.

As the name implies, the Heideggerian Interpretive camp is rooted in work primarily associated with Martin Heidegger (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger departed from Husserl by underplaying the ability of a researcher to integrate and consider their preconceptions (Peoples, 2021). Although Heidegger’s work was deeply infused with Husserl’s work, his extension of Phenomenology included an acceptance that a researcher cannot eliminate the effects of their own histories and understandings (Peoples, 2021).

The disparate ideas on the effects of preconceptions have extended histories in philosophy. From the earliest beginnings of western philosophy, the Greeks contemplated the nature of being human. This contemplation included the interaction of humans with their environment. Early models of being human included a separation of the mind/soul and body. Plato believed in a mind/body dualism. The separation allowed for theories related to truths that can exist solely in the mind and those that require interaction through the senses. A milestone in the development of dualism was René Descartes’ Mind-Body Dualism (Moustakas, 1996). Descartes’ theories were fundamental in the next phase of evolution in western philosophy (Moustakas, 1996). The debate over mind-only or mind-body interactions became the root of many philosophical debates over the next four hundred years (Husserl, 2017; Moustakas, 1996). Many of these debates are over what can be known through pure thought and what is known because it is a priori, a
term used to describe a truth that needs no empirical evidence or experience to be proven (Russell, 2020). Kant also believed that all experiences were processed through structures in our minds (Rholf, 2020). This theory helped bridge the conflict between empiricism, which believes that all knowledge must be tested through experience and rationalism and that all truths must be validated through reason (Rholf, 2020). The conflicts between empiricists and rationalists were bridged, somewhat, by Kant’s theories (Rholf, 2020). Interestingly, many of these concepts are being revived by recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (Halpern, 2021). Artificial intelligence brings back into question what is the nature of consciousness and morality (Halpern, 2021).

I was surprised to learn that the debate between Husserlian views and Heideggerian views are very much alive and well in today’s philosophical circles. According to a personal communication with international expert in Husserlian philosophy, Claire Ortiz-Hill, the debate is still a major conflict:

There is presently a problem in Husserl-Heidegger scholarship. It has its roots in the fact that Heidegger was a very popular, dynamic professor and had several disciples during the 1920s, when Husserl was at the end of his teaching career. After WWII it was mainly Heideggerians who passed on the legacy of Phenomenology, with a distorted idea of Husserl's teachings. Husserl is still seen almost exclusively as the father of the science of subjectivity. Heidegger was Husserl's student but did not like him. Heidegger was an atheist, ex- and anti-Catholic unrepentant Nazi and Husserl was a convert from Judaism. It was Heidegger who put Husserl out to pasture when the anti-Jewish laws went into
effect. The sense of my work is to show that Husserl had a well-developed, very lucid, science of objectivity…philosophers nowadays say that they study Heidegger because he had an objective metaphysics, while Husserl was wallowing in subjectivity. If that were the case, I would definitely not be a Husserlian, but I would not be a Heideggerian either…I think that Husserl's ideas are valuable for education. It is important to bracket out preconceptions and take things as they present themselves as a starting point. However, I do not believe that presuppositionless knowledge can exist. Husserl had a safety net for that. (C. Ortiz-Hill, personal communication, April 4, 2018)

Over eighty years have passed since the divergence of Husserl and Heidegger, yet very fundamental conflicts between their conclusions remain in philosophical circles and these conflicts branch into qualitative research methodologies. Although sound arguments can be made for either approach, after careful consideration of the potential options, I chose to utilize a Husserlian Descriptive approach to this study. The primary motivations for this were found in the foundations of Husserl presented by Georgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994), including what I consider the most essential foundations of Phenomenology created by Husserl. The foundational concepts developed by Husserl were expanded and further developed by many researchers, but perhaps the most coherent advancement of the Husserlian Descriptive approach came from Giorgi (2009). Husserl’s and Georgi’s methods are further synthesized by Vagle (2018). I carefully reviewed the perspectives on phenomenological research, and I was greatly influenced by these approaches in crafting this research design.
After reading presentations of Phenomenological methodologies, I was most motivated by the methodology presented by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas created an extremely well developed and succinct synthesis of work from other phenomenological researchers and Husserl’s original works. Ultimately, I used the precisely described methodologies presented by Moustakas’ (1994), which include questioning techniques.

**General Approach**

I conducted this study using a phenomenological research approach, which comes “from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon…this description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).

**Study Site and Recruitment**

The study site for this research was a school district in northern New Mexico. In order to maintain the anonymity of this district, I will refer to it as the Norteño School District. Norteño School District’s Central Office is located in a small unincorporated town within the district. For the purposes of this study, the town will be called Vista Azul, New Mexico. I invited the one sitting superintendent, the one past superintendent, and two sitting and two past school board members to participate in the study. All six invited participants ultimately participated. The board members participating were randomly selected from all sitting and past board members. The two superintendents served the same school district for the entire 24-year study period. I selected this site due to its anomalous history of long superintendent tenure in northern-New Mexico.
The participants were invited to participate through a phone call, which included an overview of the study. Once the participant verbally agreed to participate, they received a written invitation to participate including an Interview Consent Form (Appendix C) and notification of the University of New Mexico’s Institutional Review Board’s approval (Appendix D), the questions that I posed to them during the live interview, and an informed consent form including a description of the study.

**Data Collection**

Preparatory work, including preparing for interviews, in phenomenological research takes place through a process called Epoché. Epoché is the first step in coming to “know things, in being inclined toward seeing things as they appear, in returning to things themselves, free of prejudgments and preconceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). I used Moustakas’ process to prepare for the interviews and also monitored myself as an interviewer.

Prior to starting the interviews, I reviewed the purpose for the study and asked if the participants had any questions.

I made use of very limited note taking to ensure that I flagged particularly important descriptions. The note taking was limited to allow me to convey full engagement with the research participant. All the semi-structured interviews took place via the Zoom platform and I recorded the interviews using Zoom’s audio recording capabilities. Each of the interviews lasted approximately one hour or less. Once recorded, rough drafts of the interviews were transcribed using Zoom’s transcription function. I then refined and corrected the transcripts manually.
Prior to the commencement of the interview, I engaged in the process of Epoché, as described by Moustakas, “so that, to a significant degree, past associations, understandings, ‘facts,’ biases, are set aside and do not color or direct the interview” (1994, p. 116). This process is described by Husserl as taking on the phenomenological attitude (Husserl, 2017).

The interview protocol includes a list of primary questions and follow-up prompts if the interviewee’s response “has not tapped into the experience qualitatively and with sufficient meaning and depth” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). I also let the interviewee know that they would have the opportunity to review their transcribed responses to provide any clarification that they felt was necessary.

The interview questions are open-ended and are based on the research question and sub-questions. The questions were formulated based on my own experiences and the literature review. The superintendents and board members received the same questions. The questions are included in Appendix B.

Once the interviews were complete and transcribed, I sent the interviewees copies of the transcriptions of their own interview via email and I asked participants to provide any appropriate clarification on the transcripts. None of the interviewees chose to add clarification.

**Method of Analysis**

The method of analysis very closely followed a process developed by Moustakas (1994). I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzii-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122):
1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of the research participant’s experience of the phenomenon.

2. From the verbatim transcript of the research participant’s experience, complete the following steps:
   a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
   b. Record all relevant statements.
   c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
   d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
   e. Synthesize the invariant unit meanings and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
   f. Reflect on the research participant’s textural description. Through Imaginative Variation, construct a description of the structure of the research participant’s experience.
   g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the research participant’s experience.

3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the research participants, complete steps a through g.

4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all research participants’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all
individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole.

When describing the process of Imaginative Variation, the aim is to arrive at the structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the ‘how’ that speaks to conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience. How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is? (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98)

The steps of Imaginative Variation include:

1. Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings;

2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;

3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;

4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99)

Limitations

There are four primary limitations to this study. These limitations somewhat inhibited the reach of this study. Negative experiences of sitting board members and superintendents are critical to the development of current theory; these limitations were
primarily addressed through solid commitments to confidentiality, masking, and redaction of data reported in the written report.

The first limitation was the concern of confidentiality for sitting superintendents and board members who are in the midst of developing superintendent-board relations. This limitation may have dampened the full disclosure of participants. The second limitation was the constraint on superintendents and board members who were concerned about the legal implications of responses. Again, this limitation may have dampened the full disclosure of participants. The third limitation was simply a matter of memory. Since it had been several years since some of the participants dealt with situations of interest, there may have been many details that were unclear in the participants’ memories. A fourth limitation, which is not particular to this study, is typically considered in a phenomenological approach – namely, the biases of the researcher. Utilizing a common phenomenological approach, I addressed my biases through *Epoché*/bracketing.

**Positionality**

In order to pursue the ideals of *Epoché*, I am including a review of my own experiences as the researcher for the purpose of allowing the reader to consider potential biases in the research.

I have spent more than ten years as a superintendent in northern New Mexico school districts. During this time, I worked with more than twenty-five distinct school board members. Although there were tumultuous times, I never had my contract terminated. During this time, the most difficult school board members were those who had narrow constituent bases that influenced their decisions. These narrow constituent
bases limited the board member’s ability to see individual decisions as inter-related pieces of a complex system.

A constant struggle for me was the goal of finding appropriate pace of change and identification of systems that were not optimal yet did not significantly undermine the district as a major system and therefore did not warrant high levels of resource re-distribution.

During my time as a superintendent of schools, I was also interconnected with other superintendents through organizational membership, representation on statewide committees, and friendships. These interconnections further allowed me to gain insight and develop conceptions of healthy and unhealthy operations by school board members and superintendents.

For five years, I served in a statewide project to support school principals in their efforts to improve low-performing schools. My role was to serve as a conduit for communication between the Public Education Department, principal mentors, and Superintendents. During this time, I interfaced with ten other school districts and their superintendents.

For three years, I served as a regional representative on the New Mexico Activities Association Board of Directors. In this role, I represented 19 school districts and interfaced with their superintendents on a regular basis.

For five years, in two stints, I have served on the Executive Committee for the New Mexico School Superintendents Association (NMSSA). This committee is a group of veteran superintendents who provide direction and decision-making for the
association. In 2018, I was elected as the Secretary and president-elect of the NMSSA but was recruited to serve as the Deputy Cabinet Secretary of Education at the New Mexico Public Education Department before fulfilling the seat.

For approximately 3 years, I served as the Deputy Cabinet Secretary of Education for the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED). While at the NMPED, I oversaw all financial aspects of public schools in New Mexico and the internal operations of the NMPED.

For approximately four years, in two stints, I served as the Executive Director of the Northwest Regional Education Cooperative (NWREC). While in this role, I reported to a council of eight northern New Mexico superintendents. This experience gave me a great deal of insight into the contexts in other districts. During this time, I also provided training to many school superintendents and school boards, throughout the state.

After a 25-year career in education, I recently retired from state employment and have started my own educational consultation business.
Throughout the data analysis process, I revisited the fundamental practice of valid Phenomenological investigation by returning to the principles of *Epoché*. These principles are described succinctly by Moustakas: “In the *Epoché*, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things. We ‘invalidate,’ ‘inhibit,’ and ‘disqualify’ all commitments concerning previous knowledge and experience” (1994, p. 85). This practice assisted me in minimizing the imposition of my own experiences on the descriptions of experiences presented by the participants.

The process of *Epoché* also known as *bracketing* can be a mysterious and challenging undertaking (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). My process included a time set aside to concentrate on the ultimate goal of removing past experiences and preconceptions from the interview and analysis process. During this time, I reflected on my own experiences and preconceptions related to the topics to be included in the interview and analysis and then explicitly worked to clear those experiences and preconceptions from my thoughts. Then during the interview and analysis, I paid special attention to focusing on the experiences and recollections of the participants without letting my own experiences distract me from the descriptions being presented by the participant. One idea helped my focus on the experiences of the participants, this was to explicitly decide that if a participant experience was worthy of being presented by a participant, then that experience was placed at an equal value with other experiences and could not be devalued by my own experiences or preconceptions. This idea is closely related to the process of *horizontalization* (Moustakas, 1994).
To maintain participant anonymity to the greatest extent possible, I limit the description of the participants and use pseudonyms. With this in mind, the participants included the two individuals who served as superintendents during the study period of 1997 to 2021. The randomly selected school board participants included one female and three males, which generally reflected the gender distribution in the pool of potential participants. As intended in the study design, two of the board members are currently serving board members and two of them are former board members. It is worth noting that both superintendents and all but one of the school board members were born and raised in the communities served by the Norteño School District.

This chapter is very intentionally structured to honor the careful avoidance of bias rooted in the conceptual framework of Husserlian phenomenological investigation and also the methodical nature of the analysis method selected. Based on this intention, the results are presented in a manner akin to a distillation process. In this process, isolated constituent invariant meaning units from each participant are presented with minimal interpretation or ordering, next the invariant meaning units are organized into themes with minimal interpretation, and ultimately the meaning units are synthesized into a crafted narrative composite, textural-structural description of participants’ experiences. This presentation moves from a somewhat abrupt format to a more fluid format in the composite narrative. For those interested in the details of the bulleted composite themes, they can be found in Appendix D. This structure also reflects my technical background in engineering and finance.
Following Moustakas’s modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), I analyzed the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the research participants through the following steps of the method. I recorded the results of the analysis steps on a spreadsheet table. A sample table is included in Appendix E. The first column of the table captured each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement – these are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience. The second column of the table captured the clustered invariant meaning unit themes. The third column of the table captured the synthesized invariant unit meanings and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. The fourth column of the table captured verbatim quotes of examples. The fifth column of the table captured my reflection on the research participant’s textural description to construct a description of the structure of the research participant’s experience. The sixth column of the table captured the textural-structural description of the meanings and essences I created to describe the essence of the research participant’s experience.

For example, here are the contents of one row of the table:

1. Invariant Horizon / Meaning Unit: Board members conflicted but did not leave a meeting without a positive interaction.

2. Theme: Conflict Management

3. Textural Description: Board members maintained positive relationships after conflict.

4. Verbatim Quote: “the first 5 years I was on the board was a very good board. We may argue in a meeting, we may argue about the way things are going at
the school, or what our priorities were, how to build the new high school or whatever. But I never saw nobody leave a meeting without [multiple inaudible words]. But I never saw the Board members themselves ever leave a meeting without saying good night, shake hands, hey have a good one. Nobody … you could … you could really get into a heated debate, but I never once remember leaving a meeting feeling slighted by a board member.”

5. Structural Description: Board members would not depart without positive interaction.

6. Constructed Textural-Structural Description of the Experience: Even after heated debate at a board meeting, board members would not depart without a positive interaction like saying good night, shaking hands, or saying have a good one.

I repeated this process for each of the Invariant Horizon / Meaning Units identified in the interview transcript. Once I created the individual textural-structural descriptions of the experience, I created an overall textural-structural description of each of the experiences of participants. These overall descriptions are presented below. The descriptions are categorized by theme and the themes are listed in alphabetical order, which honors the effort to avoid the researcher’s own biases by granting each statement equal value – as Moustakas states, “this example of horizontalization illustrates the importance of being receptive to every statement of the co-researcher’s experience, granting each comment equal value” (1994, p. 122). Relevant verbatim quotes from the interview are also included.
Participant Baca

Participant Baca is a veteran superintendent with strong ties to the community. Baca projects a resolute disposition and is confident in his perspectives on school leadership. Baca has ascended to key leadership roles in the state and has become a frequent advisor of those seeking the perspectives of school leaders.

Communication

By using multiple communication methods, text, phone, and email, the superintendent makes sure that the board is aware of situations that may elicit inquiries from the community. This gives the board confidence in the decisions and helps build trust between the board and the community.

Conflict Management

Through reciprocal approachability, conflicts due to misunderstanding were resolved. Through private communication, superintendent and school board members would resolve conflicts without making them a public display. Baca stated:

…and we're able to kind of just kind of figure it out amongst ourselves. We never went public with any types of … of disagreements, I mean we. We had some disagreements, of course we … we’d share them with each other, but we … we do it very professionally at the right place at the right time.

Through early and active mediation, the superintendent prevented conflict between board members. Through a refocus on the primary motive of supporting students, conflict could be depersonalized.
**Contract Term**

By offering a two-year contract instead of one or three years, the school board demonstrates confidence but also caution in the new superintendent. By extending the superintendent's contract every subsequent year the board demonstrates confidence and support. By offering the superintendent perpetually renewed three-year contracts, the school board instills a sense of responsibility for long-term outcomes. Baca stated:

> They had to make a decision today, that they're going to be accountable for two or three years down the road, and they’ve got to be really good, well thought decisions. It's real easy to for a superintendent to just put a band-aid on something. You’re only going to be here for a year and let somebody else figure out the … the repercussions on down the line.

**Distractors Minimize Board Conflict**

Baca feels that the presence of the county seat in the local community draws conflict away from the school by giving other avenues for venting of frustrations.

**Evaluation and Goal Setting**

Baca feels that through an open-minded approach, the superintendent kept the evaluation process a positive experience. The evaluation process includes the development of goals with timelines and review of the attainment of the goals during evaluation, the evaluation process was positive and productive. By reflecting and revising goals throughout the year, the superintendent and board ensured that goals were relevant and appropriate. Baca stated:
…that evaluation takes place throughout the year. I mean it's just like we can have a board meeting and talk about something … one of my goals, or something like that. Or maybe the … the board will say, well, you know, maybe this is a goal that we … we don't need to focus on. And … and rather than just list it as a goal that we didn't accomplish we remove it and refocus on something else.

By developing and evaluating goals for themselves, the school board demonstrated shared responsibility. Baca stated: “One thing that this board has been really good about is being able to identify goals that they're responsible for.”

**Motives**

Through the focus on the common goal of serving students, conflict could be mediated.

**Relationship Development**

Through deep understanding of board member perspectives and personalities the superintendent mediated conflicts.

Through a sense of interdependence in a rural agrarian community, a common motive and goal allows for greater collaboration and cooperation. Baca stated:

… it's a very unique community with a … with a unique population. You've got a lot of ranching and farming communities over here. You've got a lot of small businesses, a lot of tourism. So, we all … it's a working community … working class community. We all have that … that same goal … and … and … and of course it's … which is the kids.
Through active efforts, the superintendent develops deep personal relationship development. Baca stated: “…those that I didn't know as well, of course I took the time to … to allow them to get to know me.”

*Role Division*

The Superintendent feels comfortable soliciting input from the board because the board does not overstep bounds by demanding hires. Baca stated: “Never have I been forced by any board member in this past, you know, 13 years, 14 years to … to hire anybody.”

*Shared Responsibility*

By focusing decisions on what is best for kids, school board members were able to share ownership of difficult decisions. Baca stated: “I have yet to see any Board members that try to avoid something like that. I mean, if they recognize that there's a need to make these decisions that may be controversial or shake things up.”

By ensuring that the board has a deep understanding of difficult decisions, the school board was able to own responsibility. Baca stated:

When we have any incident on campuses, I make sure that the principals make me aware of what's going on, and I do communicate that to the Board members. Because, as you know, I mean the community will right away question the board. “What … what's the police doing in the …in your high school?” They at least get the notice, and they’re able to respond intelligently about it."

By using multiple timely communication methods, text, phone, and email, the superintendent made sure that the board was aware of situations that may elicit inquiries
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from the community. This gave the board confidence in the decisions and helps build trust between the board and the community.

By developing and evaluating goals for themselves, the school board demonstrates shared responsibility. Baca stated: “one thing that this board has been really good about is being able to identify goals that they’re responsible for.”

**Superintendent Traits**

Through investment and progression through various critical positions in the district, the superintendent created an advantage in applying for Superintendency.

The internal candidate relieved the board of the necessity to transition the superintendent other than demonstrate support and appropriate motives.

Through long-standing and various types of relationships, the board members and superintendent knew each other which reinforced trust and perceptions of support. Baca stated:

They saw me you know, in different shoes, at different stages of my life and career and … and they … they watched me grow as well. So, I think it was a … it was a pretty good partnership, a very good understanding of … of each other, and I owe them as well, because I had them as students, and I also had them as athletes. So, I knew how they reacted, what they were all about, I … so we kind of use that … each of us use that to … to kind of support each other, to understand each other.
Transparency

Through the active pursuit of transparency, the superintendent developed healthy relationships with board. Baca stated: “and of course you know one of the things is to be … be very … very transparent about what you're doing. I don't ever, and I never have tried to sneak anything by my board.”

Despite HB 212’s removal of the school board from personnel decisions, the superintendent solicited input from the school board, especially hires from within the community. Baca stated:

Although House Bill 212 doesn't, you know, allow for board members to do certain things or become involved in certain things. I always kept them abreast of what I was doing, I always ask for recommendations, especially when we're looking at staffing within the community, because they may know something about a particular individual that I don't know, and we're able to share that.

Work Sessions

By dedicating work session time in the summer preceding the school year, time was invested in shared planning, goal development, and goal evaluation.

Participant Montoya

Participant Montoya is a veteran board member with multiple children in the school system and is active in support of extra-curricular activities, including serving as a coach. Montoya has an animated personality and often uses Spanish colloquialisms to more precisely describe experiences.
Abstention

Through the use of an abstention instead of a vote opposing an action, board members minimized the public perception of conflict and minimized offense toward the majority voting board members.

Board Member Traits

Through the use of leadership and mediation skills supported by training in their day job, the board president was able to counsel a new board member on appropriate board member behavior. Montoya stated:

Because at [name] they don't … they don't believe in the management style. They believe in the leadership … leadership style. So, I had gone through a lot of leadership courses, Franklin Covey and a couple of other courses, where … a lot of the … where you diffuse a lot of situations and … and … and conflict mediation is, is … is a big part of some of these trainings. And so, with that training, I was able to talk to him on … on side bars and … and help them understand that you know that nobody here was … was trying to … You know we were all holding [inaudible] superintendent responsible for anything, and that there wasn't any … any shady deals going on."

Board Member Transition and Training

Through training, a new board member’s expectations about being able to make all decisions are tempered to align with the specific role of the school board. Montoya stated:
He had this yeehaw, like I'm going to change the world, and it's going to be this way, and we're going to do this. And then when he … when he started going through his board trainings, he realized that, you know, there, there's only so many things you can do as a board. Oh, you approve policy, the budget hiring, firing superintendent.

By prioritizing an adequate budget for training, the superintendent and school board valued the insights gained through training which supports the health of the board and helped define roles for the board. Montoya stated:

And so, one thing that we push as a board is … is education. And so, we're never … we always find budgeting to go to these conferences and training. And what [name] told me when I was President, he told me that the … the reason he thinks this board is so good is because an educated board is a strong board and a good board. and the fact that we take our … our training and education seriously has helped us, I think, keep our vision and … and our goals streamlined."

**Board Organization**

By stepping down and nominating a new board member as president the board self-regulated power distribution.

**Closed Sessions**

Through appropriate use of closed sessions, the school board was open to lively and passionate discussion without public display of potential conflict during a public vote.
Communication

By including expectations for communication in the annual superintendent evaluation, the board prioritizes and reinforces the need for good communication.

By providing timely communication to the school board, the superintendent ensures that board members were prepared to respond to community questions. This helped to build trust with constituents. Montoya stated:

Now, with kids on social media or their phones word gets out. So, one of the things we asked them to do is when a big event happens, if you just take a few minutes, say “Hey. The … an event happened at school. This is the basis.” … that's really helped us a lot in … in … in the faith that we have with our constituents.

Community Relations

By attending community functions together, the board and superintendent conveyed unity.

Conflict Management

By communicating hot button issues to the superintendent, the board ensured that the superintendent was aware of important community concerns.

The board president quickly and consistently mentored a new board member with predetermined motives inspired by disgruntled community members through counsel and trust building.
Consensus Building

Even when a vote was split and the board could not come to a majority vote, board members accepted the split and were able to move on without hard feelings. Montoya stated:

I think it came down to 2… 2 and 2, and so with that it ended up going to the PED. To install someone, and … and so like, in that case there … there's no hard feelings, I mean, 2 people had a strong opinion about this person, 2 people had a strong opinion about that person. And ultimately, we … we got a … a third party that the … that the PED had had helped us locate, and actually that person has fit perfectly into our model. So, it worked out really well.

Unlike what has been reported from other districts where disagreement leads to family disownment and "you are dead to me" approaches, the board was able to disagree and maintain healthy relationships. Montoya stated:

I guess just because we have a close relationship in this community and like you said, yeah, in many other communities … there's a school board that I that I have a friend. That's a coach with me in the … the [name], and it's … it's awful because they’re … that it’s like you're out of the family. And you're dead to me, kind of thing, and that's why we don't have that.

Contract Term

The superintendent demonstrated credibility with legislators through extended tenure in the district. Montoya stated:
And because those legislators see him as a solid part of our district when he goes and asks … they know that he's going to be here for a year or two. So, some of these projects that they help fund for us are two- or three-year projects. And it's kind of hard to … for legislators to say, “Oh, yeah, we're gonna give you this.” not knowing if the guy is going to be here, or … or … or … or her is going to be here in the future.

*Evaluation and Goal Setting*

By acknowledging that there is always room for growth, there is an anticipation that there will be goals for improvement while minimizing the room for offense when areas for improvement exist.

Through the use of a rubric, evaluation of the superintendent is systematized.

By assisting the board with the evaluation process and preparing support material, the superintendent helps ensure a robust evaluation process.

School board demonstrated good will by expressing that evaluation is meant to help the superintendent improve and not just to find fault. Montoya states: “However, we we've always wanted to help him improve. So, we would have things that we wanted him to work on.”

By actively managing and revising goals, the superintendent's evaluation was relevant and useful.

By continuously evaluating goals for their relevance and importance, the board supports a healthy evaluation process that was relevant and useful.
Fidelity to Process

By maintaining fidelity to the process of a personnel hearing through the rejection of an effort to influence outside of the hearing process, the board maintained healthy relationships and trust.

Inexperience

Due to the fact that the district has never had a superintendent vacancy during this board member's tenure, they have never experienced another superintendent or the hiring process.

Legal Counsel

By reaching out to legal counsel to get advice in dealing with a problematic board member, the board was able to keep a board member in check.

Local Superintendent

The board perceives the superintendent as being more vested in the district because the superintendent grew up in the community, attended the schools in the community, and now has kids and grandkids in the schools. Montoya stated:

The fact that what helps us too, I think, is the fact that he's born and … born and bred here, he's not from somewhere else. And so, his kids went to this school district. His grandkids are going to this school district, so he … he also has a vested interest in this district, as we do as parents of kids here. So, I think the fact that we all have vested interest here, and we're not … not saying that outsiders can’t do a good job, but it seems like when you have a home-grown superintendent that … that was … he went to school here, and you know his kids
and his grandkids, and, like, you know, our ... our kids go to school here. So, I think that really helps kind of bring ... bring the ... the ... the glue that puts it all together.

**Motives**

When board members have their own children in the school system, the board members have a vested interest in the decisions they make.

Individuals who choose to get on the school board do not use the position to leverage their election to move into other political offices. This helps them keep their motives focused on the best interest of students. Montoya stated:

I think that having that vision of putting the kids first. and not using this as a political stepstone. Like many other districts you'll ... you'll see. I'm not going to mention any names, but there's certain districts that they use the School Board as a steppingstone for county commissioner or city council, or whatever. In this case this Board is not interested in political aspirations past what we're at right now. And putting the kids in the district first. I think since we all have that same vision. I think it really has really helped us become - be a unified unit.

The board president quickly and consistently guided a new board member with predetermined motives inspired by disgruntled community members through counsel and trust building.

Through the avoidance of acting on ulterior motives, the board maintained healthy and trusting relationships, which allow for honest votes and minimizes hard feelings when a split vote occurs. Montoya stated:
We don't have any ulterior motives and I’m not saying the other boards do. But sometimes, when you … if you read closely between the lines, or if you stay around. If you study boards long enough, you start seeing movidas, like they say in Spanish, or favors, or … or whatever you want to call it, and with us we don't have any of those ulterior motives.

By having children or grandchildren as students in the schools, board members demonstrated a vested interest and have a direct reporting mechanism on what was happening in the schools. Montoya stated:

I think the fact that we are … we are a younger board, and, like I said, I don't I don't want to make light of some of these board members that have been there for 30, 40 years. But when you have a younger board and they have a vested interest, especially if you have kids in the district. Yeah, you know you have a vested interest. But as a parent, you know, day to day your kids come home and tell you this and that and the other. So, when … you have parents, that … and we're all parents, we all have kids in the district, except for one that just recently his daughter recently graduated.

**Networking**

The superintendent brought attention to the district's needs through the leverage of a strong network of contacts built up over the years. Montoya stated:

The thing I was impressed with is how many contacts he has in Santa Fe. And although we don't want to admit this, education is political … it is a political game and if you don't have the right contacts in the Legislature, you're never
going to get anything … or you're going to be on the back burner for years to come, and the fact that he … he has these contacts over the years.

Relationship Development

Board members maintain positive relationships through community ties outside of the board.

The board built trust and demonstrated that they are voting on appropriate motives by falling on different sides of issues and not always voting with the same other board members on split decisions. Montoya stated:

So that's the thing is … like that's what I like about the board is that we don't … we don't, we don't have cliques, or … or … or anything like that, or we only vote the one way, you know, and that … that's one thing that I’m meeting with you, I’m able to think about things like I said in that first one that we had 2-2 vote. It was those 2 and these 2, and then on the … on this other one. It was the … the it was a mix. It was a 2 … It was 2 different no, and 2 different for this. So, it wasn't along the same lines which is, which is good. That means that your board is … is … is voting because of how they feel, what they think is in the best interest of the district, and not in the best interest of one other one of their movidas, you know what I mean?

Responsiveness

Superintendent demonstrated responsiveness by committing to follow up and then actually following up with an update.
Shared Responsibility

School board demonstrated good will by expressing that evaluation is meant to help the superintendent improve and not just to find fault.

By attending community functions together, the board and superintendent conveyed unity.

Superintendent Traits

The superintendent demonstrated skill in staff management through effective selection, assignment, and delegation with trust.

Through open and honest conversation with the board about personnel issues, the board perceives the superintendent as holding faculty and staff accountable.

By leading the district through a process to move out of a budget deficit status to a surplus budget status, the superintendent demonstrated fiscal aptitude.

Through the active navigation of emergency supplemental funding, the superintendent demonstrated vision to the board.

The superintendent demonstrated fiscal aptitude by being intimately familiar with budget and finance and being able to answer questions as well as the district's business official.

Through interaction and charisma, the superintendent demonstrated being young-at-heart.

Through early morning communication with the school board, the superintendent demonstrated work ethic. Montoya states:
His…his work ethic is…is beyond…He's always working. I…I look…when I go to [name] he'll text me in the mornings. I…I used to leave at 4:30. But I don't leave as early anymore but when I would leave at 4:30 he'd call me and tell me “hey, how are the roads?” He was already up.

Through transparency, approachability, and follow-through the superintendent was perceived as being open and honest.

Despite limitations on board authority on personnel matters, the superintendent chose to keep the board well informed on personnel matters. This built trust from the school board.

Despite limitations on board authority on personnel matters, the superintendent chose to invite the board to make recommendations while maintaining that it cannot be a demand but only a recommendation. The board accepted the limitations in making recommendations.

**Participant Zamora**

Participant Zamora offers very insightful reflections on experiences on the school board. Zamora has demonstrated clear leadership skills by taking on the chairpersonship of the board. Zamora is active in supporting both extra-curricular and academic excellence for children of the district.

**Board Transition and Training**

Due to being a new board member no hiring process has been experienced.
Communication

The board reminded the superintendent about the importance of communication during evaluations.

The board offered to assist the superintendent in communicating to the community by acting as a conduit to the community. Zamora stated: “He needs to communicate a little bit more with getting it out to the community. And … and he does that through us.”

The board wanted the superintendent to communicate with them early so that when they would get contacted by the community, they were able to respond in an informed manner.

By always accommodating visits from the board, the superintendent demonstrated a commitment to an open-door approach. Zamora stated:

His office is always open. We can literally go in the middle of the day. If he's meeting with somebody else, or has issues, he has always made time for any board member to walk into his office announced or unannounced and we all feel comfortable with that. We don't need to schedule a meeting to talk to [name]. He might prefer that, but we're … I feel like we all feel comfortable enough just stopping by his office. And we communicate through email. But a lot of our communication is sitting down and talking face to face.

Community Relations

Because the superintendent is from the community the board knew that they get along with people.
The superintendent was perceived as being able to relate to the staff and students because they were a student and staff member in the district. Zamora stated: “And he's from the area. He … he's passionate about it because he went here. He started at the bottom. He's been in the same shoes as staff and students right here.”

The board reminded the superintendent about the importance of communication during evaluations.

The board offered to assist the superintendent in communicating to the community by acting as a conduit to the community.

The board wanted the superintendent to communicate with them early so that when they were contacted by the community, they were able to respond in an informed manner.

**Consensus Building**

By being open to differing opinions, the board supported expression of individual perspectives. Zamora stated:

I feel like our board is pretty united. We're kind of all on the same level. We all do have different ideas, different beliefs. But again, we kind of talk it out and no harm when somebody has an idea doesn't agree with someone else, you know, each individual sticks by what they believe.

The board demonstrates openness to different perspectives by compromising when opinions differed.
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Local Superintendent

Participant feels that they know the superintendent well due to being born and raised in the community.

The superintendent is perceived as being able to relate to the staff and students because the superintendent was a student and staff member in the district.

Motives

The board demonstrated openness to disagreement by maintaining focus on what is best for students.

Shared Responsibility

By requesting input on decisions, the superintendent demonstrated transparency and openness to input in decision making. Zamora stated:

I can't necessarily say that we've actually … or I haven't really encountered conflict, or actually seen a … a big conflict with … with the superintendent. However, the way [name] approaches it is … is he … he lets us give him ideas before he tells us what his ideas are. Because then at … at some instances, he'll be like, “I hadn't thought of it in that perspective. But this is what I was thinking.” So, I haven't had … we … we haven't had to deal with a lot of conflict, but he does … he does listen first before he tells.

The board and superintendent demonstrated shared responsibility by actively and cooperatively contributing to the development of plans to address challenges. Zamora stated:
We each feel that we were elected to … to do our part to be a voice for the community. And each one of us brings a different aspect to the board. I feel like we, if there's a difficult decision, we … we put a team effort. We focus on the problem. We … we make a plan. The … we … we hash it out, take action.

By reflecting on their decisions after implementation, the superintendent and board made use of closed loop decision-making to improve future decisions. Zamora stated: “and then evaluate … evaluate the … the good and the bad and the outcome of the situation.”

**Superintendent Traits**

The superintendent was perceived as having broad experience in staffing, operations, and finance because of the roles filled in the past.

The superintendent is perceived as a strong leader through demonstration of passion for school children.

Because the superintendent is from the community the board knows that they carry respect from the community.

The superintendent demonstrated a skill desirable to the board member by being able to switch between joking and business when appropriate. Zamora states: “He's … he jokes, he's a big jokester, but when it's time for business it's business, and he can differentiate that.”

The superintendent is perceived as having high expectations for students by demonstrating importance of a broad set of educational outcomes for individual students. Zamora stated:
But most importantly, the goal is the students and ... and the education that they're receiving. He has a lot of faith in small town students where many people feel like we're at a disadvantage of becoming something -- becoming more educated, in other words. However, he does not discourage any trade. I mean farming and ranching is big out here, plumbing, electrical. He just wants a fair education for ... for everybody.

The superintendent demonstrates a positive relationship with students because he can be seen interacting with them and they are not intimidated by him.

The superintendent demonstrates a positive relationship with students because the superintendent has faith in them and can be seen interacting with them and they are not intimidated by him.

By being open to new ideas from the board, the community, staff, and students, the superintendent demonstrated a commitment to innovation. Zamora stated:

And this is together in this ... giving him ideas, trying to implement new things for the school, ideas that students or community members bring. And he's actually always open to new ideas. And then he prioritizes what is doable, what we need to work on.

*Transparency*

By requesting input on decisions, the superintendent demonstrated transparency and openness to input in decision making.
Participant Ortiz

Participant Ortiz is a veteran superintendent with a vast network of acquaintances throughout the state. Ortiz is known by many to be one of the most knowledgeable veteran superintendents in northern New Mexico and throughout the state. Ortiz was selected as a leader in multiple positions, such as executive boards. Ortiz projects an air of wisdom in his presentation of experiences.

Board Transition and Training

By encouraging board members to present information from conferences to fellow board members at the next board meeting, the superintendent encouraged extending training, verification of directives, information sharing, and transparency.

Using offsite work sessions, the superintendent kept communication about progress on goals timely so that when formal evaluation time comes, there are no surprises. Ortiz stated:

So, from when I took over, we had it like over in [place]. We had it over here and in a … [name] Lodge and things like that. But we did meet at the very beginning of the school year, and maybe the middle of the year, and at the end of the year for next year's expectation. So, I think one of the big things is communication, and when you have a good communication with the board, the annual evaluation goes, basically or the … or your evaluation goes basically from meeting to meeting, and they are ready to sit down with you when the annual evaluation is done … is … as a formality.
Communication

The superintendent ensured that all board members felt included and equal partners by evenly sharing abundant information. Ortiz stated:

There are 5 board members, and if you work with 5, then that's one thing I did any information that I … shared with one I shared with all of them. And starting with the board I mean board President, and then giving that same information to everybody else, so that they were aware of what was happening, and they didn't have any questions.

The superintendent avoided conflict by pre-emptively informing the board about anything that could devolve into conflict.

The superintendent and board agreed to avoid the overhearing of confidential information by only using land lines and avoiding use of mobile phones.

By pre-emptively informing the board president and other school board members about situations that are likely to blow up, the superintendent avoided major conflict on difficult decisions. Ortiz stated:

He was our board president for quite a long time. If I … I started with him, I told him what was coming up, and for everything and anything, and we would get ready before it really became a problem. Like for an example, one year for homecoming, the boys, the football players went to [business name], and they drank. And if they wouldn’t have gone to school – they went to school so that year we didn't have a football team. Couple of parents went and faced … well, I informed them of everything and anything right away, and what happened was,
the parents went over there to the board meeting closed session, and they and they wanted for … for us to have a football team and things like that. But I have full support of the board because they have full information on what … on what had happened and what I had done regarding that.

**Community Relations**

Through a transparent effort to inform community and board members about the facts used to decide on a recommendation for the closing of a school, the superintendent achieved school board support and community acceptance.

The superintendent built community relations through meetings at community venues. Ortiz stated:

I used to even … I’d have it in [place], even there in [place], they don't have a place to go. I borrowed the … the church … the Catholic church, and basically, they if you informed the … the staff … community, they will support you. So basically, when we had bond issues, they supported them.

The superintendent and board built community relations by following-through on spending commitments during bond election campaigns.

The superintendent built strong community relations by being approachable through involvement in community organizations such as being an EMT and serving on the domestic water association, and parish council.

The superintendent acted with a desire to be a leader among equals by ensuring that they were seen being part of the community and serving in roles that showed humbleness. Ortiz stated:
And the one thing I felt, and I used to tell the staff, and this came from a former … from a current father, a priest that was my classmate in the early years when they as signed him here, or one of the things I used to say that I was a leader among equals, not because I wore a tie, and the thing of superintendent was I wasn’t better than anybody else. And I think I proved it when they saw me at games. They saw me there. They saw me drive the bus and things like that. So, I was part of the team.

**Conflict Management**

The superintendent minimized escalation of conflict by reaching out directly to individual board member for a one-on-one conversation. Ortiz stated:

What I would do was probably call them individually, and I would probably do it very professionally, and not in front of anybody, because I think the problem would probably multiply itself. But if I felt that a board member had a problem with me, or something like that, I would call them to my office.

The superintendent reached out quickly to individual board member to resolve conflict in a one-on-one conversation. Ortiz stated:

The other thing is … is also timing. The timing, and the place where you discuss … discuss those things. … I think I didn't kind of have conflict with them, because I informed them of everything and anything that I felt could be … could create some kind of conflict. I got on the phone right away.
The superintendent minimized conflict by probing the school board for support of initiatives; the superintendent decided to only move forward if a majority of the board supported the initiative. Ortiz stated:

One thing I learned also that if the majority of the Board didn't support you, I dropped whatever I wanted to do, because I know okay, it wouldn't … it wouldn't go … it wouldn't fly. So, I learned how to … to also work with the board like that. That is, let's say 3 board members didn't want to follow my idea. So, my suggestions and things like that, I dropped it. I didn't push it because I've been … I've seen superintendents are pushing and push it. And if they don't want that, you're just fighting a losing battle if a majority of the Board didn't want to do things … or educational issues, whatever that you had. So, I just dropped it, and I didn't push it."

The superintendent and board used a consensus-building process to garner buy-in and shared ownership of difficult decisions.

Through a transparent effort to inform community and board members about the facts used to recommend the closing of a school, the superintendent achieved school board support and community acceptance.

The superintendent encouraged positive relationship with the board by adjusting timing of a school closure based on their recommendation.

**Contract Term**

The participant favored and appreciated extended contracts but boards must be careful to not end up buying out contract.
**Evaluation and Goal Setting**

The participant believed that evaluations during the holidays are bad because of all of the things going on at that time.

The participant believed that termination is dangerous during the holidays because a former superintendent committed suicide after termination during the holidays.

Due to the public nature of the superintendent's actions, the superintendent was being evaluated every day and not just at times of formal evaluation.

After having difficulty agreeing on an evaluation instrument, the board obtained an instrument from the NM School Board Association.

The school board supported evaluation best practices by ensuring that the superintendent was aware of expectations before the school year.

Through the use of offsite work sessions, the superintendent kept communication about progress on goals moving in a timely manner so that when formal evaluation time comes, there were no surprises.

The board was clear in their expectation that the superintendent not delegate signature authority and that he was to use blue ink to sign original documents.

**Family Repercussions**

The superintendent sacrificed time with family to ensure that the job was getting the attention required. Ortiz stated:

It takes a lot of time and a lot of work. In fact, I was talking to my wife [inaudible] and I just got out of being Board of… from the Board of Directors from the … from the [inaudible] domestic water, and I told her, Sometimes I feel
okay … I … I didn't spend as much time with her and with my girls growing up because and then she told me, yeah, but … but … but it was because of your job.

Yeah, I was. It was because of my job.

**Homegrown Staff**

The superintendent felt supported by a homegrown staff.

**Legal Counsel**

The superintendent ensured appropriate action by conferring with legal counsel but was frugal using because of cost.

**Local Superintendent**

The superintendent had to persevere after being passed over twice before being hired.

Two prior superintendents from neighboring areas created a work schedule that limited time in the district and they failed to thrive and did not stay employed.

**Low Turnover in Staff**

The participant felt that the superintendent was supported by low turnover in the staff. Ortiz stated: “They stayed there like forever. When I retired, the last, maybe 3 years is when the staff started to change, so that we had a very stable staff during my superintendency.”

**Motives**

After being frustrated with having to make difficult decisions while serving as Assistant Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent became more motivated to apply a third time for the position.
Nepotism

The board supported the superintendent by never bringing forward an issue of nepotism due to his wife being his secretary.

Networking

The superintendent gains insight from more experienced peers by seeking counsel before major decisions. Ortiz stated:

The other thing that I did is I used a lot of former superintendents and … or administrators, for example, [name], [name], [name], [name], and [name] former administrators, and I would ask them what would you do and I had to take into consideration that I was younger and basically, and they had a lot more experience.

When the superintendent became a veteran, they offered counsel to younger peers, while acknowledging that ultimately, they had to own the decision.

The superintendent garnered staff buy-in by using peers to project expertise.

Through visibility at statewide events, the superintendent encourages interactions with officials and board members from other districts which encourages positive feedback.

The superintendents built networks and cross-pollinated ideas by visiting each other’s districts for the purpose of evaluation. Ortiz stated:

When the State used to go and do evaluations on the school evaluations and I think it was well we I called her … [name] when she was superintendent over there. She invited us … me and [name], we went over there to … so we … they
were going to come here later, so we … to see what they would do, and things like that.

When the superintendent became a veteran, they offered counsel to younger peers, while acknowledging that in the end they had to own the decision.

The superintendent garnered staff buy-in by using peers to project expertise.

**Policy**

By not allowing individual board members to direct action outside of board meetings, the superintendent ensured commitment to including all board members in decisions.

**Relationship Development**

By giving the school board direct access to key district personnel during work sessions, the board was able to get to know the staff. Ortiz stated:

Yes, and the other thing that I did is I … I took everybody well, not for the whole sessions, but I took everybody for … for those … for those board trainings like I took the cafeteria manager, a transportation manager, and they were the ones that made their presentations, and the Board had the opportunity to know them and see who they were and what they were doing, and things ask them questions, and, like I said my practice even with the board, I said before I had them tell the Board what I was doing, but because I didn't want for say, “Well, [name] is just giving us BS.” But if it came from the, from the lion's mouth, and that of the other directors, they had them there, and they were able to ask questions and answer.
Relationships of superintendent, board members, and staff were built and reinforced by having meals at the board meetings.

The district built family-style relationships by participating in potluck meals for regular board meetings and special meals around holidays. Ortiz stated:

But then, on the other hand, like for Christmas and different occasions like that, everybody would be a potluck. So basically, it was like a … like a family.

The superintendent maintained positive relations with the board by making sure that all board members are receiving the same information and that no board members feel that there is favoritism.

The school board built strong relationships by joking and having fun at board meetings when there was low community turnout.

*Rural Setting*

Diligence is required in recruitment and retention of staff to make sure that hires are prepared for the difficulties of the rural setting and especially difficulties during the winter. Ortiz stated:

And like in Vista Azul. I'm talking about staff right now. We used to hire staff. Well, they come here like in the spring or in the fall. It's God’s country. But come December and their car doesn't start, and their water freezes. We had a few, a few teachers that felt … that I mean that left between and Christmas and New Year's break.

Diligence is required in recruitment and retention of staff to make sure that hires are prepared for limited healthcare options. Ortiz stated:
The other one is at least we are a little better now, but a probably rural area is that we don't have major medical facilities. … one of the … there … a lady was waiting for me there to be interviewed there at Central Office, and one of the girls … they told her about … she asked I guess, about major medical facilities, and they say, “Well, basically we don't have major medical facilities,” and then she asks “Well, what happens?” And the girls told her, “You die.”

Diligence is required in recruitment and retention of staff to make sure that hires are prepared for limited entertainment options.

**Shared Responsibility**

While being supported by the board and staff, the superintendent stayed for 17 years.

By pre-emptively informing the board president and other school board members about situations that are likely to blow up, the superintendent avoided major conflict on difficult decisions.

The superintendent owned decisions despite actively seeking counsel from peers.

**Superintendent Traits**

By gaining experience in difficult decisions when the superintendent was absent the superintendent candidate gained experience.

By avoiding involvement in political process, the superintendent avoided perceptions of bias when board members changed.
Despite providing the board access to key personnel, the board wanted the superintendent to maintain a broad understanding of all aspects of the district. Ortiz stated:

But, on the other hand, one of the things that they required from me is that I was aware of everything that was going on and once … a couple of times when they asked, because I used to require all the directors and things like that to attend board meetings make their presentations. And they … they asked me a specific question, and I wanted to refer it to one of our directors. They … a couple of times, and I learned fast, they used to tell me, “[name], we are asking you. You are supposed to know you are the superintendent.” So that's one thing. I was on top of everything, just in case. In fact, board day, on the meeting days we had board meetings, it was a lockdown for me. I try to get any and all information I thought any of the Board members might ask, and most of the time they didn't, but at least I was ready to answer the questions.

**Transparency**

Through a transparent effort to inform community and board members about the facts used to recommend the closing of a school, the superintendent achieved school board support and community acceptance.

**Veteran Staff**

The superintendent felt supported by a veteran staff.
Work Sessions

By giving the school board direct access to key district personnel during work sessions, the board got to hear directly from staff about plans and decisions and also ask questions.

By giving the school board direct access to key district personnel during work sessions, the board was able to get to know the staff.

Participant Romero

Participant Romero served on the board during the tenure of both superintendents during the study’s investigation period. Romero is an active parent who supports his children as a coach. Romero projects a very pragmatic and selfless approach to leadership.

Board Member Traits

Since board members had grown up, lived, and worked together, they were more able to work respectfully with each other. Romero stated:

Well, I think one of the biggest things is that we were all locals, right, so we all kind of grew up together. And then, like Mr. [name], Mr. [name], I've known him since I was a kid. His ... his brother [name] was my ... was my High school football coach, my junior high coach. So, we ... we've ... he worked at the Assessor's office at the county, and when I came out of college I started working at the county. And I was able to kind of rub elbows with him, right, and ... and work alongside of him. And just, I think, just the mutual respect we had for each other. And I ... I think a lot of it is the way you treat each other, right.
**Board Member Transition**

New board members were taken under the wing of veteran board members to help them transition into their new role.

New board members were supported by a veteran superintendent into new role.

**Community Relations**

The board maintained a positive relationship with the public, constituents, and superintendent by seeking input from them on difficult decisions.

**Conflict Management**

Board members would self-mediate conflict through respectful problem solving and direct communication. Romero stated:

Conflict between School Board members, we ... we kind of just handled it with respect right because everybody had their own different ... everybody had their own different opinions on how things should be run. And we had, an ... we ... we had an incident where one of our board members didn't really agree with the way things were going. And we would discuss it, right? We ... we’d get together, and we'd say, okay, what … what … what do you suggest that we do? All right. If … if this is the problem, what's your direction, or what's your advice as to getting this conflict squashed right? So, there was a lot of times that we would talk to each other.

**Consensus Building**

By remaining open to solutions presented by other board members, the board remained open to consensus building. Romero stated: “First of all, not having a chip on
your shoulder. Not always thinking my way is the only way. Because other people have other ideas that might work better than … than the ideas that you have.”

Board members maintained a positive relationship by accepting decisions for which they were in the minority and maintained a positive relationship with the public, constituents, and superintendent by seeking input from them on difficult decisions. Romero stated:

We'd lean on … on public input as to what the public thought our constituents wanted. So, it … it … it was kind of an overall team effort. And … and there was times that we included the superintendent as well, right, because of experience in … in the schools and experience with policy. So, I … we just worked together. We … we made it work.

**Contract Term**

The board demonstrated restraint and caution by offering a short-term first contract to monitor performance. Romero stated:

Some wanted a year-to-year contract right, and that happened the first year, right? … And … and just like any other position, right? I … I think … I think a superintendent coming into a position like this, I think they need a chance to prove themselves, right? Because the first … if you go year-to-year contract, the first year that you're there, you're in a learning environment, unless you've been there over some time. right? And it's just like the any other position like a basketball coach, right? He's not going to go and turn the program around in one year, right? So, the year-to-years you can continue them for like a year or 2.
After witnessing performance under short-term first contract, the board transitioned to long-term contract to support long-term relationship. Romero stated:

But then, after he showed his experience and his ability to lead the schools and be the leader of the … as the superintendent in that position. Later on, it … it got extended to 3-year contracts. … but then eventually you kind of wave out and give them 3 years contracts … 3-year contracts because there … there is a learning curve.

The board demonstrates satisfaction through long tenure held by superintendent.

**Evaluation and Goal Setting**

Through consensus, the board decided on what items the superintendent would be evaluated, based on what was most important to the students of the district.

**Local Superintendent**

Due to extensive knowledge of the district, the assistant superintendent was clearly the best candidate for the superintendent position when the veteran superintendent retired. Romero stated:

Well, of course, [name] was the assistant superintendent at the time. So [name] had … had … had all the experience of being in the schools. Knew the students, knew the faculty, knew the policies in and out. And it … it was … it was great that he was able to step in and apply for that superintendent position. So, he kind of … we … we did go out, and we had some interviews and stuff, but … but he was by far the ... the best candidate for the job, right? So … so we were fortunate in the
matter that he was there for a long time, and ... and ... and he was the man for the job.

By opening the superintendent position to outside candidates, the board validated the selection of the assistant superintendent for the position.

**Responsiveness**

By demonstrating responsiveness and follow-through, the superintendent inspired confidence from the board.

**Role Division**

The board allowed the superintendent to do their job by delegating power.

Romero stated:

I think some school Board members or boards want to say “yo mando,” right? I want this person in. I want that person in. Well, that's ... that's not your job. Your job, your ... your only employee, is the superintendent, right? So, the superintendent does all the other hiring. And I think if ... if you're able to sit back as a board and recognize that. And not try to pull for or things that you want. I ... I think as a board you'll be more successful.

**Superintendent Traits**

Through familiarity and demonstrated competence, the superintendent was seen as a guide to the school board.

The superintendent demonstrated doing a great job by having rapport with students.
By appreciating that the board has a small view of the day-to-day operations, the board trusted the superintendent to do their job and not micromanage. Romero stated:

I think you just have to have trust in your superintendent, right? He's … he's the boots on the ground. We come around monthly, go over financials and other type of problems that we might have, but he's the boots on the ground, so he's involved in the everyday activities. So, I think you just have to have trust in him and let him do his job. I think that's the most important part.

**Superintendent Transition**

The fact that the new superintendent had been the assistant superintendent facilitated a smooth transition.

By continuing to offer support to the board and new superintendent, the former superintendent facilitated a smooth transition. Romero stated:

And then Mr. [name] was always there as well if I need [inaudible] step down. He was always there in case we needed any type of … of questions answered, or any type of assistance as a board. He was always there as a reference to … to call upon. So that was a really big help.

**Participant Lovato**

Participant Lovato is a veteran of multiple community leadership roles. Lovato expresses bold opinions that are deeply rooted in a desire for the betterment of the community. Of all of the participants, Lovato is the most willing to share negative aspects of experiences.
Board Member Traits

Positive board relations were maintained because the people who ran for office and were elected had a high quality of character. Lovato stated:

Maybe I'm wrong. It's probably the quality of the individual that ran for the office. … that I was fortunate in the 6 years that I was serving that board that people with a lot of respect, dignity, class, served.

The participant feels that values and quality of character are critical. Individuals carry values that make them a good board member, like listening to others and standing up for what you believe is right.

Political candidates should demonstrate quality of character, like not being rude, or else they should not be elected.

Board Member Transition

The superintendent supports new board members into new role through trainings and visits to the schools. Lovato stated:

When I got in [name] was actually helping us transition in because we were rookie board members that never been on the board before, you know. And so, he was very … he was very cordial in that way in the sense that he actually had trainings for us. And I ... I remember going to this office, taking a tour of the facilities.

Community Relations

The participant valued public input through allowance of impromptu public input during the board meeting.
The participant was displeased with the changes made by a new board when they eliminated the opportunity to speak spontaneously at board meetings.

The participant valued other public governing boards that allow for spontaneous public input from the public. Lovato stated: “In meetings, you raise your hand, Hello, audience. [Multiple inaudible words] I'm giving you the floor. What do you have to say, right?”

The participant sees a lot of public boards moving to only allow formal input from the community at meetings by having speakers sign in and only speak at the beginning of the meeting. Romero stated:

And right now, they're doing that to this day. You've got to sign in, and you're not allowed to speak [multiple inaudible words]. I hear a lot of boards have gone that way, but I wouldn't be a part of one of those boards.

**Conflict Management**

The superintendent minimized conflict with the board by listening carefully to the will of the board and then followed through on directives, especially on big issues. Board members maintained positive board relations when they were in the minority on a split vote by demonstrating restraint after losing a vote. Lovato stated:

We always respected the Democratic way and that was [multiple inaudible words] for 5 minutes let's say, and then we’d go to a vote. And if [inaudible] won, we accepted that. I ... I [inaudible] the other board members are [multiple inaudible words] on the winning team. I don't remember everybody just saying, “oh, to hell
with this” and walk out. Like I’ve heard of that. I’ve seen that in the [multiple inaudible words]. But that never happened with us, ever.

The board demonstrated self-regulation by addressing an allegation of harassment from a staff member. The board member immediately corrected behavior before the issue escalated any further. Lovato stated:

[name], in those days called an executive session. And I remember [name] mentioning to the board member that whatever he was doing he thought was like illegal or whatever. And so anyways, at that point, I remember the board member saying [multiple inaudible words] he was the board chairman [inaudible] he’s like “if I’m not allowed to do it, I’m not allowed to do that I guess, you’ll see a change from me.” [name] was pretty like, hardheaded, you know what I mean. But we respected what [name] told him and we never heard that situation get out of hand again.

The board maintained healthy relations by ensuring that board member position is made clear and then accepting that the majority vote wins without hard feelings. Lovato stated:

I remember telling my wife a few times “damn man, I could not sway that board.” But you gotta accept that you’re in the minority. That … you lost it. I had 5 minutes to do my spiel and persuade you to vote my way and you didn’t. Oh well, we live in a democratic society.
Even after heated debate at a board meeting, board members would not depart without a positive interaction like saying good night, shaking hands, or saying “have a good one.”

The first 5 years I was on the board was a very good board. We may argue in a meeting, we may argue about the way things are going at the school, or what our priorities were, how to build the new high school or whatever. But I never saw nobody leave a meeting without [multiple inaudible words]. But I never saw the Board members themselves ever leave a meeting without saying good night, Shake hands, hey have a good one. Nobody … you could … you could really get into a heated debate, but I never once remember leaving a meeting feeling slighted by a board member.

**Contract Term**

The incoming board was frustrated because they lost the ability to make a decision on the superintendent due to a long-term contract awarded on the old board's way out of office.

**Evaluation and Goal Setting**

The participant felt that the evaluation process was meant to justify rehire and not to truly evaluate. Lovato stated:

I never really liked the evaluation process myself. I thought it was set up in a … in a way to … it was … it was kind of an evaluation, in those days, so as to set up [name] to not get fired.
The participant was displeased with the evaluation process and wanted more objective and quantifiable measures added to the evaluation instrument. Objective measures included number of students lost to other districts. Lovato stated:

It really didn’t have some potatoes and meat to it, where you could really evaluate him on, let’s say, how many kids have left the district because of poor curriculum. How many are going to [place] because of poor curriculum. Like I used to ask those questions. [multiple inaudible words] really pertinent [inaudible] programs and things like to our schools. [multiple inaudible words] It was very cut and dry, and I would stay there with 10 to 12 questions like [multiple inaudible words].

Due to the fact that the superintendent evaluation instrument did not include objective and quantifiable measures of performance, the board member did not have confidence that the instrument could be used to justify the termination of the superintendent without litigation. Lovato stated: “It would be very [inaudible] to get rid of a superintendent without being sued. With the … with … with the one we had. That’s the way I feel.”

**Funding Increases Without Improvement**

Lovato feels that schools have a problem when funding continues to increase but no gains are made in student outcomes.

**Local Superintendent**

Because some board members were looking for change, they were conflicted about hiring the assistant superintendent at the time. Lovato stated:
But if they hire within the … somebody – when I say local, I think here in the [place] they consider [place] to [place] local. So … once I hit [place] everybody [inaudible] Vista Azul, really. So, if they hire a superintendent to replace [name], that was born and raised in those boundaries, that person ain’t going nowhere if they’re doing a decent job, that’s for sure.

The board was afraid that if they do not hire the assistant superintendent that the assistant superintendent would leave.

The participant feels that the board will be supportive of a long tenure as long as they do a decent job.

Motives

The board member was motivated to run for election to represent the community's frustration with school consolidation efforts.

Board members evaluate motives of other board members by witnessing movement when evaluating each issue and not always aligning with individuals. Lovato stated:

Well, let’s say you were on the board, like is [name] really voting for the good of the kids or is he voting because he’s in cahoots with [inaudible] let’s just say. And then, the next meeting would come up and the decision is on a whole different agenda, he is here for the good of the kids.
No School Consolidation

The participant believes that efforts to consolidate are a bad idea because the schools are the heart of the community and consolidating schools takes that away from the community.

Relationship Development

The participant felt that having a meal after the meeting allowed tensions to be relaxed and socialization to take place so that board members could maintain a healthy relationship with each other. Relationships were such that the board member felt that he could count on any board member to be one hundred percent supportive of them. Lovato stated:

But I never saw them ever leave without … right after every one of our meetings for one thing, [name] always had a meal. I remember that. It could be posole with red chile, it could be beans and chile, it could be whatever, but everybody would go in that room and eat. [Inaudible] we start talking about sports or the Lakers or whatever. Next thing you know we were all eating. I never saw or felt [inaudible] on that board, never. I think if anybody would have [inaudible] one of us, I think the board would have backed up that board member 100%, guaranteed. If you would have gone in there [inaudible], the people that came after me, let’s say, I really believe any of those board members [multiple inaudible words] would have had my back.
SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT RETENTION

The superintendent stays in the good graces of the board and maintains positive board relations by being responsive, acknowledging board members in various settings outside of the school, and overall respecting the position of the school board members.

**Role Division**

Participant believes that some boards fail because they micromanage. Lovato stated:

I learned this on the board way back then, I think I really believe that where boards fail, in my opinion is, they want to micromanage. I always [multiple inaudible words] to tell people on the board, “We’re not here to micromanage.”

**Santa Fe Out-of-Touch**

The participant feels that the Governor and others in Santa Fe should be interested and give opportunities to interact and get input from school boards.

**Status Quo**

Participant expressed desire for change and innovation because participant was not satisfied with the status quo.

Participant believes that the community culture, going back generations, does not like change, and that has encouraged extended superintendent tenure.

**Superintendent Traits**

A board member wants a change in the superintendency because the superintendent is out of date and the district is going backwards.
Trust

Healthy board relations were maintained when board members felt that they could speak their minds in closed sessions and not have the information leak out.

Composite Experience

Following step four, I completed the final step of Moustakas’s modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzii-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). This step is described by Moustakas, “from the individual textural-structural descriptions of all research participants’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). The composite experiences are organized by theme.

Composite Description of Experiences

Perhaps as a reflection of the objective of the study and the phenomenon being studied, which are both framed from a positive perspective, the participants in this study focused on the positive aspects of their experiences as superintendents and school board members and rarely mentioned negative experiences. Although the nature of the study may have heavily influenced this, it may also reflect the overall attitude that the participants carried into the relationship between themselves, their school, and their community.
Narrative Composite Description of Experiences

The experiences of participants in this study included the recognition of pre-existing personal traits that allowed and obligated them to act in a manner that reinforced healthy relationships with each other and with the superintendent. These personal attributes were affirmed through relationships that developed before becoming board members. While on the board, participants demonstrated high character qualities, including integrity, politeness, active listening, and loyalty. Board members also elicited trust and loyalty from fellow board members by being focused on service as a board member and not using their position on the board as a stepping stone to higher office. Also present in the experiences of participants was the value of skills that had been obtained in work and experiences outside of the board, these skills included those in the areas of leadership development and conflict management. Board members were thought to be more personally vested in the schools if they had children or grandchildren in the schools.

Accompanying the recognition of positive traits in board members was the recognition of positive and beneficial traits in the superintendent. Participants sincerely appreciated the skills demonstrated by the superintendent while they served in other roles in the school district before becoming superintendent, these roles included coach, teacher, principal, and central office administration. The familiarity with the district allowed the board to feel confident in the ability of the new superintendent without much need for transitional support from the board. As with individuals serving on the board, participants
relied on relationships from interactions outside of the school setting to reinforce relationships developed in school-based relationships.

Participants also appreciated the aptitude of the superintendent in specific areas of school leadership, especially in finance. The superintendent gained significant levels of appreciation when he led the district out of a budgetary shortfall into a budget surplus.

The importance of the superintendent’s ability to be visible and approachable in public settings was also crucial to the development of a healthy relationship with the board and community. These public interactions were especially notable when they included interactions with students. Of particular note in these interactions was their opportunity for the superintendent to demonstrate care for students, approachability by students, being available to the public, and a lack of pretentiousness. Board member participants also felt it necessary that the superintendent find a balance between a jovial nature and the ability to shift to a serious tone. This balance includes the ability to make difficult decisions and hold employees accountable for their duties. The balance also includes the ability to delegate responsibility within the limits allowed by the board.

The ability of the superintendent to demonstrate sincere consideration of recommendations brought forward by the board was critical in developing a healthy superintendent-board relationship. This serious consideration required the superintendent to recognize the value of the diverse perspectives of the board and the need to carefully consider them before making a final decision. Along with the ability to consider recommendations from board members was the ability to let go of efforts not supported by a majority of the board. This ability avoided the deepened conflicts that result from
persistent efforts to overcome a lack of support from the majority. The superintendent also demonstrated a genuine respect for board members through public recognition of the board when opportunities arose. Participant board member experiences included consistent recognition of availability and follow-through from the superintendent. The ability of the superintendent to make themselves available when board members needed interaction was a potent mechanism for developing strong relationships. Also critical was the superintendent’s consistency in following through on promised deliverables.

The participants in this study placed significant value on a local superintendent. Similar to board members, superintendents were perceived as being more invested when they had children or grandchildren in the schools – this is more likely with a local superintendent. The local superintendent had already demonstrated the traits sought by the board for the superintendency. Interactions with board members and community members demonstrated the ability of the superintendent to relate well. Before selecting a local candidate for the superintendency, outside superintendents had failed to thrive.

Participants’ experiences related to board member transition were both formal and informal. Formal processes for board transition included off-site work sessions where new board members were oriented. The superintendent also held formal orientation sessions that included visits to the schools. Informal transition activities included mentorship efforts from veteran board members. The importance of mentorship was especially critical when a new board member took office with an agenda developed before becoming acquainted with the inner workings of the school and with the limitations of the board’s authority.
One of the most significant themes within the participants’ experiences was in the area of effective communication. Various communication media were used for appropriate timeliness and detail. Additionally, more expedient and brief communications via text were used to bring attention to urgent and detailed communication through email. When necessary, in-person communication was used.

Board members emphasized the importance of communication to the superintendent during the annual evaluation process. These expectations were taken seriously by the superintendent who used the feedback to refine communication processes. This refinement included using the school board to disseminate information to the community, the need to be uniform in distributing information to the board, and the importance of quickly notifying the board when there were situations that were likely to blow up in social media or traditional media. This communication allowed the board members an opportunity to demonstrate that they were doing an excellent job as school board members.

The participants often spoke of experiences related to developing a healthy relationship with the community. The superintendent and board used various methods to interface with the community including in-person meetings, written communication, and personal communication to present information about significant changes transparently and gather input. The public meetings included meetings away from the school such as parish halls and community-owned buildings.
The superintendent and board built trust with the community concerning bond elections by ensuring they always followed through on the commitments made during bond election promotion. This encouraged support for bond elections in future years.

Superintendent participants made themselves available and served the community in settings outside of the school by serving in roles outside their formal responsibility such as bus driver, emergency medical technician (EMT), and member of a water association board.

The management of conflict was a significant feature in the experiences of participants. These experiences outlined how the participants maintained healthy relationships despite significant conflict. One very common theme in experiences related to conflict management was an underlying focus on the primary purpose of the school system, which is to do what is right for students. The focus on this virtue was a consistent premise in conflict-related experiences. The belief that differing approaches and plans of action on the part of the superintendent and board members were all rooted in the right motive was a very significant factor in the ability of participants to depersonalize disagreement and conflict. Depersonalization of conflict was also achieved through a belief in the democratic process, which allows for lively and passionate disagreement followed by a vote to select the most popular option.

Board members mediated public perceptions of conflict with each other by negotiating the conflict one-on-one instead of engaging in conflicting behavior during a public board meeting. Additionally, when conflict between board members arose the superintendent quickly intervened to help mediate the conflict.
One of the most striking reflections on the experiences of board members was the description of practices that were used after school board meetings when the participants would share a meal to de-escalate by shifting focus to more mundane topics, such as sports or the weather. The participants also followed conflicts during the board meetings with a conciliatory gesture, such as saying “good night,” “have a good one,” or shaking hands.

Participants’ experiences related to shared responsibility supported the development of healthy relationships. The most significant experiences related to shared responsibility were the process of problem-solving sessions to arrive at a solution derived from consensus and genuine consideration of all solutions proposed. The authentic nature of the process strengthened future processes by encouraging all involved to contribute their perspectives and arrive at a solution that could be supported by all.

There were some experiences of participants that seemed to very directly support the development of healthy relationships between school board members and the superintendent. One subtle, yet potent, mechanism for this was the avoidance of voting blocs on critical issues. Participants noted that the fact that board members avoided these “cliques” or voting blocs reinforced the faith that board members were acting on virtuous motives and not simply to manipulate majorities for personal advantage. Multiple participants mentioned avoiding this form of vote manipulation for ulterior motives, naming it through a Spanish colloquialism, “movida.”

Superintendents very explicitly explained their experiences in finding ways to straddle the importance of treating board members uniformly while getting to know board
members individually. This delicate balance allowed board members to trust the superintendent yet allowed the superintendent to understand individual board members’ interests and perspectives deeply.

Participants’ experiences related to superintendent evaluation, contract terms, and goal setting were replete with efforts to strengthen relationships. The board set the tone for evaluation as something that would necessarily contain recommendations for improvement since everyone has room for improvement. This sentiment included a message of support in terms of the board wanting to “help” the superintendent improve. In turn, the superintendent saw the evaluation process as a helpful process instead of an effort to find fault.

Investing adequate time and effort to develop appropriate goals and then frequently revisiting these goals helped develop a healthy evaluation process that minimized the potential for surprises during the formal evaluation process. This revisitation also allowed the board and superintendent to eliminate goals that were no longer relevant and did not require elevated attention. Finally, the evaluation of goals themselves became a mechanism for the refinement and improvement of goal setting in the future.

Contract terms were approached in a very pragmatic fashion. Initial contracts were shorter-term contracts of one to two years. After a probationary period in the new position, the board demonstrated support for the superintendent by offering an extended contract to the legally allowable three years. Further support of the superintendent was validated through rolling extensions of three-year contracts at the end of every contract.
period. In a related experience, one participant experienced frustration with an outgoing board when they offered an extended contract just before several new board members took office.

Participants expressed the importance of transparency in the work of the superintendent and board. The board demonstrated transparency by actively seeking input from the community on difficult decisions, like school closure. The community appreciated this transparency as they felt that the district had demonstrated a clear and logical need and were willing to engage with the community to deliberate solutions.

Another very delicate topic for superintendents and board members is the nature of their relationships with personnel decisions. The superintendent is not legally required to seek input from the board on these decisions, yet the superintendent participants extended invitations to provide input on these decisions to the board while maintaining the authority to make ultimate decisions. In response to this acquiescence, the board was careful not to exceed the limitations of this invitation by never demanding specific decisions. This was an example of a broader theme of avoiding micromanagement of the superintendent by the board. Board member participants discussed the need to trust the superintendent because they were the closest to work or the “boots on the ground.”

The fact that the school district in this study was located in a rural setting lent itself to many experiences directly related to this setting. One theme in these experiences was to ensure that recruited employees were made aware in advance of the limited resources available in the rural setting, including healthcare options and entertainment. The extreme winters were also a topic that required good faith warnings. Participants also
attributed many of the virtuous behaviors of superintendents and board members to the culture of a rural agricultural community that requires interdependence and trust of fellow community members.

Other experiences of participants that did not fall neatly into themed categories were the toll that the superintendency takes on family obligations, the belief that the presence of the county seat in the community drew unrest away from the school district, frustration with efforts to consolidate schools, the importance of avoiding influence outside of formal board hearings, frustrations with funding increases despite lack of academic performance of students, out of touch politicians in the capital city of Santa Fe, and frustrations with those satisfied with the status quo.

**Research Question Response**

The research question for this study was: What are the essential themes in lived experiences in the relationships between superintendents and school board members in a north-central New Mexico school district that successfully achieved low superintendent turnover over a 24-year period from 1997 to 2021? Based on the composite textural-structural description of participant experiences above, the essential themes are:

- The Importance of Positive Traits of a School Board Member
- The Importance of Positive Traits of a Superintendent
- Advantages of a Local Superintendent
- Effective New Board Member Transition, Training, and Mentorship
- Effective Communication
- Active Community Relationship Development
• Active Conflict Management
• Shared Responsibility
• Active Superintendent – Board Relationship Development
• A Persistent Focus on a Motive Centered on the Students
• Diligence in Evaluation, Goal Setting, and Earned Extended Contract Terms
• Trust through Transparency and Cautiously Deferential Role Division
• Appropriate Use of Legal Counsel
• The Successful Navigation of Challenges Related to a Rural School Setting
• The Importance of Confidentiality and Adherence to Official Procedures
Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

As intended, this investigation yielded many insights into the relationship between superintendents and school boards enabling extended superintendent tenures. The phenomenological approach to the study both enabled me to bracket my own experiences from the interview and analysis process and allowed the study to focus on the lived experiences of the superintendent and board member participants in the study.

Connections to the Literature

There were many parallels with the literature; although, this investigation successfully fleshed out the topics in the literature review by attaching real life experiences and genuine language to the topics that are often posed in a very mechanical and theoretical manner in most scholarly presentations on these topics. In the following sections, I breakdown the connections between the findings of this study and the literature.

Complexity and Tensions on Superintendents

The literature points to the specific issues that have created a complex and extremely tense environment for the superintendent, such as accountability measures, state and federal bureaucracies, teacher shortages, equity in education, culturally responsive instruction, social media, remote learning, and school finance (Bush et al., 2005; English, 2015; Fusarelli, 2006). It was interesting that few of these issues were specifically mentioned by the participants in this study. Instead, the participants described their universal approaches to navigating all challenging issues through a deliberate focus on the proper motive for decisions, on maintaining healthy relationships with other board
members, healthy relationships with the superintendent, and maintaining strong and proactive communication with parents and the community.

**Role Conflict**

Role conflicts in the superintendent-board relationship are inevitable (Antonucci, 2022; Dawson & Quinn, 2000). One of the most striking themes in the experiences of the participants in this study was the proactive solicitation of input by the superintendent despite technical restrictions on the role of the board. This is an extremely delicate balance and required the superintendent to offer input to the board without relinquishing final decisions and required school board members to use the input judiciously without overstepping their bounds by demanding decisions. This was a prime example of the “art-craft” of being a superintendent described by New Mexico Superintendent’s Association Executive Director, Stan Rounds (personal communication, March 3, 2022). The experiences of the participants in this study, many of whom were school board members, reflected the art-craft of being a school board member. It was critical that they responded to the invitation for input with caution and reserve, otherwise the relationship could have been destroyed and the superintendent could have retreated to holding the legal authority of the superintendency close and thereby disrupting the delicate yet powerful relationship that buttressed the ability for this district to maintain extended superintendent tenure.

**Superintendent-Board Relations and Trust**

Two common topics in the literature are the features of superintendent-board relations and trust (Bowers, 2016; Capulo, 2021; Casey, 2007, McAdams, 2009, Quesnel et al., 2021). The experiences in this study are a veritable master class in superintendent-
board relations and trust. In fact, many of the themes identified in the experiences of participants could be placed under a super category of Superintendent-Board Relations and Trust; these include New Board Member Transition and Training, Effective Communication; Active Conflict Management, Shared Responsibility, Active Superintendent-Board Relationship Development, Trust through Transparency and Deferential Role Division, and Importance of Confidentiality.

I conclude that the experiences of the participants in this study clearly fulfilled every one of the five fundamental elements of superintendent-board relations identified by Capullo (2021, p. 6):

- Community input – including administrators, teachers, students, parents, businesses, government agencies and residents – on the development of the district’s vision.
- Clearly defined responsibilities.
- Mutual respect.
- Flexibility and collaboration rather than authoritativeness.
- Prioritization of student achievement.

Further, I conclude that the experiences of the participants in this study clearly fulfilled the recommendations from Bowers (2016) for building trust in the mistrustful context of K-12 public education. Bowers describes the need to cultivate improved board relationships through the navigation of both individually tailored and uniform relationships. This need was also described by both Joe Guillen, Executive Director of the New Mexico School Boards Association (personal communication, February 23,
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2022) and Stan Rounds, Executive Director of the New Mexico School Superintendent’s Association (personal communication, March 3, 2022). The experiences of participants in this study also demonstrated the ability to mend initially untrustful relationships through mutual respect and demonstration of competence. Finally, through active pursuit of effective communication and relationship development, the superintendent and board avoided the potential pitfall of becoming insular to the needs of the community described by Bowers.

Navigating a Challenging Environment

Another area of the literature where the experiences of the participants in this study align with the literature is the navigation of challenging environments. White and Lineburg (2021) recommend four concrete recommendations for this navigation. The participants in this study demonstrate all of them:

1. Understanding the issues – superintendents were extremely diligent in making sure that board members were given all of the information necessary to understand the issues and decisions made or to be made so that they could articulate them clearly to constituents – beyond the what and into the why.

2. Centering on students – there were frequent references back to the fact that board members and superintendents made decisions in the best interest of students. Board members and superintendents accepted that even when there were disagreements and split decisions, that the decisions by individuals were made in the best interest of students.
3. Developing common language for communication – participants described the fact that board members were a conduit to the community and ensured that the superintendent and board were speaking in unison on difficult issues was prioritized. This was also reflected in efforts by the superintendent to get to know board members individually in order to encourage synchronization.

4. Protecting the superintendent – although most board members would not describe their actions as protecting the superintendent, the efforts to maintain clear and abundant communication, for the board to be well informed, and for the board to act as a conduit to the community reflect efforts to ensure that the community’s impressions of the superintendent were protected.

Evaluation

The literature describes the importance of superintendent evaluation (Davidson et al., 2019). The participants in this study described experiences related to the evaluation of the superintendent that aligned closely with the six most important factors in superintendent evaluation: 1) management of the financial affairs of the district; 2) maintaining the quality of the educational program; 3) relationships with employees; 4) developing and implementing long-term plans for the district; 5) student performance, measured by state-mandated assessments; 6) maintaining a safe environment for students (Davidson et al., 2019, p. 225).

Although their experiences were part of the introduction and not technically part of the literature review, I believe that it is certainly worth noting how closely the experiences of the exceptionally successful school board in this study aligned with the
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best practices described by Executive Director, Joe Guillen of the New Mexico School Boards Association and Executive Director, Stan Rounds of the New Mexico Superintendents Association. These two individuals demonstrated their vast level of experience with the things that work and those that do not when dealing with superintendents and school boards in the state of New Mexico. This practical experience is invaluable to the roles that they serve in the educational system.

Recommendations

Considering the literature review and results of this study, recommendations for superintendents, boards of education, and school communities have emerged. It should be noted that these recommendations are carefully targeted at superintendents and boards of education that want to prioritize the importance of seeking extended superintendent tenures by recognizing the advantages offered to the educational system by extended tenures.

Recruitment of Board Members

Communities, boards of education, and superintendents should be active in promoting the candidacy of potential board members who demonstrate traits that will be beneficial to a successful board of education. This promotion should include an arm’s length involvement from the superintendent with individual candidates but more of a solicitation of community members who embody certain traits. The desirable traits are:

- A motive for serving on the school board that is focused on the best for all students and not on vendettas or aspirations for higher political office.
A constitution that allows for the ability to find themselves on the losing end of a split vote and maintain respect for the majority by accepting that all board members are voting for proper motives.

• An ability to stand alone on issues and not default to bloc voting.

• Skills, qualities, and training from their background that will strengthen the overall skillset of the board, such as leadership development, conflict management, communication, finance, goal planning, supervision/evaluation, and common-sense decision-making.

• An ability to maintain confidentiality.

**Superintendent Traits**

Unlike the indirect influence that superintendents, boards of education, and communities have on the candidates for school board, the board of education has direct influence on the person that they select for a superintendent position. The traits of this individual should ideally include:

• Experience at many positions within the school system, including central office and multiple levels of schools. This experience allows for greater understanding of the challenges of those who work beneath them in an organizational chart. This also minimizes the need for school boards to ensure that new superintendents are properly transitioned into the superintendency.

• Skills related to staff management. These skills include recruitment, retention, holding staff responsible, appropriate assignment of staff, effective delegation, and dynamic personnel adjustment to meet evolving needs.
• Exceptional aptitude in school finance.
• The ability to be visible in the community and demonstrate approachability and engagement with students and community members.
• A passion for educational outcomes for all students, including those interested in pursuing direct entry into the workforce, career technical fields, entrepreneurship, or fields important to the local community like agriculture.
• Openness to seriously consider proposals brought forward by the school board.
• The ability to recognize the importance of school board members and respect their role in the educational system.
• The ability to walk away from a proposal not supported by the majority of the board.

Superintendent Traits for Local Candidates

Unless a board of education intends to move in a significantly new direction, the board should strongly consider internal candidates. Even if a local candidate is strongly considered, the board may want to open the position to outside candidates to provide a greater sense of validity to the ultimate selection. The internal candidates are likely to provide some of the following advantages:

• The superintendent is more vested in the success of the district because they may have grown up in the community and in the school system and they may have their own children, grandchildren, or other family members in the system.
• The board members may already know the candidate from personal interactions.

• The superintendent candidate may be able to better relate to the community.

**Board Member Transition and Training**

Boards of education should be very deliberate in their efforts to transition new board members into their new roles and to invest in the training of the board. This should include:

• Adequate budgeting for board training.

• Adequate time for board work sessions.

• Mentorship of new board members by veteran board members and the superintendent.

**Superintendent-Board Relations, Shared Responsibility, and Communication**

Superintendents and boards of education should actively pursue relationship development and strive to achieve healthy standards of communication that build and strengthen trust. This communication should include:

• Use of multiple and redundant communication methods for the exchange of critical information, including in-person consultations, phone conversations, email, and texts with escalation depending on the importance of the information to be communicated. Redundancy to utilize phone calls or texts as a flag about critical information sent out by email to ensure that critical information is not overlooked.
• To the extent possible, the superintendent accommodates unscheduled visits from the school board or at least visits with minimal notice.

• Reliance on the school board to be a mechanism for communicating important information to critical community stakeholders. This requires the superintendent to adequately communicate significant detail to the board and also requires school board members to invest the time and effort to understand the information fully. This information must include an understanding of why something is happening and not just what is happening.

• Uniform distribution of information to ensure that board members feel equity in their role on the board.

• Proactive sharing of information by the superintendent to ensure that the board is informed on matters that are likely to blow up in the community, via social media, or in traditional media coverage. This includes emergency situations at the school. This assists the board in maintaining healthy relationships with their constituents and provides board members an opportunity to demonstrate competence as a school board member.

• Efforts for superintendents and school board members to get to know each other as individuals.

• The superintendent should acknowledge board members in an honorific manner when in public settings. These actions demonstrated the superintendent’s respect for the role of board members.
• Board members should actively monitor the appearance of cliques or voting blocks to reinforce their standing with other board members. When board members trust that motivation is appropriate, they can more easily accept being in the minority on a split vote.

Community Relations

The nurturing of positive relationships with the community is critical and can be reinforced by:

• A unified superintendent-board presence at public events.

• Superintendent and board member visibility at school related public events and public events not directly related to the school. This presence provides the school board and community an opportunity to observe the superintendent interact with students and the public and for the community to interact informally with the superintendent and board members.

• The superintendent and board should use written communication, public meetings, and personal communications to present information about major changes in a transparent manner. The public meetings should include meetings at facilities away from the school, such as city facilities and other publicly owned buildings. Public meetings should also be used to solicit genuine input from the community about the plans for the district.
• The district should be diligent in the allocation of bond funds to projects that were included in the bond election promotion so that the community feels trust each time that a bond election is presented.

• When possible, the superintendent should make an effort to serve the community in roles outside of their official school role. Examples include serving as a bus driver, an emergency medical technician (EMT), or serving on community boards and councils. This makes the superintendent more relatable and demonstrates a lack of pretention to the community.

Conflict Management

Management of conflict may be the most important recommendation from this study. Participants described practices that should be considered best practices by many forms of governing bodies. These best practices include:

• Conflict mediation should focus on redirecting individuals to the primary objective of the school system, which is to support students.

• Whenever possible, conflict between individuals should be negotiated in private and not on public display.

• The superintendent should quickly attempt to defuse conflicts between board members by engaging in mediation between board members before the conflict becomes entrenched.

• Board members must accept the democratic process when they are on the losing end of a split vote. They should feel a genuine obligation to make the case for their perspective and vote accordingly but if they lose a vote, they
must do their best to accept it with no hard feelings and remain respectful of their fellow board members.

- Conflict management can be reinforced through social engagement opportunities that coincide with board meetings where board members can depersonalize their actions during the board meetings.

- Conflicts can be mediated by goodwill and friendliness such as saying “goodnight,” “have a good one,” or shaking hands at the end of meetings.

- Superintendent and board members should genuinely consider all solutions proposed by other board members and not dismiss an idea without true justification. This practice can help ensure that the board members feel heard and keep the consensus building process open and dynamic by creating a sense of trust in all members.

Evaluation and Goal Setting

Evaluation and goal setting are critical to a healthy superintendent-board relationship. Efforts in this area should include:

- The superintendent should hold an open mind on the evaluation process and take feedback as an opportunity to improve. The board of education can reinforce this by remaining focused on the evaluation process as an opportunity to truly assist the superintendent in succeeding and not simply using it as an opportunity to find fault.
• The board and superintendent should cooperatively create goals for the school year in a summertime work session so that expectations are clear to all involved.

• The superintendent and board should actively and continuously monitor progress toward goals throughout the year. Using this approach, there should be no surprises during formal evaluation.

• The superintendent should be active in preparing materials documenting the progress made on goals assigned during evaluation.

**Contracting**

• Boards of education should consider one or two-year initial contracts to minimize the risk of a costly contract buyout.

• Once a superintendent has demonstrated competency, the board of education should move to a three-year contract, the maximum allowable contract in New Mexico.

• After the first three-year contract, the board of education should move to a one-year extension at the end of each year to maintain a three-year contract. This reinforces the support of the superintendent by the board of education and creates a sense of confidence in the relationship between the superintendent and board and gives outside entities and individuals confidence in long-term commitments toward the school district.

• School boards should be cautious of extending contracts after a board election has taken place where there will be significant change in the make-up of the
board. This practice can doom a superintendency when a board feels that they were “stuck” with a long-term contract out of spite.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

There are many potential avenues to continue the research included in this study. During this investigation, I became much more aware of the intense nature of phenomenological research. Phenomenological research by an individual researcher limits either the number of participants, the duration of the study, or the breadth of the research question. In order to manage the demands of a phenomenological research approach the following strategies may allow for further investigation:

- The themes identified in this study could be isolated in a future study. A Phenomenological framework is ideal for deep investigation of human experience and therefore deep understanding of human behaviors. This would make a more focused study of a particular theme possible. With the focus on an individual theme, a researcher may be able to expand the participant pool to more districts and more varied community settings.

- A larger research team could take on a larger participant pool from more school districts to include varied community settings. A useful comparative study could be conducted to investigate the similarities and differences between the implications of rural versus urban and suburban school settings.

- An alternative approach to investigation could be to study the experiences of a school board with a history of short superintendent tenures. The findings of such a study could be used to contrast with the findings of this study.
• There are other school districts outside of north-central New Mexico that have had long-serving superintendents. These school districts include Rio Rancho Public Schools and Tucumcari Public Schools. Dr. Sue Cleveland has served as superintendent of the Rio Rancho Public Schools since the district’s creation in 1994, 29 years as of 2023. Aaron McKinney has served as superintendent in Tucumcari for 18 years as of 2023.

Final Thoughts

Finally, I find it useful to shed the phenomenological attitude and return to the natural attitude to reflect on the conclusions of this study and how they relate to my own experiences as an educational leader. In doing so, I am pleasantly surprised that the themes identified closely align with my experiences with board members and superintendents who exhibited the best traits in their respective roles. Before engaging in this study, I would have attributed most of the manifestation of these traits to their personalities and ethical motivations; however, this study has encouraged me to believe that there is great value in the aspirational culture of the relationship between the board and superintendent and between board members that can be explicitly identified and promoted.

Even though this study was conducted in a rural setting, I believe that most of the principles identified in this study would apply in other settings. However, it does seem that some of the recommendations associated with being local as a superintendent or board member get diluted when serving a large district with many schools reflecting many different contexts and demographics.
I see additional importance in recognizing that all but one of the participants in this study were born and raised in the community and the one participant who was not was married into a local family. Often, individuals involved in community leadership look outside the community to find expert leadership; this study is one example of a community finding successful leadership from within. This study indicates that the familiarity of individuals with the community, investment in the school system by having family in the school system as students and employees, and overall commitment to the success of the community played heavily into the motivation of participants toward positive outcomes from the superintendent-board relationship.

Perhaps the primary use of the findings and conclusions of this study is in superintendent and board member preparation and training. One specific area that would particularly benefit from this work is superintendent preparation. During my time working in public education, I have often encountered debates over superintendent preparation. These debates are commonly rooted in the potential need for an education leadership professional license that is differentiated for superintendents, apart from school-level and other school leadership positions. The most obvious set of skills that are needed in a superintendency that are not needed in other administrative positions are those related to successful interface and relationship-building with school boards.

Sources for superintendent training and preparation exist, including an Aspiring Superintendent’s program coordinated through the New Mexico School Superintendents Association and training programs through the National School Superintendents Association. The merits of these programs are sometimes debated, especially in contrast
to programs that exist or could be created by our state’s universities. The lack of traditional credibility that is associated with university programs is a commonly identified deficiency of programs that other organizations create. The need for additional training for superintendents is rarely doubted by those familiar with the role; however, the means of provision and mechanisms for ensuring fulfillment are much more controversial. I am confident that the findings and conclusions of this study would significantly bolster the curricula that are developed for superintendent training and preparation programs in any form that they take.

The themes identified in this study could be developed into training modules for superintendents and school boards that target idealized behaviors that support the development of a healthy and supportive environment that maximizes the potential for extended superintendent tenure, which will in turn maximize the benefits of such a situation – most importantly to the benefit of the students, families and communities served by the school system. I have seen firsthand the tremendous benefits that can be realized through the extended tenure of a well-prepared and appropriately intentioned superintendent. In my experience working with these districts, they have been able to move past the most fundamental challenges of budget and operations and begin tackling the more critical challenges of successful student outcomes.
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Appendix A

Map of North Central NM Districts
Appendix B

Interview Questions

A Phenomenological Study of Successful Superintendent Retention in a North-Central New Mexico School District

Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

Questions:
1. What are your experiences related to the initial hire of the superintendent?
2. What are your experiences related to the school board’s support of the superintendent when transitioning into the position?
3. What are your experiences related to the annual evaluation of the superintendent?
4. What are your experiences of dealing with conflict between the superintendent and board members?
5. What are your experiences of dealing with conflict between school board members?
6. What are your experiences related to the school board creating a shared ownership of difficult decisions?
7. What are your experiences of contract extensions of the superintendent?
8. What are your most significant overall experiences related to the retention of a superintendent in your school district?
9. What else would you like to share with me regarding your experiences related to superintendent retention?

As Moustakas recommends, I will ask the interviewee one or more of the follow-up questions if I perceive that the interviewer’s response has not yielded sufficient depth for analysis (1994, p. 116):

- What incidents and people intimately connected with the experience stand out for you?
- How did the experience affect you? What changes do you associate with the experience?
- How did the experience affect significant others in your life?
- What feelings were generated by the experience?
- What thoughts stood out for you?
- What bodily experiences or states were you aware of at the time?
- Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the experience?
Appendix C

Interview Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Successful Superintendent Retention in a North-Central New Mexico School District
November 21, 2022
Consent for Interview

Adán Delgado, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, is conducting a research study under the supervision of his faculty advisor, Dr. Allison M. Borden. The purpose of the research is to learn about the lived experiences of superintendents and school board members who have achieved the rare accomplishment of low superintendent turnover in a north-central New Mexico school district. You are being asked to participate because you served as a superintendent or school board member in your local school district between the years of 1997 and 2021. If you were a school board member, you were randomly selected from those who served as school board members during this time. Your responses will add to an emerging body of knowledge on how to improve the retention of school superintendents.

Your participation will involve taking part in an interview that will take about 60-90 minutes to complete. The interview will take place either in person, via telephone, or via Zoom based on your preference. I will audio record all interviews. The interview includes questions such as the following:

- What are your experiences related to the school board’s support of the superintendent when transitioning into the position?
- What are your experiences of dealing with conflict between the superintendent and board members?

Your involvement in the research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. Data will be stored on the student investigator’s laptop, in his home, physically secured by lock, and electronically secured by password.

All identifiable information will be removed from the information collected in this project. The information from this study will not be used for future research or shared with other researchers.

The findings from this project will provide information about the retention of superintendents. If published, results will be presented in summary form only. Although the research is intended to improve superintendent retention, you will not receive direct benefits by participating in this study.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please feel free to call Dr. Allison M. Borden, the student investigator’s faculty advisor, at 505-277-1285. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, please contact the UNM Office of the IRB (OIRB) at 505-277-2644 or oirb.unm.edu.

By taking part in the interview, you are agreeing to participate in the study.
Appendix D

UNM IRB Approval Letter

Date: 12/13/2022
Principal Investigator: Allison Borden
Protocol Number: 2211027598
Protocol Title: A Phenomenological Study of Successful Superintendent Retention in a North-Central New Mexico School District
Submission Type: Initial
Committee Action: APPROVAL
Approval Date: 12/14/2022
Expiration Date:
Review Type: Minimal Risk
Risk Level: Minimal Risk
Project Status: Active - Open to Enrollment

The University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board has granted approval for the above referenced protocol. This approval is based on an acceptable risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks to participants have been minimized. This project is not covered by UNM’s Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and will not receive federal funding.

This approval includes the following:
Protocol - 1 Adan Delgado IRB Protocol v11.21.22.docx
Informed Consent Document - 3 Adan Delgado Consent Form 11.21.22.docx
Questionnaire/Survey - 4 Adan Delgado Interview Ques v11.21.22.docx
CV/Resume - 6 Adan Delgado Resume 11.10.22.pdf
Scientific Review Form - Delgado Scientific Validity Form Signed.pdf

The IRB made the following determinations:
Informed Consent must be obtained and documentation has been waived. To obtain consent, use only approved consent document(s).

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission and does not apply should any changes be made to this research. If changes are being considered, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit an amendment to this project and receive IRB approval prior to implementing the changes. A change in the research may disqualify this research from the current review category. If federal funding will be sought for this project, an amendment must be submitted so that it can be reviewed under relevant federal regulations.

All reportable events must be promptly reported to the UNM IRB, including: unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, serious or unexpected adverse events, and noncompliance issues. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

If an expiration date is noted above, a continuing review or closure submission is due no later than 30 days before the expiration date. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to apply for continuing review or closure and receive approval for the duration of this protocol. If the IRB approval for this protocol expires, all research related activities must stop and further action will be required by the IRB.

Please use the appropriate reporting forms and procedures to request amendments, continuing review, closure, and reporting of events for this protocol. Refer to the OIRB website for forms and guidance on submissions.

Note that all IRB records must be retained for a minimum of three years after closure.
Appendix E

Discrete Composite Experiences by Theme

The participants in this study described their experiences with the positive traits that reflected the practices of a good board member. In their descriptions, the traits of a good board member included:

- The board members leveraged valuable skills obtained from their lives outside of their work on the board to enhance their performance as board members; these skills included leadership and conflict management.
- Familiarity and relationships with other board members and superintendent from life outside of the school board enhanced the strength of relationships.
- Individuals possess high quality of character, integrity, politeness, listening, and loyalty.
- Aspirations that are limited to work on the school board and not higher office.

The participants in this study described their experiences with the positive traits that reflected a good superintendent. In their experiences, the traits of a good superintendent included:

- Pre-existing experiences at various levels of school staffing. These included teaching, coaching, principal, and central office administrative roles.
- Pre-existing experiences that minimized the need for the district to coordinate significant transitioning of the new superintendent. These experiences include familiarity with the school district at which the superintendent candidate is applying to be superintendent.
• Familiarity and relationships with board members from life outside of the school board. This familiarity allows for deeper superintendent-board relationships.

• Skills related to staff management. These skills include recruitment, retention, holding staff responsible, appropriate assignment of staff, effective delegation, and dynamic adjustment of personnel to meet evolving needs.

• Aptitude in areas relating to school finance. Specifically, guiding the district through times of fiscal austerity – moving the district from emergency supplemental funding to a fiscal surplus. This was demonstrated by proposing novel solutions to financial challenges. This is also demonstrated by being intimately familiar with the schools finances and being able to answer questions about them without relying too heavily on the district business official.

• Visibility in the community where the superintendent was seen connecting with community members and students. This visibility demonstrates true care for the students in the school district and demonstrates the students’ perception of the superintendent as approachable and relatable.

• Demonstrating a true passion for the educational outcomes for all students, including those interested in pursuing careers in career technical fields, entrepreneurship, or agriculture.

• Demonstration of a charismatic and fun nature when appropriate and the ability to recognize the context requiring more formal disposition.
• Openness to serious consideration of recommendations from the school board.

• Demonstration of a strong work ethic. This work ethic was seen through engagement in after-hour school events and early morning commitments, like inclement weather evaluation.

• Demonstration of responsiveness to the school board. The superintendent responded in a timely manner and followed through on commitments made to the board members.

• Respect for the school board members. This was seen in the reverence offered to school board members, by acknowledging them in public settings as school board members, by having an open door to school board members when they seek time with the superintendent, and by working to welcome new board members through a thorough orientation.

• Acceptance that every initiative proposed by the superintendent did not garner majority support from the board. When an initiative was not supported by a majority of the board when probed, the superintendent let it go and moved on to more productive endeavors.

• Avoidance of involvement in the politics of school board elections. This avoidance made healthy relationships more likely once the election takes place and candidates became board members.

• Provided access to key district personnel yet has a thorough understanding of all aspects of district operations and did not solely rely on staff. This broad
and deep knowledge of the district encouraged trust and discouraged the temptation to micromanage.

In a theme closely related to superintendent traits, the participants described their experiences related to hiring a local superintendent. These experiences included:

- The superintendent is more vested in the success of the district because they grew up in the community and in the school system, they have kids and grandkids in the system.
- The board members felt that they already knew the superintendent candidate because he had grown up in their community, had attended school in the community, and had a long career in the school district.
- Being from the community allowed the superintendent to relate to the community members.
- A superintendent passed up twice for the superintendent position waited out two non-local candidates who had failed superintendencies that lasted less than a year each. The non-local superintendents created work schedules where they were often only in-district for three days per week.
- The school board opened the vacant superintendent position to outside candidates, but the internal candidate was able to clearly demonstrate a superior fit for the job, due to complete familiarity with the district’s needs.
- The school board opened the vacant superintendent position to outside candidates, which provided credibility to the selection.
The participants in this study described their experiences with new member transition and training. Their experiences included:

- The use of work sessions held outside of the district allowed for a non-distracted setting for board training.

- When board members attended training individually, they were encouraged to present what they had learned from the training to the rest of the board members. This encouraged buy-in from other board members when the training included the need to change practices in the district.

- New board members were taken “under the wing” of veteran board members. This not only helps the new board member to learn their new role but also encouraged healthy relationships between board members.

- The superintendent acted as a support to assist the new board members as they transition into their new roles. This support was especially valuable when the superintendent is a veteran superintendent and possessed much experience. This support also included a well-planned orientation for the new board members, including site visits to district sites.

Communication was a strong theme in the experiences of participants. Experiences with effective communication included:

- Multiple and redundant communication mediums were used to keep board members well-informed about district happenings. The communication medium should reflect the urgency of the notification. For example, a text message is more appropriate to notify about a lockdown. If an important email
was sent out, a text message was sent to remind the board member to look at the email. When appropriate for more complex matters, a phone call or a face-to-face meeting took place.

- Superintendent evaluations included expectations for healthy communication.
- The board was used to help communicate critical information to the community. This was an effective method of distributing information and strengthens board member relationships with their constituents.
- The superintendent uniformly distributed information to all board members so that each board member felt equally informed.
- The superintendent informed the board early about incidents that can blow up in social media or electronic communication. This allowed board members to be well prepared when the community reached out to them. When the board is well informed about the situation, they are better prepared to discuss the situation with their constituents and have an opportunity to demonstrate that they are doing a good job as a board member.

The study participants experienced the deliberate nurturing of community relations as work done by the superintendent and board members. Their experiences included:

- The board demonstrated unity by attending public events together. This practice demonstrated unity.
- The superintendent was visible at community events and was seen interacting with the community members, parents, and students in a healthy way.
The superintendent and board used written communication, public meetings, and personal communications to present information about major changes in a transparent manner. The public meetings included meetings at facilities away from the school, such as parish halls and community-owned buildings. Public meetings were also used to solicit genuine input from the community about plans for the district.

The district was diligent in the allocation of bond funds to projects that were included in the bond election promotion so that the community felt trust each time that a bond election was presented.

The superintendent made an effort to serve the community in roles outside of their official school role, such as serving as a bus driver, an EMT, member of the community water association, and parish council. This made the superintendent more relatable and demonstrated a lack of pretention to the community – “a leader among equals.”

During some of the time of this study, the board was open to ad hoc input at board meetings. One participant felt that this was critical to strong community relations and that formalizing the need to sign in and only speak during a designated comment period undermined the true role of the board, which is to represent the public.

The participants expressed many experiences with conflict management practices. Since these practices contained much overlap with consensus building the experiences were combined below. These experiences included:
• When conflict arose between two individuals, the conflict was negotiated in private and not on public display.

• The superintendent quickly defused conflicts between board members by engaging in mediation between board members when a conflict arose.

• Conflicts were mediated by redirecting individuals to focus on the primary objective of the school system, to support students.

• Disagreements were depersonalized by building confidence that all parties had appropriate motives of supporting students and not feeling that board members positions and decisions were motivated by ulterior motives or movidas. Movida in the Spanish vernacular of the area is a private deal to conspire for a hidden benefit.

• The board informed the superintendent about hot button issues that are developing in the community so that the superintendent could work to address them quickly.

• A new board member elected with a hidden agenda of retribution was mentored by a veteran board member to get them to a place where they understood the limitations of the board and trusted that actions of the superintendent and board were appropriate.

• The board internally addressed an accusation of harassment of a district staff member by a board member. The matter was addressed by the superintendent in a closed session and the board member acknowledged the expectation for correction and the issue was resolved immediately.
• The board accepted the democratic process when they were on the losing end of a split vote. They felt the genuine obligation to make the case for their perspective and vote but if they lost the vote, they accepted it with no hard feelings and remained respectful of their fellow board members. Some of the conflicts were decompressed by meals after board meetings where board members could socialize and depersonalize their actions during the board meeting. Despite differences in votes, the board remained loyal to each other. Board members would always leave meetings, even those with passionate disagreement, with acts of friendliness such as saying “goodnight,” “have a good one,” or shaking hands.

• Avoiding situations observed from other school boards where a split vote left some board members with a “you are dead to me” relationship. Board members accepted being on the losing side of a split vote as part of the democratic process.

• The Superintendent and board members genuinely considered all solutions proposed by board members and did not dismiss the idea without true justification. This practice made the board feel heard and kept the consensus building process open and dynamic by creating a sense of trust by all members.

The participants had many experiences that reflected the acceptance of shared responsibility. These experiences included:
• Focus on what is best for students. When other board members trusted that other board members shared this same motivation for votes, they were able to accept a lost split vote and get behind the will of the majority.

• By ensuring that board members had access and had put the effort into understanding adequate information on difficult decisions, the board found it easier to own responsibility.

• The board shared in responsibility for the district by creating and evaluating themselves on the achievement of goals.

• The board was sure to make it clear to the superintendent that their evaluation was meant to support the superintendent by letting them know where they could improve and give the superintendent feedback on progress.

• The superintendent and board attended public functions together to present a united front.

• The superintendent and school board engaged in genuine problem-solving sessions to create shared approaches to solving problems. In these sessions, all board members were not only invited to actively engage, but they were also expected to actively engage.

• The superintendent and board engaged in a reflective evaluation of solutions implemented to gauge the effectiveness and inform future efforts.

Success in many of the areas discussed above relies on an active effort to build relationships between the superintendent and school board members and between school board members. The participants’ experiences in this area included:
• The superintendent and board members leverage relationships outside of school settings to strengthen school-based relationships.

• The superintendent actively got to know each school board member personally. This allowed the superintendent to better understand board members’ positions on issues and to assist in mediation when the need arose.

• Board members actively monitored the appearance of cliques or voting blocks to reinforce their standing with other board members. This effort was perceived as voting on differing approaches to the ultimate objective of supporting students. When board members trusted that motivations are appropriate, they can more easily accept being in the minority on a split vote.

• Having key district staff at board meetings allowed the board to get to know the staff and personalize their role in the district. It also allowed them to ask questions and hear directly from the staff member about their motivations and perspectives.

• The superintendent made sure to have meals in concert with board meetings. Some of the meals were potluck style “family-style” events where all staff and board members contributed to the effort. One participant made sure to describe the de-escalation that could happen after a tense board meeting by having a meal and talking about mundane topics outside of the school setting, like sports or the weather.

• Despite knowing each board member as an individual, it was critical that each board member felt that they were equal members on the board by receiving
equal treatment and ensuring that each board member received precisely the same information.

- The board made an effort to joke and have fun at the board meetings, especially when public attendance was low or non-existent.
- The superintendent acknowledged board members in an honorific manner when in public settings. These actions demonstrated the superintendent’s respect for the role of board members.
- One participant expressed the need for board members to sometimes abstain from votes instead of voting in opposition to minimize offense to the majority.
- One participant noted their willingness to step down as chairperson to allow for the position to be held by other members.

The theme of motive is interwoven in several of the themes above; however, it was prominent enough in the experiences of the participants to address separately. These experiences included:

- The ultimate motive for all actions on the board should first consider the best interest of students.
- When the superintendent and board members have their own children and grandchildren in the school system, they have a vested interest in all actions of the district. This situation also gives the superintendent and board member a closed loop feedback system on their official actions.
- The board developed a trusting relationship because the primary motive of serving on the board of education was singular and did not include the use of
the elected position as a steppingstone for other political positions, such as county commissioner or legislature.

- The board quickly moved to mentor a new board member who arrived their position with a pre-determined agenda created by the influence of disgruntled former staff members. With care and patience, the board member abandoned their agenda and became a successful board member.

- The board was able to feel comfortable in expressing their opposing perspectives when there was a mutual acceptance of appropriate motives despite different perspectives on issues.

- The board can represent appropriate motives by voting issue by issue and not in alignment with other board members. When this is achieved trust from other board members is strengthened.

Evaluation of the superintendent, goals setting, and contract terms are all closely related themes. The experiences of participants in these areas included:

- The superintendent held an open mind on the evaluation process and took feedback as an opportunity to improve.

- The board communicated to the superintendent that their intent for the evaluation was to “help” them be a better superintendent.

- The board and superintendent cooperatively created goals for the school year in a summertime work session so that expectations were clear to all involved.
• The superintendent and board actively and continuously monitored progress toward goals throughout the year. Due to this approach, there were no surprises during the formal evaluation.

• The superintendent and board actively monitored goals and at times would amend or remove the goals if they were no longer appropriate.

• By communicating on the premise that there is always room for improvement, the evaluation process minimized the expectation of not receiving any corrective feedback.

• The superintendent prepared materials documenting the progress made on goals assigned during evaluation. This information assisted in ensuring a smooth process.

• One participant heard of a superintendent being notified about being terminated during the holidays and then committed suicide. This participant believes that the holidays should be avoided for evaluation due to the many time constraints and stresses at this time.

• The public nature of the superintendent’s role creates a situation where the superintendent is being evaluated every day.

• When the board could not agree on an evaluation instrument, they reached out to the New Mexico School Board’s Association for a model instrument.

• One participant felt that the evaluation process was not rigorous enough and needed more objective measures of goal attainment. This participant felt that
the process was would not hold up to a challenge though litigation if a termination was every needed.

- Initial contracts were limited to one or two years in order to allow the new superintendent to acclimate to the position and prove themselves before a longer-term contract. This minimizes the financial exposure to the district from a costly buy-out if things are not working in the initial contract term. The superintendent appreciated the need for this caution.

- Once the superintendent proved themselves, the board moved to an extended contract and added perpetual rollovers of an additional year as the years passed. This demonstrated clear commitment and faith to the superintendent.

- Long-term contract commitment placed a long-term responsibility on decisions made by the superintendent.

- Extended tenures of superintendents contributed to credibility of school district when state-level decision makers considers support of projects in the district.

- One participant was frustrated with the fact that an incoming board inherited a long-term contract offered by an outgoing board.

Transparency was identified as a theme within the experiences of the participants. Although the term was not often used, the goal of transparency was often linked to the development of trust in the relationship. Participants also described experiences related to role division, which in this context is closely tied to transparency. The experiences of participants in these areas included:
• Despite the technical removal of the authority of the school board in personnel matters, the superintendent chose to include the board by asking them to provide input in certain hiring decisions, especially hires from within the community. The superintendent also informed the board about certain controversial personnel matters. The school board respected the limited nature of their inclusion in personnel matters by never overstepping their limits by demanding hires.

• The superintendent demonstrated transparency by being approachable and willing to take visits from the board without the need for scheduling appointments.

• By soliciting input from the board on critical decisions, the superintendent demonstrated transparency in decision-making.

• The superintendent and board demonstrated transparency by actively pursuing community input through a variety of mechanisms, including holding meetings in community spaces away from the school.

• The board resisted the temptation to micromanage the superintendent. Because the superintendent is on the ground every day, they are the person closest to the needs of the day-to-day operation. The board stuck to its official responsibilities of budget, employing the superintendent, and setting policy.

In both superintendent and board member roles, participants experienced the need to make use of legal counsel; however, noting that it should be used sparingly due to cost.
Participants reported experiences related to the rural setting of the school district. The participants’ experiences included:

- Being diligent in making sure that recruits were aware of limited entertainment, health care, and difficulties brought on by extreme winter conditions.
- The participants described experiences related to the interdependent nature of a rural agricultural community and how the values and norms of the community reflected on the culture of the school district, superintendent, and school board.
- Participants described experiences of being able to trust the intended confidentiality of the closed session and never having an instance where something discussed in a closed session leaked. This encouraged the ability of the superintendent and board to express their most heartfelt perspectives, to disagree passionately, while not putting these displays in public view.

Participants’ experiences that did not fit neatly into any of the categories above are included below:

- One participant described experiencing reflection on the fact that the superintendency places a heavy toll on the family, especially in terms of the time required.
- One participant expressed that the presence of the county seat in the same community as the district drew community unrest away from the school.
• One participant expressed experiencing frustration with efforts to consolidate schools in the district, which the participant vehemently opposed.

• One participant expressed the experience of resisting the efforts of individuals to influence the deliberations of a hearing and instead dismissed the individual’s efforts by letting them know that the board could only consider what was presented in the hearing. The adherence to policy and procedure was expressed by a second participant who reminded a board member that they only carry authority when in a board meeting.

• One participant expressed experiencing frustration with the fact that schools are getting funding increases without a demonstration of improvement.

• One participant expressed experiencing frustration with Santa Fe politicians being out-of-touch with school boards.

• One participant described experiencing frustration with the majority of the board being satisfied with the status quo.
### Sample Interview Analysis Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>interview Horizons / Meaningful Ideas</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Textual/Descriptive</th>
<th>Verbatim Quotes</th>
<th>Structural Description</th>
<th>Textual Structural Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from veteran board members.</td>
<td>Board Member Transition</td>
<td>Veteran board member support new board member.</td>
<td>I think that I was very lucky because when I came in there were some veteran board members that were already there that kind of took me under their wing, and were able to help me become a better board member. Right, and... and teach me kind of how things were run.</td>
<td>Veteran board members actively involve new board members.</td>
<td>New board members are taken under the wing of veteran board members to help them transition into their new role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from veteran superintendent.</td>
<td>Board Member Transition</td>
<td>Veteran superintendent supports new board member.</td>
<td>And we... we were very fortunate because Mr. (name) was there, I think he was maybe 15 or 16 years before, when he decided that he wanted to retire.</td>
<td>Veteran superintendent mentors new board members.</td>
<td>New board members are supported by veteran superintendent into new role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant superintendent transitions into superintendent.</td>
<td>Superintendent from Within</td>
<td>Assistant superintendent hired to become superintendent.</td>
<td>Well, of course, (name) was the assistant superintendent at the time. So (name) had... had... had all the experience of being in the schools, knew the students, knew the faculty, knew the policies in and out. And... it was... it was great that he was able to step in and apply for that superintendent position. So he knew of us... we did go out, and we had some interviews and stuff... but... but he was by far the... the best candidate for the job. Right? So... so we were fortunate in the matter that he was there for a long time, and... and... and he was the man for the job.</td>
<td>Assistant superintendent was clearly the best candidate for superintendent.</td>
<td>Due to extensive knowledge of the district, the assistant superintendent was clearly the best candidate for the superintendent position when the veteran superintendent retired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened superintendent position to outside candidates.</td>
<td>Superintendent position opened to outside applicants.</td>
<td>Opened superintendent position to outside candidates.</td>
<td>We didn’t do it, and we had some interviews and stuff... but... but he was for the... the best candidate for the job.</td>
<td>The board selected the superintendent.</td>
<td>To opening up the superintendent position to outside candidates, they established the selection of the assistant superintendent for the position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smooth transition for new superintendent.</td>
<td>Superintendent Transition</td>
<td>Board member perceived a smooth transition for new superintendent.</td>
<td>Forward (1)... it was a really smooth transition, because (name) already knew... at the time the superintendent already knew pretty much what was going on in the boardroom, right out of the gate... it... it was a pretty smooth transition in that, in that sense.</td>
<td>The new superintendent had been the assistant superintendent.</td>
<td>The fact that the new superintendent had been the assistant superintendent facilitated a smooth transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former relieved superintendent still available to support the new superintendent.</td>
<td>Superintendent Transition</td>
<td>Board member felt supported by former relieved superintendent during transition to new superintendent.</td>
<td>And then (name) was always there as well and could... could support us. He always knew the ins and outs of... of our work... our... of the organization. He was always there as a reference to... people, or to call upon. So that was really big help.</td>
<td>The former superintendent made themselves available.</td>
<td>By continuing to offer support to the board and new superintendent, the former superintendent facilitated a smooth transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitution of goals by chairman of board.</td>
<td>Superintendent Evaluation</td>
<td>The board reached consensus on goals for superintendent evaluation.</td>
<td>We, we would... we would come up with some questions. And as a group... as a board... we would decide what were the most important things for the future of the district and the students.</td>
<td>What was most important for the success of the district.</td>
<td>Through consensus, the board decided on what items the superintendent would be evaluated, based on what was most important to the district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board member felt guided by the superintendent.</td>
<td>Superintendent Professional</td>
<td>The board member left comfortable and knowledge provided by the superintendent.</td>
<td>And we didn’t really have much conflict between the superintendent and the Board members. His,... the superintendent was always there to guide us, right, and give us information on the school site... or any questions that we had, he would always answer for them. There was... there was a... while... in... there was a... there was no conflict to tell you the truth. Either Mr. (name) or... or with Mr. (name).</td>
<td>Personal and democratic compliance of superintendent.</td>
<td>Through familiarity and demonstrated competence, the superintendent was seen as a guide to the school board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between board members handled with respect.</td>
<td>Conflict: Mediation</td>
<td>Board members would self-mediate conflicts.</td>
<td>Conflict between school board members, we... we kind of just handled it, with respect. Right? My board members didn’t really agree with the way things were going. And we would discuss it, right? We... we just kind of worked together, and we just had to. Okay. What? What do you suggest that we do? All right, if... if this is the problem, what’s your direction, or what’s your advice as to getting this conflict squashed right? So there was a lot of times that we would talk to each other.</td>
<td>Respectful problem solving.</td>
<td>Board members would self-mediate conflict through respectful problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships outside of board need to respectful relationships on the board.</td>
<td>Relationship Outside of School</td>
<td>Respectful relationships (trust) outside of board.</td>
<td>Well, I think one of the biggest things is that we were all local, right, so we kind of all grew up together. And then, like Mr. (name), Mr. (name), we knew them since we was a kid. His... his brother (name) was my... was my high school football coach, my junior high coach. So we, we... we... we worked at the assistant’s office at the county, and when I came out of college I started working at the county. And I was able to kind of ride elbows with him, right, and... and work alongside of him. And just, I think, just the mutual respect we had for each other. And... I think like... like, how do you treat each other, right.</td>
<td>Growing up, living, and working together.</td>
<td>Due to the fact that board members had grown up, lived, and worked together, they more able to work respectfully with each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board open to ideas different than their own.</td>
<td>Consensus building and brainstorming.</td>
<td>Board members are open to new solutions.</td>
<td>First of all, not having a chip on your shoulder. Not always thinking the way is the only way. Because people have other ideas that might work better than the idea that you have.</td>
<td>Board members held belief that their way is not the only way.</td>
<td>By remaining open to solutions presented by other board members, the board remained open to consensus building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of majority decision when vote is split.</td>
<td>Consensus building and brainstorming.</td>
<td>Accept majority vote.</td>
<td>Well, you know, there was some difficult things... if that had to be done while I was there, right, and it, of course, you never make everybody happy. So some individuals were upset with us, right, and some of the other individuals accepted what the decision was made. So... so it was like, we said we... we would get together and... and... and listen to each other for advice.</td>
<td>When a board member was in the minority, on a decision, they accepted it without holding a grudge.</td>
<td>Board members maintained a positive relationship by accepting decisions for which they were in the minority.</td>
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<td>Board sought input from public, constituents, superintendent along with other board members.</td>
<td>Community relations and consensus building.</td>
<td>Board seeks consensus from public, constituents, superintendents, along with other board members.</td>
<td>We’ve been... we’ve put public input to what the public thought our constituents wanted. So it was... it was kind of an overall team effort. And... and there was times that we included the superintendent as well, right, because of experience in... in the schools and experience with policy. So, we... we just worked together. We worked it work.</td>
<td>Seeking input from public, constituents, superintendent.</td>
<td>The board maintains a positive relationship with the public, constituents, and superintendent by seeking input from them on difficult decisions.</td>
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<td>Initial short term contract for superintendent.</td>
<td>Short-term Contract</td>
<td>Board offers short-term first contract.</td>
<td>Some wanted a year to year contract right, and that happened the first year? Right? And... and... just like any other position, right? I think... I think a superintendent coming into a position like this, I think they need a chance to prove themselves, right? Because the first... if you go year to year contract, the first year that you’re there, you’re in a learning environment, unless you’ve been there over some time, right? And it’s just like the any other position like a basketball coach, right? It’s not going to go and turn the program around in one year, right? So the year to year you can continue them for like a year or?</td>
<td>The board is cautious for the year.</td>
<td>The board demonstrates prudence and caution by offering a short-term first contract to monitor performance.</td>
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<td><strong>Extended subsequent contracts.</strong></td>
<td>Long-term Contract</td>
<td>Board transitions to long-term contract.</td>
<td>Not. Then, after he showed his experience and ability to lead the school and be the leader of the (as the superintendent) in that position, it got extended to 3 year contracts... but then eventually you kind of wear out and give them 5 years contracts... 3 year contracts because there... there is a learning curve.</td>
<td>Confirmation of performance.</td>
<td>After witnessing performance under short-term first contracts, the board transitions to long-term contract to support long-term relationship.</td>
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<td><strong>Long tenure is a good thing.</strong></td>
<td>Long tenure.</td>
<td>Long tenure.</td>
<td>Well, of course, I was only there for 4 years, right? So, I... I know that the board is happy with him. He's... I know he's been there. What? 14 years. 13 years. So, that kind of speaks for himself, right?</td>
<td>Confirmation of board satisfaction.</td>
<td>The board demonstrates satisfaction through long tenure held by superintendent.</td>
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<td><strong>Rapport with students is part of doing a great job.</strong></td>
<td>Rapport with students.</td>
<td>Rapport with students.</td>
<td>It's got a... a great rapport with the... with the children, and he... he... he's done a great job.</td>
<td>Demonstration of rapport with students.</td>
<td>Superintendent demonstrates doing a great job by having rapport with students.</td>
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<td><strong>Trust your superintendent.</strong></td>
<td>Trust in superintendent.</td>
<td>Trust in superintendent as the boss on the ground.</td>
<td>Think you just have to have trust in your superintendent, right? He's... he's the boss on the ground. We come around monthly, go over financials and other type of problems that we might have, but he's the boss on the ground, so he's involved in the everyday activities. So, I think you just have to have trust in him and let him do his job. I think that's the most important part.</td>
<td>Appreciation of the day-to-day knowledge of the district.</td>
<td>By appreciating that the board has a small view of the day-to-day operations, the board trusts the superintendent to do their job and not micromanage.</td>
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<td><strong>Board delegates power.</strong></td>
<td>Delegation of power and task division and micromanagement.</td>
<td>Board wants a &quot;yes man&quot; approach.</td>
<td>Think some school board members or boards want to say yes, man, right? I want this person in, I want that person in. Well, that's... that's not your job. Your job, your... your only employee, is the superintendent, right? So, the superintendent does all the other hiring. And I think it... if you're able to sit back as a board and recognize that, and you can pull for things that you want. ... I think a board you'll be more successful.</td>
<td>Trust in superintendent.</td>
<td>The board allows the superintendent to do their job by delegating power.</td>
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<td><strong>Confidence in superintendent built through follow through on question responses.</strong></td>
<td>Confidence in superintendent.</td>
<td>Confidence in superintendent.</td>
<td>Yeah, it's just he was always... he was always there to answer any questions that we had, and if he didn't have the answer he'd look into it, and he'd use his other resources, right? He'd ask for... his business manager, said he was a lot as a resource. And he (at... I)... I know he was the man for the job.</td>
<td>Responsiveness and follow-through.</td>
<td>By demonstrating responsiveness and follow-through, the superintendent built trust and confidence from the board.</td>
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