

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRGINIA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The position of public school superintendent is one that is filled with many challenges and opportunities. A more in depth awareness of the leadership characteristics of public school superintendents enhance the understanding of this very complex role in today's society. The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. Additionally, this study gathered and evaluated perspectives from practicing superintendents and their board chairpersons to determine similarities and differences between the perceptions of these two groups.

The population selected for this study was comprised of all 132 K-12 public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia during the 2008-2009 school year. Additionally, all 132 Virginia school board chairpersons were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 101 responses were received from the survey population of Virginia school superintendents. This represented an overall survey return rate of 76.52%. A total of 70 responses were received from the survey population of Virginia school board chairpersons, representing a return rate of 53.03%.

The respondents were asked to read 17 statements regarding the activities and characteristics related to the job of superintendent and answer from 1 to 4, strongly disagree to strongly agree. In addition, respondents were asked to rank in order of

importance ten superintendent leadership characteristics, with the value of 1 corresponding to the most important characteristic. The perceived ratings were then rank-ordered based upon the composite mean of the ratings of each individual leadership characteristics.

Superintendents and school board chairpersons agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are the most essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. Superintendents and school board chairpersons also agreed that effective communication with board members, division and school staffs, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.

Both superintendents and school board chairpersons perceived visionary leader as the most important leadership characteristic, relative to all the characteristics rated. Superintendents indicated that instructional leader was the second most important characteristic, while school board chairpersons perceived this characteristic as the third most important. Superintendents rated effective school board relations as the third most important characteristic, while school board chairpersons ranked this as their fourth most important characteristic.

Statistically significant differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school board chairpersons were observed for the following characteristics: professional development experience, politically astute, and team builder. Superintendents perceived professional development experience to be significantly less important than did school board chairpersons. The superintendents perceived politically astute to be significantly more important characteristic than the school board chairpersons. Finally, school board

chairpersons considered the characteristic of team builder to be significantly more important than superintendents.

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To my loving wife, Donna: thank you so much for supporting and believing in me. Your love is a real and constant force in my life. Thank you for all the personal and professional sacrifices that you have made for me and our family. May God continue to bless you.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Donna and my daughters, Alexis, Alyssa, and Alayna. This achievement could not have been realized without your support and constant encouragement. I love you all more than mere words can express.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my mother, Dolly Thornton, who has always been a role model and inspiration to me. I also dedicate this study to my father, Robert Thornton, and my sister, Robin Charles. Finally, I dedicate this accomplishment to Dr. J.L. White, Sr. and the late Mary T. White.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The public school superintendent has one of the most demanding and complex roles in today's society. This role is critical to the success of a school district. For the past nine years, I have had the opportunity to observe first hand the demands and expectations that are placed upon the school superintendent. During this time, I have served in the capacity of assistant superintendent for finance and operations with four different superintendents in three very different school divisions in different geographic regions of Virginia. These superintendents differed in gender and years of experience and displayed varying leadership characteristics. In addition, the three school divisions range in categories from small and suburban, to medium-sized and suburban/rural, to a large urban division.

Despite the varying degrees of experience of the superintendents and the unique demographics of the school divisions they served, each of these superintendents was expected to provide professional leadership to their school community. This leadership encompassed responsibilities in instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, and operations management. The leadership responsibilities described above were particularly important as each school district faced the demands of accountability and change. Given my varied experiences in working so closely with several superintendents, I have developed an interest in investigating whether there are specific leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. More specifically, I am interested in knowing from today's practicing superintendents and sitting school board chairpersons in the Commonwealth of Virginia

their perceptions of the superintendent leadership characteristics that are deemed to be essential to the position of school superintendent.

According to the research, the traditional, less visible role of the school superintendent has changed to that of a highly visible chief executive who needs vision, skills such as setting directions, developing people and organizations, and knowledge to lead in a new and complex world (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, Glass, 2005). Public school superintendents are called and charged to work with boards of education and a myriad of stakeholders to provide the best possible educational opportunities for youth. In addition, high-stakes testing has resulted in increased local, state, and national accountability to school districts and its leaders. The more recent change in the role of school superintendent finds its origin, in part, in the early 1980s, when widespread concern for the condition of the nation's public schools was voiced. This concern prompted the call for major reform of America's public school systems. National commission task forces were also birthed to examine our public schools.

One of the most critical problems facing public education today is the increasing shortage of qualified superintendents (Cooper, Fusarelli & Carella, 2000; Sharp, Malone, & Walter, 2002). The quest to identify and define superintendent leadership characteristics can be traced back to the establishment of the position in American public education. Characteristics of an effective leader may change over time, but many people posit that particular elements of leadership have always been evident in successful leaders (Gardner, H., 1994; Gardner, J., 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). As such, identification of the qualities and characteristics of superintendent leadership remains a growing concern.

Background

In April, 2006, Arizona State University doctoral candidate, Douglas Wilson, submitted and successfully defended his dissertation entitled *Current Perceptions of Leadership Characteristics for Superintendents*, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (Wilson, 2006). Wilson's research methodology involved an effort to collect reliable and valid information regarding leadership characteristics of a cross-section of school superintendents and governing school board presidents throughout the state of Arizona. His conclusions were based upon data drawn from the survey responses of 107 superintendents and 57 governing board presidents. Based upon his analysis of the data, Wilson proffered the following conclusions:

1. The majority of the superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the top five: instructional leadership, effective school board relations, visionary leader, effective at community building, and team builder. The majority of superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the bottom five: understanding of school finance, focus on professional development, understanding of school law, politically astute, and intellect.
2. The majority of the governing board presidents ranked the following characteristics in the top five: instructional leadership, effective school board relations, visionary leader, effective at community building, and team builder. The majority of governing board presidents ranked the following characteristics in the bottom five: understanding of school finance, focus on professional development, understanding of school law, politically astute, and intellect.

3. No significant difference existed between the perspectives of superintendents and governing board presidents in relation to those characteristics that are considered essential for effective leadership in the superintendency.
4. Superintendents' perceptions of the essential characteristics for success were not consistent with school board policies pertaining to the superintendents' job description.
5. Governing board perceptions of the essential characteristics for success were not consistent with school board policies pertaining to the superintendents' job description.

The Wilson study and results were limited to superintendents and governing board presidents in the state of Arizona. The work that follows will replicate, in part, Wilson's study in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The current study replicated Wilson's study, in part, by utilizing modified versions of survey instruments from the Wilson study to identify those characteristics that are perceived to be essential for the school superintendent by practicing superintendents and sitting school board chairs. The results of which were then compared to determine similarities and differences. However, this study has differed from the Wilson study in two distinct ways. The current study did not suggest or assert that the identified characteristics were essential to the effectiveness and success of the school superintendent; nor did this study seek to align identified characteristics with current job descriptions.

Statement of the Problem

If public education is to continue to be a primary force in the development of its citizenry for productive service, the characteristic roles of the superintendent must be

better understood and appropriately modified to maintain positional power in order to facilitate the educational process (Owen, 1998). The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. In addition, this study compared the perceptions of school board chairpersons and superintendents in relation to characteristics of superintendent leadership.

The research questions that served as the basis for this study were as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?
2. What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?

Significance of the Study

The superintendency is a career position that is filled with challenges and opportunities. Superintendents of public school districts hold one of the toughest and most demanding jobs in the nation. When describing the job of the superintendent, Paul Houston, former Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) wrote, "The superintendent often runs one of the largest and most complex businesses in the community—transporting more people than public transportation, feeding more people than all the restaurants in the community combined, and managing more square footage than most of the businesses in the community" (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. ix). The increasing importance of ensuring the success of

public schools in the United States, the significant role of superintendents in helping to ensure that success, the tendency of the superintendency to be more stressful and more demanding, and the evidence of substantial, and perhaps increasing, turnover among superintendents point to an increasing need for school boards to select and hire an appropriate superintendent who has the characteristics that will blend with the school district as well as the community (Collins, 2005).

To expand and improve this line of study and research, more information is needed regarding the leadership characteristics of superintendents. This study contributes to the scholarly body of knowledge pertaining to characteristics recognized in school district leaders. In doing so, this current study investigated and analyzed the perceptions of school superintendents and board chairpersons in Virginia as they relate to superintendent leadership characteristics.

There are several reasons why a study of school board chairpersons' perceptions and superintendents' perceptions might be significant: (1) The findings may help school board chairpersons, school board members, and superintendents identify specific characteristics for the superintendency. (2) The research is designed to provide additional information and direction for future superintendent preparation programs. (3) The research may provide relevant information for state organizations such as the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) and the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) for future professional development workshops for current and aspiring superintendents, as well as school board members. (4) The research may provide a set of characteristics that can be utilized as a framework for superintendent

evaluation criteria. Finally, study results may provide public school stakeholders in Virginia greater insight into the multifaceted position of public school superintendent.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. Additionally, this study sought to gather and evaluate perspectives from practicing superintendents and their board chairs to determine similarities and differences between the perceptions of these two groups of individuals.

Justification of the Study

American school superintendents provide professional leadership to the nation's schools. This leadership is particularly critical as local school districts face demands for accountability and change brought on by mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). Superintendents are both educational and community leaders and their opinions say much about the state of local school districts and those who lead them (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). In addition, the working relationship between boards and their superintendents sets the tone and climate which can extend from the classroom to the central office and into the community at large.

In Virginia, the first state-wide public school system was established in 1870 as prescribed in the Constitution adopted the year before. Today, public education in Virginia is a multibillion dollar endeavor. School boards around the state employ thousands of persons to provide education to more than one million students. Both the

Constitution and the statutes provide that the public school system shall be administered by a state board of education, the state superintendent of public instruction, the division superintendent of schools, and county and city school boards. The school system in Virginia is administered through local administrative units called school divisions. Currently, the state system is comprised of 132 school divisions.

Article VIII, Section 7 of the Constitution of Virginia establishes the legal basis for school boards. Thus, school board members are constitutional officers of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The school board in Virginia is a corporate body which may, in its corporate capacity, sue or be sued, contract, or be contracted with and, in general, is vested with all the powers, and charged with all the duties, obligations, and responsibilities imposed upon by law. In Virginia, school board members can be appointed or elected, and no school board is fiscally independent. The school board must look to the General Assembly and the local governing body for the funds which it expends. Finally, not unlike many other American school boards, Virginia school boards have two primary functions: appointing a division superintendent of schools and determining educational policy.

This study compared how Virginia school superintendents perceive their superintendent leadership characteristics with the perceptions of their school board chairpersons. For the purposes of this study, school board chairpersons were chosen because they are elected by their board colleagues and thus may be representative of other members' orientations and behaviors (Collins, 2005). In addition, they are more likely to communicate more frequently with the superintendent than other members of the school board. An investigation of the board chair's perceptions was warranted in order to

identify any perception gaps that exist between how the superintendents see themselves in contrast to the way they are perceived by their school board chairpersons.

Furthermore, these perceptions were studied to provide additional knowledge to the field of educational leadership, organizational culture, and change.

Theoretical Framework

The Theoretical Framework, noted in Figure 1, serves as the guide for this study. It illustrates the concepts to be studied and what, if any, statistical relationships exist. It represents the idea that there are specific leadership characteristics for the superintendency. As such, both practicing school superintendents and their school board chairpersons each has their own opinions and perceptions of leadership characteristics for the position of the superintendent. These perceptions and opinions will also be compared, statistically, to ascertain whether significant differences exist. It is believed that the results of this research provide additional insights to the position of the superintendent for current and aspiring superintendents.

Definition of Terms

Superintendent: The superintendent is considered the chief executive and administrative officer of a school system (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

School Board: The school board serves as the governing body of the local school division (Eadie, 2005). The primary functions of a school board are to serve as the policy-making body of the school division and to hire the superintendent.

School Board Chair/Chairperson: The member of the school board elected by his or her fellow members to serve as the leader of the school board.

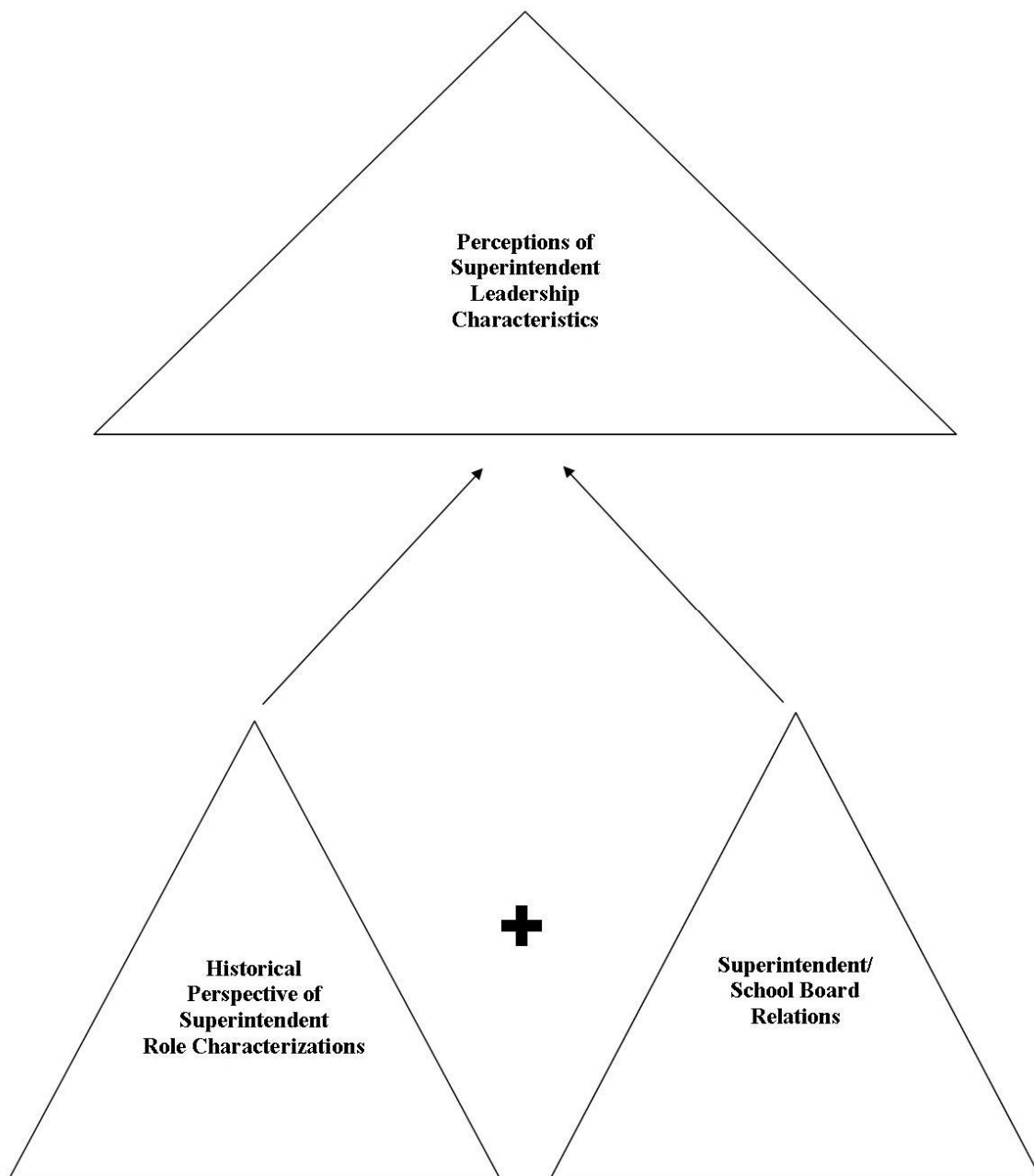


Figure 1

Limitations

The following limitations were defined for this study: a) The study was limited to public school superintendents and school board chairpersons serving in the Commonwealth of Virginia during the 2008-2009 school year; b) The researcher relied on participants to provide honest responses; c) The study was limited by the possibility that responses may be biased due to the self-report nature of the study.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, definition of terms, limitations, and the organization of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on the historical perspective of the superintendency, superintendent-school board relations, and studies of superintendent leadership characteristics. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology including the research design, population and sample, and methods of statistical analysis. Chapter 4 reports the data collected and provide an analysis of those data. Chapter 5 includes a summary of findings, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for further study and investigation.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. This study replicated, in part, a study conducted by Douglas Wilson at Arizona State University in 2006. Wilson (2006) investigated practitioners' opinions about elements of leadership that engender success as a school superintendent. Additionally, the researcher aimed to gather and evaluate information from practicing superintendents and their governing boards about what makes a successful superintendency. Perspectives from superintendents and governing boards were also compared to determine similarities and differences between these two groups of individuals. The purpose of this current study was to identify the leadership characteristics of public school superintendents as perceived by both Virginia school board chairpersons and school superintendents themselves. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature and research to develop a theoretical, philosophical, and practical foundation for the dissertation.

Introduction

School superintendents at the start of the 21st century work under intense scrutiny from parents, teachers, board members, and elected officials. They are held responsible for the progress and achievements of the students in their district's schools (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). In addition, the superintendency encompasses responsibilities in instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, and operations management (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Research suggests that effective leadership is essential for improving student achievement and maintaining the viability of public schools in America (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). Given the many responsibilities and challenges of the superintendency, one could conclude that there are certain leadership characteristics that today's superintendents should possess.

The essence of this dissertation was to investigate the leadership characteristics of the school superintendent as perceived by Virginia school board chairs and practicing superintendents. In Virginia, the superintendent of schools serves the school board as its Chief Executive Officer (CEO); while the primary role of the school board is twofold: to serve as a policy making body and to hire the superintendent. Within this context, the primary focus of the following review of relevant research and literature was an examination of the leadership characteristics that are perceived by both school board chairs and practicing superintendents to be essential to the role of the public school superintendent.

The remainder of this chapter is organized into three sections which include (a) historical perspective of the superintendency, (b) superintendent and school board relations, and (c) superintendent leadership characteristics. The final section provides the reader with a brief summation of the chapter.

Historical Perspective of the Superintendency

The superintendency is just over 170 years old. The position of school superintendent began in American public education in the mid-1800s. The establishment of the first public school superintendency can be traced back to 1837 when the city of Buffalo, NY appointed a superintendent on June 9, 1837 (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Since that time, the position has evolved, incrementally becoming more extensive, complex, and demanding (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). As such, the significance of the position and an understanding of its mission are paramount to the future of the American society and the larger global society. Paul Houston (2001), former Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), posited that the call of the superintendency is to help children create a future where democracy is preserved and the ideals of this nation are moved forward. In order to gain a better understanding of the superintendency as it is known today, we must begin with an examination of its historical evolution.

The evolution of the American school superintendent has gone through five major stages since its inception in 1837 (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 2006). During each of these stages, differing role conceptualizations emerged. According to noted historian Raymond Callahan (1966), the first four were teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic statesman, and applied social scientist; the fifth--communicator--was depicted by Kowalski (2006). When viewed separately, these distinct role conceptualizations could appear to oversimplify and falsely compartmentalize the position. However, when examined together they provide the essential framework upon which the complexities of today's superintendency can be better understood. A brief discussion of these five role conceptualizations is provided to illustrate how the position of school superintendent has evolved over time.

Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar

The superintendent as teacher-scholar encompasses a period of time ranging from the last half of the 19th century through the first decade of the 20th century. During this

period of time the foci of the superintendent was implementing a state curriculum and training and supervising teachers. These superintendents were also characterized and viewed as master teachers (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). In carrying out the duties and responsibilities of this role, superintendents were considered the school district's instructional leader.

Traditionally, during this early stage of role development, school boards assumed both legislative and executive functions by setting policy and having individual board members assume day-to-day managerial responsibilities. Bjork and Kowalski (2005) noted that management functions were often assumed by school board members or relegated to subordinates of the superintendent because superintendents did not want to be viewed publicly as business managers or politicians. Because of these views and the resulting expectations, superintendents were not considered much differently than teachers. This conceptualization of the superintendent began to wane at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the essence of this initial role never became irrelevant as continued emphasis on instructional leadership fluctuated throughout the past century (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).

Superintendent as Manager

The changing role of the superintendent from teacher-scholar to superintendent as manager could also be characterized as a shift from that of a specialist to that of a general manager. In the vernacular of sports, the role of the school superintendent has evolved from that of a position coach to that of a head coach. This evolution can be paralleled with the growth and development of America as an industrialized nation. As the nation began to experience significant growth and sophistication, the demands and complexities

of its large city school districts emerged. By the end of the 19th century, superintendents in most states became responsible for all operations in the district (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). In response to this change in roles and responsibilities, reservations were being expressed about the abilities of traditional superintendents to administer large city districts (Kowalski, 2006). As noted by Carter & Cunningham (1997), some larger districts actually appointed dual superintendents—one for business and one for education.

This change in the way in which the role of the superintendent was viewed reflected the impact and influence of Frederick Taylor's (1992) principles of scientific management. During this period, control over decision making was shifted from boards of education to the superintendent. Taylor believed that the greatest source of gain under scientific management came from the new duties and burdens assumed by management. As such, budget development and administration, standardization of operations, personnel management, and facility management were the first tasks assumed (Callahan, 1962). However, with the crash of the stock market and the subsequent economic depression, this new glamorized business manager role was being subjected to intense criticism from those who came to question the new found authority and power of these superintendents. However, these criticisms should not diminish the importance of sound business and management practices in the public school arena. Bjork and Kowalski (2005) posited that experienced practitioners recognize that many of their leadership attributes become insignificant when budgets are not balanced, school facilities are deemed not to be safe, and personnel problems routinely result in litigation. As such, the challenge facing superintendents is not choosing between leadership and management,

but in establishing and maintaining an appropriate balance between these two daunting roles and expectations.

Superintendent as Democratic Leader

The third major role conceptualization that emerged over a twenty-five year period beginning around 1930 was that of a democratic leader. This new role conceptualization was born out of the political and philosophical realities that were prevalent during the Great Depression. Given the realities of scarce fiscal resources, school officials were expected to engage more directly in the political activity of lobbying state legislatures (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2006). This type of activity was considered necessary as school districts had to compete with other governmental services for limited fiscal resources. Additionally, because of the heavy bureaucratic orientation of scientific management, philosophical critics of that particular ethos were actively promoting a more participatory, civil, and democratic approach to school administration (Moody, 2007).

As with previous role characterizations, the weight of the role of democratic leader began to diminish over time. However, the role of democratic leader never fully died. Kowalski (2006) observed that the role of democratic leader has resurfaced over the past twenty years across all types of organizations, including school districts because of the complex mix of changing values and economic realities.

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist

Following the growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership after World War II and the rapid development of the social sciences, a fourth major role characterization, superintendent as applied social scientist, emerged. A number of

significant social factors were instrumental in forging the transition to this more contemporary role characterization of the superintendency. Carter & Cunningham (1997) suggested that the decisive moment in thinking about the role of the superintendent occurred in 1957, with the Soviet Union's highly technical success of the *Sputnik* launch. This scientific and technological breakthrough was considered to be far more sophisticated than anything developed in the U.S. In addition, *Sputnik* was viewed as a potential threat to our national defense. The resulting political response was for greater emphasis to be placed on the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic in America's schools. In terms of the superintendency, the call was now for leadership, political savvy, reform, community responsiveness, and improved public education.

The superintendent was also expected to provide leadership during the decade of the sixties, when much social and civil change was taking place. Minorities viewed education as being the vehicle of hope for improving the quality of their lives and the lives of their children. As such, America's previously segregated and unequal system of education needed to be fixed. To that end, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act, both in 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to address inequities. These legislative acts increased both state and federal influence on local education. A resulting by-product was that the superintendent was expected to lead the response to these mandates.

As with earlier superintendent role conceptualizations, the applied scientist role began to wane. The emergence and growth of the information age, coupled with advancements in internet technology, would begin to exert its influence on public education. However, it was the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National

Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) that would mark the beginning of the reform movement in America's public education system. This report included several assertions and provided a multitude of recommendations that were believed to provide lasting reform for the nation's schools. Among them was that citizens hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve the recommended reforms. More specifically, the report recommended that superintendents and principals play crucial leadership roles in developing school and community support for the reforms, and that school boards provide them with the professional development and other support necessary to effectively carry out their newly defined role.

Superintendent as Communicator

A fifth role characterization, superintendent as communicator, was posited by Kowalski (2006). This role emerged during what Peter Drucker termed the Information Age. With this change came access to huge amounts of information almost instantly. The availability of volumes of information created many opportunities and challenges for school administration. Once considered a skill, communication now became a pervasive role assumed by the school superintendent.

With increased demands for school reform and accountability, the school superintendent was and is expected to work collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders. As such, the school superintendent of the 21st century is expected to effectively carry out his new role characterization as that of a communicator. In describing the superintendent of the 21st century, Paul Houston (2001) offered the following remarks:

Superintendents of the future must see themselves as village builders. They must

do so by reaching outward to connect to the resources of the broader community.

That means they will have to be masters of the “crucial C’s”. The C’s are the processes that support the work and get it done. They are things like connection, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices.

Leadership in the future will be about the creation and maintenance of relationships: the relationship of children to learning, children to children, children to adults, adults to adults, and school to community (p. 430).

As detailed above, the evolution of the position of school superintendent has been characterized by major roles—the superintendent as (a) teacher, (b) manager, (c) statesman, (d) applied scientist, and (e) communicator. Although each of these distinct role characterizations emerged and were relevant during specific time periods of our history, none of them completely died. Taken together, these role characterizations are very much relevant to the superintendency as it is known today. In this age of high stakes testing, limited fiscal resources, diverse student populations, and unprecedented access to information, today’s superintendent is expected to be an instructional leader, business manager, chief lobbyist and negotiator, social worker and psychologist, and public and community relations expert.

The words of Paul Houston (Glass & Franceschini, 2007) provide a summation of the demanding and challenging role of the superintendency when he states,

The complexity of the superintendents’ job has them doing many different things during the course of the day. She is expected to be the top educator in the community, be understanding, and lead educational improvements and change

with the system. He also often runs one of the largest and most complex businesses in the community—transporting more people than public transportation, feeding more people than all the restaurants in the community combined, and managing more square footage than most of the businesses in the community. Superintendents play a political role balancing the desires of parents and taxpayers, staff and community, liberals and conservatives, and religious and secular interests. They are the chief spokespersons for the district and its most visible face (p. ix).

He goes on to conclude that: It is no wonder that the public has trouble keeping up with what a superintendent is and does (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. ix).

The next section focuses on perhaps the most critical, and at times challenging, function of the superintendency—board relations. Carter and Cunningham (1997) suggest that the superintendency is perhaps most clearly defined by its relationship with school boards. As such, the relationship the superintendent has with the school board, especially the chairman, is vital to his or her survival.

Superintendent/School Board Relations

The relationship between the superintendent and the school board has a significant impact on the effectiveness of a school district. Sharp and Walter (1997) noted that the relationship between the board of education and the superintendent is crucial, not only for the job security of the superintendent, but also for the efficient management of the school district. According to Kowalski (2006), no relationship in a school district has a greater effect on successful education than that between a board and its superintendent. Carter and Cunningham (1997, p.92) posited that the superintendency

is perhaps most clearly defined by its relations with school boards. It is this relationship that sets the tone and climate for everything that takes place in a school district (Glass and Franceschini, 2007). As such, the quality and effectiveness of the local school district can be a direct reflection of the quality and effectiveness of the relationship between the superintendent and the school board.

As with any relationship, there are some basic elements and factors that must be present and functional between the school superintendent and the school board for effectiveness. Research suggests that communication, trust, and understanding role differences are main factors influencing the effectiveness of the superintendent-school board relationship (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Polacheck, 2006; & Sharp & Walter, 1997).

In 2006, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) commissioned a mid-decade study entitled, *The State of the American School Superintendency* authored by Glass and Franceschini. This study was considered midterm, as the interval between previous studies had been approximately ten years. This midterm study was warranted due to the rapid rate of change and effects resulting from state accountability programs and No Child Left Behind legislation that were taking full effect since the publishing of the 2000 study. Among the key questions addressed in the 2006 study was the state of superintendent-school board relations in this era of rapid change and reform. Overall, 2006 study results indicated superintendents thought that their relationships with their school boards were positive. More specifically, 62.8% of responding superintendents claimed that a *very good* relationship exists; while another 30.2% indicated that a *good* relationship exists.

In spite of the positive opinions expressed by superintendents regarding their relationship with their respective school boards, other factors continue to pose a challenge to developing and sustaining the effectiveness of this potentially tenuous relationship. Among these challenges are board expectations of the superintendent, role demarcation, and communication. According to Glass & Franceschini (p.71), 41.5% of responding superintendents indicated that the board's primary role expectation of the superintendent was that of an educational leader; while another 34.5% believed that the board's primary role expectation for the superintendent was that of managerial leader. In the role of educational leader, they were expected to focus their energies and talents in the area of curriculum and instruction. In the role of managerial leader, they were expected to provide leadership in the areas of general management, budget, and finance.

Researchers have noted that understanding role differences is a major factor contributing to successful superintendent-board relationships (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass & et al. 2000; Kowalski, 2006; Peterson & Fusarelli, 2001). Glass & et al. (2000) noted that without clear demarcation between the roles of superintendents and school boards, tensions in many districts are part of daily life. They go on to state that role conflict is often the reason superintendents get into trouble with their school boards and move on to other positions. Sharp and Walter (1997) put forward that a real problem in the relationship is often the balance of power between the board and the superintendent. In an effort to address this problem, they suggest that superintendents and school boards develop and implement a decision-making matrix which assigns responsibility for each type of decision. This matrix would document who has

responsibility for each type of decision, the board or the superintendent, and how far this authority extends.

Another critical factor affecting the superintendent-board relationship is effective communication. Research on effective superintendents stresses the importance of effective communication (Glass & et.al, p. 65). The superintendent must keep the board members abreast of any issues and or problems that can affect policy development, policy implementation, and community relations (Collins, 2005). An example of effective communication is personal contact between the superintendent and school board. This contact can take the form of telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, e-mails, letters, weekly status reports, and board meeting packages. However, research indicated that nearly half (49.3%) of surveyed superintendents spend three hours or less per week in direct communication with board members (Glass & et al., 2007, p. 71). On a seven-member board this is approximately 30 minutes per board member. The data from this survey item might indicate a primary source of problems between superintendents and their boards. However, if the relationship between the superintendent and the school board is to have any hope for effectiveness, it must be founded upon effective communication.

As the research indicates, the relationship between the superintendent and the school board is critical. To that end, there are many factors that can influence the effectiveness of this sometimes tenuous relationship. Factors such as board expectations, trust, communication, and role demarcation are just a few that have been identified and explored in this review of the literature. These factors, among many others, must be considered as superintendents and school boards seek to establish new relationships and

improve existing relationships. For it is with this relationship in mind that the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics finds its place in the research.

Superintendent Leadership Characteristics

As the position of school superintendent has evolved over time, so have the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics. During the past several years there has been concern on the part of educators and school board members alike about the skills and leadership characteristics of school administrators, especially school superintendents. Given the complexities and responsibilities inherent in the position of school superintendent, the quest to identify a set of ideal leadership skills and characteristics for the position has increased in recent years. As such, research regarding superintendent leadership skills and characteristics as perceived by school boards and superintendents continue to evolve. The research studies that follow provide some insights into the position of school superintendent from the perspective of the school board and the superintendent.

School Board Perceptions

Wilson (2006) investigated the perceptions of governing board presidents and practicing school superintendents in the state of Arizona. One of the goals of the study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of governing board presidents regarding those leadership attributes considered essential to the superintendency. To accomplish this goal, the researcher compiled a listing of ten characteristics considered essential for the superintendency as published by the Arizona School Board Association. These ten characteristics were as follows: instructional leadership; understanding of school finance; focus on professional development; effective school board relations;

visionary leader; understanding of school law; effective at building community; politically astute; team builder; and intellect.

The majority of the superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the top five: instructional leadership, effective school board relations, visionary leader, effective at community building, and team builder. The majority of superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the bottom five: understanding of school finance, focus on professional development, understanding of school law, politically astute, and intellect.

The majority of the governing board presidents ranked the following characteristics in the top five: instructional leadership, effective school board relations, visionary leader, effective at community building, and team builder. The majority of governing board presidents ranked the following characteristics in the bottom five: understanding of school finance, focus on professional development, understanding of school law, politically astute, and intellect.

In the state of Nebraska, Moody (2007) found that school board presidents perceived that competency in school finance was the most important attribute for successful employment, followed by superintendent-school board relations and effective public relations. In contrast, the research disclosed that competency in curriculum development, school construction, and collective bargaining was perceived to be least important for the success of the superintendent. The Moody study also revealed that superintendent-board relations was cited as the most frequent cause for the superintendent leaving the school district.

A similar study completed in 2007 by Meyer investigated the views of superintendents and school boards in the state of Texas regarding the competencies

deemed necessary in managing successful school districts. In her study, she sought to determine the perceptions that public school superintendents and school board members in selected Texas school districts have of the competencies and skills needed for managing a successful school district and whether perceptions were related to district size to identify the competencies and skills that should be emphasized within superintendent preparation programs and considered essential for training and supporting successful school superintendents.

Through the analysis of survey results, Meyer determined that the capacity to act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner was ranked as the most important competency by both superintendents and school board presidents, indicating that 96% of both groups held it as a very important skill. The study results also revealed that 73% of school board presidents rated the ability to communicate and collaborate with a diverse group of stakeholders as very important. In addition, survey results indicated that 71% of board chairs/presidents believed that knowledge of effective leadership and management in relationship to budgeting, personnel, resource utilization, financial management, and technology as very important. Conversely, the ability to implement a staff evaluation and development system to improve the performance of staff members and the ability to apply principles of leadership and management to the district's physical plant and support systems to ensure a safe and effective learning environment were noted least important among board presidents.

Responses from interviews with both superintendents and school board presidents disclosed that one of the most important factors affecting the productivity of superintendents was the idea of building relationships and working as a team. Results of

the qualitative study also revealed that the characteristics of integrity, fairness, ethics, shaping a vision and a culture, combined with the ability to communicate and collaborate were noted as the highest priority and equivalent factors for both superintendents and school board presidents.

Meyer concluded from her study that superintendent leadership is a complex skill. More specifically, she concluded that the data secured from the study indicated that the most significant competencies identified for superintendents in the state of Texas were related to integrity, building relationships through communication and collaboration, and creating a vision in a culture of diversity in order to manage successful school districts.

Are there identifiable professional and personal characteristics that school board presidents find essential in their superintendent? This is the primary question that Mark Collins (2005) sought to answer in his dissertation entitled, *Perceptions of Illinois School Board Presidents Regarding Selected Personal and Professional Characteristics of Their Superintendent*.

The study results indicated that the three identified personal characteristics that board presidents considered most important when selecting their superintendent were type of experience (M=4.20), size of annual budget (M=4.14), and licensure (M=4.14). Study results also revealed that the three least important personal characteristics were gender (M=1.79), ethnicity (M=2.07), and age (M=2.64).

As for perceptions regarding professional characteristics, study results indicated that the three identified professional characteristics that board presidents perceived to be most important when selecting their superintendent were personal integrity (M=4.88), honest/fair standards (M=4.83), and strong communication skills (M=4.79). The three

least important professional characteristics perceived by school board presidents were the ability to lead change in student assessment (M=4.38), organizational knowledge (M=4.28), and curriculum development skills (M=4.01).

Collins concluded from his study that Illinois school board presidents place a stronger emphasis on professional characteristics than personal characteristics when selecting a superintendent. The researcher also determined that professional characteristics were more easily identifiable with the responsibilities and duties of the superintendency. Finally, the researcher concluded through his review of the literature that there are a finite number of needed characteristics that a superintendent must acquire to be successful on the job.

Superintendent Perceptions

Richard Mextorf (2003) conducted a study of Pennsylvania superintendents designed to identify the requisite roles of the contemporary superintendency and to investigate how these roles may vary relative to school district size. In addition, this study sought to ascertain how superintendents actually spent their time versus how each would choose to spend their time with respect to five specific roles identified in the literature.

In small districts, superintendents indicated that they spent (reality) most of their time with superintendent-school board relations, followed by management. Similarly, Moody (2007) discovered that superintendents in Nebraska ranked superintendent/board relations and school finance first and second, respectively. Wilson (2006), on the other hand, found that instructional leadership was considered to be the most important superintendent leadership characteristic for Arizona superintendents. Continuing with

Mextorf study results, instructional leadership ranked third in time spent, followed by vision setting and school-community relations ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. Conversely, superintendents of small districts indicated that if they had a choice (ideal), they would spend their time in the following order: instructional leadership would be first, followed by vision setting. Superintendent-school board relations, school-community relations, and management would be ranked third through fifth, respectively.

In medium-sized districts, survey results revealed that respondents spent most of their time with superintendent-school board relations, followed by management. As with small districts, instructional leadership, vision setting, and school-community relations ranked third through fifth in order of time actually spent. Ideally, respondents in medium-sized districts indicated that they would choose to spend their time in the following manner: vision setting, followed by instructional leadership, with superintendent-school board relations, school-community relations, and management ranking third through fifth, respectively.

In large school districts, respondents spent most of their time with superintendent-school board relations, followed by vision setting. Instructional leadership, management, and school-community relations ranked third through fifth, respectively. Ideally, respondents of these districts indicated that they would rather choose to spend their time in the following manner: vision setting, followed by instructional leadership, with superintendent-school board relations, school-community relations, and management ranking third through fifth.

Bredeson and Kose (2007) sought to examine how the work of school superintendents in a large Midwestern state has been affected over a ten year period by

education reform initiatives, in particular the increased demands for accountability. Research revealed that superintendents' ranking of task importance and time allocation had not changed significantly over the ten year period. Attending to the budget and school finances dominated the top ranking for each survey in both importance and time, while curriculum and instructional leadership moved from the fourth highest ranking in 1993 to the third highest ranking in 2003. The data also disclosed a disparity between task importance and time allocation related to curriculum development and instructional leadership, evaluation of student learning outcomes, and professional growth and staff development. In 1993, curriculum and instructional leadership fell from fourth in importance to seventh in time spent; in 2003, the same category respectively dropped from third to sixth. In 2003, evaluation of student learning outcomes plummeted from sixth in importance to tenth in time spent. In 1993, professional growth dropped from sixth in importance to ninth in time spent; in 2003, it fell from seventh to ninth.

As for the influence of internal and external accountability factors on the superintendents' response to reform initiatives, superintendents rated the expectations that school boards and principals had for them in the area of curriculum development and instructional leadership highest. However, open-ended superintendent responses indicate that school board high expectations in curriculum and instruction were not top priorities with the criteria they use to evaluate superintendents' annual performance.

Superintendents' annual performance review was closely tied to both internal and external accountability factors such as budget and finance (27.4%), personnel administration (19.6%), communications (19.1%), evaluation of student learning outcomes (10.6%), leadership (8.9%), general management of the district (5.2%),

curriculum and instruction (4.8%), and planning and goals formulation (4.6%). These differences suggest that school boards have yet to see planning and goals formulation and curriculum/instruction as critical responsibilities of the superintendent. The general message from the data was that superintendents are interested in curriculum and instruction and believe these are important tasks, but the daily realities of their work, along with school board expectations often challenge even the most committed professional.

Thomas Glass and Louis Franceschini conducted a study entitled, *The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study*. The purpose of this 2006 study was to provide a better understanding of the leadership and the work of superintendents serving various types of districts and communities (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Regarding board relations, study results indicate that 93.0% of respondents indicated that a *very good* or *good* relationship exists between the superintendent and school board. These findings were also consistent with statewide studies conducted in Pennsylvania and Nebraska by Mextorf and Moody, respectively. With respect to the board's reasons for hiring a particular superintendent candidate, good leadership ability is the reason given by nearly half (49.2%) of superintendents as the most important reason their boards hired them (p.68). Personal characteristics such as honesty, integrity, ethics, and dedication were the top reasons for board hiring by 21.7%. Management skills in instruction, personnel, and budget only received 14% of responses.

With respect to the board's expectations of the superintendent's primary role, educational leadership activities such as working with curriculum and instruction were selected by 41.5% of responding superintendents. The role of managerial leader,

including general management, budget, and finance, was selected by 34.5% of respondents. The role of political leader (board and community relations) was only selected by 15.5% of responding superintendents.

This study provided insights relative to those areas of training that could increase superintendent effectiveness. The two most often selected topics for professional development identified by superintendents were strategic planning (39.1%) and systemic thinking (45.4%). Superintendents also chose instruction, assessment, and data management (33.2%) and public relations and communications (33%) as needed professional development areas (p. 53).

The study results also revealed that superintendents of all district sizes felt that interpersonal relations skills was the most important factor contributing to superintendent effectiveness (p.54). Most superintendents see themselves as effective district leaders. The most preferred way to improve their effectiveness was through improved skills in communications and human relations.

Summary of Studies

The concept of leadership has been studied and debated for decades and centuries. Studies have focused on the idea of what characteristics are essential for leaders (Collins, 2005; Mextorf, 2003; Meyer, 2007; Moody, 2007; Wilson, 2006). And nowhere is this idea more critical and sought after than in the arena of public education. While the studies and reports presented in this literature review are different and focus on different aspects of the superintendency, common themes emerged. For example, the roles and expectations of the superintendency have evolved from that of a teacher-scholar to a manager, to a leader, and to that of an effective communicator and collaborator, while

maintaining the focus on student achievement. However, inconsistencies in the rank order of the importance of various characteristics, competencies, skills, and tasks of the superintendent were discovered. For example, the Wilson study, which took place in the state of Arizona, disclosed that instructional leadership was ranked highest by superintendents and board presidents; while the Moody study, which took place in Nebraska, revealed that school finance ranked first and second by school board presidents and superintendents, respectively.

The Meyer study suggested that superintendent competencies such as the capacity to act with integrity, fairness, and ethics were considered most important by both superintendents and school board presidents surveyed in the state of Texas. While the results of the Collins study revealed that school board presidents in the state of Illinois perceived that type of experience, size of annual budget, and licensure were the most important personal characteristics for their superintendent. But at the same time, data results from the Collins study indicated that professional characteristics of personal integrity, honesty and fairness, and strong communication skills were considered most important for the Illinois superintendent. Clearly, the consistent theme that emerged from these studies was that the opinions and perceptions of what superintendents and school board presidents consider to be essential to the position of superintendent vary from state to state. As such, no single comprehensive list of leadership characteristics emerged from the review of literature. Perhaps this variation is reflective of different cultures and values of each state.

Another theme that emerged from these studies was that superintendents believe that curriculum and instruction are important; however, the daily realities of their

leadership and management responsibilities challenge their ability to devote and invest significant amounts of time to curriculum and instruction. In addition, the studies revealed that what superintendents are expected to do versus what they are evaluated on can be inconsistent. For example, the Wilson study disclosed that desired superintendent leadership characteristics were not consistent with job descriptions and superintendent performance evaluation criteria.

Given the evolving nature of the superintendency and varying opinions and conclusions presented in these studies, additional research on the leadership characteristics of the superintendent was needed. To this end, this study investigated the perceptions of superintendents and school board chairpersons within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. Additionally, this study gathered and evaluated perspectives from practicing superintendents and their board chairs to determine similarities and differences between these two groups of individuals (Wilson, 2006).

The research questions that served as the basis of this study were as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?
2. What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?

This paper replicated, in part, a study initially conducted by Douglas Wilson at Arizona State University in 2006. Wilson (2006) attempted to identify and evaluate characteristics or factors that school superintendents and governing board members within the state of Arizona attribute to a successful school district leader. This study differed from the Wilson study in that it focused on school superintendents and governing board members within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Research Design

This study utilized a survey instrument to investigate the leadership characteristics of superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The research design was quantitative. Quantitative non-experimental research was conducted to describe phenomena and to investigate relationships between the variables (McMillan & Wergin, 2006). A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics was utilized. Descriptive statistics were utilized to report the points of central tendency and dispersion while inferential statistics were utilized to make inferences about populations from the surveyed sample. Descriptive statistics including mean, mode, and standard deviation for the school board chairpersons, as well as the school superintendents, were computed and reported in rank order of mean item responses for each of the characteristics included on the surveys. *T* tests were utilized to determine if significant differences exist between the perceptions of school board chairpersons and school superintendents on the 17 Likert response survey questions, as well as the rank ordering of ten leadership characteristics.

Population

In an effort to collect the most reliable and valid information regarding superintendent leadership characteristics, the population for this study was comprised of all 132 K-12 public school superintendents in Virginia. Additionally, all 132 Virginia school board chairpersons were invited to participate in the survey.

The study focused on the responses of the practicing superintendents and sitting school board chairpersons during the 2008-2009 school year. The names and addresses of school superintendents and school board chairpersons were obtained through the office of the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA).

Instrumentation

The survey instrument utilized in this study was a modified version of a mail survey originally developed by Wilson for his 2006 dissertation. Dr. Wilson provided his consent to utilize his questionnaire (see Appendix H). These modifications included rephrasing statements to remove the terms success and effectiveness. In addition, multiple statements regarding the superintendent's role in integrating technology into instruction were reduced to just one statement. Finally, additional statements were included based on the current literature review. These statements are specific to superintendent-board relations and the impact of accountability mandates specific to Virginia. The revised versions of the survey instruments were juried by former school board chairpersons and retired superintendents. Appropriate revisions were made based upon the feedback from the jurors. This current validation process was deemed necessary given the limited explanation provided by Wilson regarding his instrument validation procedures.

As a part of the instrumentation validation and critique process, the following questions were asked of each jury member:

1. Are the written instructions clear and concise?
2. Is the content of the statements on the survey clear and understandable?
3. Did you have any difficulty in rating each of the ten characteristics?
4. Do you have any comments or suggestions for improvement to the survey instrument?

The survey instrument was organized into two sections, utilizing two response structures. The first section of the survey consisted of 17 statements regarding different

characteristics. Respondents were asked to employ a four-point Likert scale response to rate each item, where the values corresponded to the level of agreement with the statement. The second section of the survey consisted of a list of ten characteristics for the respondents to rank in order of importance from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the most important characteristic.

In designing the original survey, Fowler's (1998) five principles for developing effective survey instruments were applied by Wilson. These principles are as follows:

1. The strength of survey research is asking people about their first-hand experiences. In this study, respondents will be asked questions about leadership in the superintendent's role.
2. Questions should be asked one at a time. Wilson (p. 23) contends that this survey was written so respondents would answer each question before moving on to the next.
3. A survey question should be worded so that all respondents are answering the same question. With respect to the current study, the same survey will be sent to all respondents. Superintendents and school board chairpersons will be given the same survey.
4. All respondents should understand the kind of answer that constitutes an adequate answer to a question. Clear directions on the survey will be provided.
5. Survey instruments should be designed so that the tasks of reading questions, following instructions, and recording answers are as easy as possible for the respondents. Clear directions will be provided with the survey.

Data Collection

The findings of this study were based upon data collected by means of the two-tier survey questionnaire described in the prior section. The researcher obtained exempt approval from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Institutional Review Board and the approval letter is included in Appendix F. These questionnaires were completed by Virginia public school board chairpersons and Virginia public school superintendents. Cover letters and the survey questionnaires were mailed to Virginia public school board chairpersons (Appendices B & D) and Virginia public school superintendents (Appendices A & C) on February 1, 2009. Each mailing included a self-addressed, stamped envelope to expedite the return of the survey instrument. In addition, each questionnaire was coded for tracking purposes. This code was used to track the returned surveys, and the coding information was destroyed once the research process was completed and/or the survey materials were received. A follow-up letter, a second copy of the initial survey instrument, and another self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to school board chairpersons (Appendix E) not responding within a three-week period from the date of the original February mailing. An adequate response rate was achieved as a result of the follow-up mailing; therefore, no additional mailings or follow-up were required.

Data Analysis

The data analysis included entering response data from the two groups into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. A response containing a four-point Likert scale where 1=*Strongly Disagree* and 4=*Strongly Agree* was utilized. Each response was assigned a numerical value between 1 and 4 that corresponded with the Likert scale response value.

Data from the 17 Likert scale survey statements of each responding group or individuals were totaled, combined, and averaged. In addition, data from the rank ordering response structure were totaled, combined, averaged, and converted into percentages. These data were then imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis purposes. Responses to the survey items were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics as described below. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations to indicate variability of responses, and reported in rank order of mean item responses for each of the survey items. Finally, independent samples *t* tests were utilized to determine if significant differences exist between the perceptions of school board chairs and school superintendents for each specific characteristic.

Research Question 1: What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent? To address this question, the survey responses were analyzed by looking at the means of the first 17 items on the Likert-scale survey. The items consisted of statements about different characteristics and roles that superintendents might utilize in their position. In addition, the mean responses generated through the rank ordering response survey structure were analyzed. The means for each item for superintendents and school board chairpersons are presented in a table format for side-by-side comparative purposes.

Research Question 2: What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent? The data analysis and presentation plan for research question number two mirrors that of research question number one described above.

Research Question 3: How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents? Independent samples *t* tests were utilized to determine whether or not significant differences exist between the perceptions of superintendents and school board chairpersons for each of the 17 Likert-response survey questions. The final phase of the analysis process compared the rank ordering of the superintendents' and school board chairpersons' responses.

Summary

The research methodology utilized in this study was that of a quantitative design. Such a design allowed the researcher to use numerical indices and statistics to summarize, describe, and explore relationships among traits. In addition, the use of a well-designed survey instrument administered to all school board chairpersons and school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia was expected to generate credible and reliable data for analysis. Now completed and validated, the results of this study can serve as another source of scholarly research to assist school superintendents in becoming more informed on those leadership characteristics that are perceived to be essential for public school superintendents.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. Additionally, this study gathered and evaluated perspectives from practicing superintendents and their board chairpersons to determine similarities and differences between these two groups of individuals.

The research questions that served as the basis of this study were as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?
2. What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?

This chapter is organized in the following manner: response rates of the surveys, results of data collection, and data analysis.

Response Rates

The results of data analyses presented in this chapter are based on responses to a two-part mailed survey completed by Virginia public school superintendents (Appendix A) and Virginia public school chairpersons (Appendix B). The population for this study was comprised of all 132 K-12 public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia. A total of 101 responses were received from the survey population of Virginia

school superintendents. This represents an overall survey return rate of 76.52%. Of the 101 surveys that were returned, 94 produced usable data for both sections of the two-part survey instrument, while seven surveys were deemed unusable as they were either incomplete or incorrectly completed by the respondents. This number represents a usable return rate of 71.21% of the school superintendent surveys. As the usable return rate for this population was considered adequate, no additional follow-up efforts were required for this population.

Surveys were also mailed to all 132 school board chairpersons in Virginia. A total of 70 responses were received from the survey population of Virginia school board chairpersons, representing a return rate of 53.03%. Of the 70 returned surveys, 61 produced usable data for both sections of the two-part survey instrument, while nine surveys were considered unusable, as they were either incomplete or incorrectly completed by the respondents. This number represents a return rate of 46.21% of the school board chairperson surveys containing usable data. As the initial response rate of 30.03% was not considered adequate, a follow-up mailing was conducted three weeks after the initial mailing to achieve a higher return rate for this population.

Results of Data Collection

Research Question 1: *What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?* Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to identify the mean responses for each of the first 17 items on the survey. The items consisted of statements about different characteristics and roles that superintendents might utilize in their position. For each item, the respondent rated their level of agreement with each statement using a four-point Likert-type scale

(1 = *Strongly Disagree*; and 4 = *Strongly Agree*). The means and standard deviations for each item from superintendent survey responses are presented in Table 1.

Analysis of the results illustrated in Table 1 reveals that most items received mean scores between 3 and 4 from responding superintendents; values corresponding with an agree and strongly agree Likert rating. The means indicate a general agreement with the statements. A closer look at the composite means and the standard deviations disclosed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent ($M=4.00$, $SD=.000$), followed by the importance of effective communication with board members and other school community stakeholders ($M=3.98$, $SD=.140$), and that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success ($M=3.81$, $SD=.393$) received the highest mean responses from superintendents. In contrast, the suggestion that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover ($M=2.65$, $SD=.818$), followed by persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent ($M=2.89$, $SD=.598$), and the effective management of buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency ($M=3.14$, $SD=.649$) received the lowest composite mean scores. Analysis of the standard deviation of each mean response revealed that the lowest degree of variability occurred in those characteristics that received the highest mean responses of superintendents. In fact, no variance existed in the mean responses of superintendents regarding the importance of personal integrity, honesty, and fairness as essential leadership characteristics, as the composite mean score for this characteristic was four. Conversely, the highest degree of variability in mean responses was associated with those characteristics or statements that received the lowest mean responses.

Table 1

Mean Responses of Superintendents to the Survey

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.	4.00	0.000
Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.	3.98	0.140
Superintendent-School Board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.	3.81	0.393
Curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.	3.78	0.415
In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.	3.77	0.467
Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.	3.75	0.456
Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations, public meetings and politically-inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups.	3.75	0.456
Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.	3.74	0.439
Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.	3.72	0.472
Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) and NCLB.	3.69	0.524

Table 1 cont'd

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.	3.67	0.471
Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision.	3.40	0.549
Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.	3.38	0.545
Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.	3.32	0.509
Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books and bonds" are essential to the superintendency.	3.14	0.649
Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.	2.89	0.598
School Board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.	2.65	0.818

Section two of the survey instrument asked school superintendents to rank in order of importance ten superintendent leadership characteristics, with the value of 1 corresponding to the most important characteristic. The rank ordering of different leadership characteristics as illustrated in Table 2 provides an additional source of information to determine perceptions by superintendents.

School superintendents ranked the following characteristics as the three most important: visionary leader ($M=3.33$, $SD=2.745$), instructional leader ($M=3.83$, $SD=2.474$), and effective school board relations ($M=3.98$, $SD=2.190$). Conversely, the following characteristics were ranked as the three least important by superintendents: professional development experience ($M=8.99$, $SD=1.418$), school law experience ($M=7.71$, $SD=2.133$), and intellect ($M=6.61$, $SD=2.528$). A closer review of the standard deviations of each composite mean score indicated that the highest degree of variability among the composite mean scores of superintendents occurred in the top ranked characteristic—visionary leader ($M=3.33$, $SD=2.745$), while the lowest degree of variability among the composite mean scores occurred with the lowest ranked characteristic—professional development experience ($M=8.99$, $SD=1.418$).

Supplemental data analysis of superintendent responses disclosed that the mode rating of the top two characteristics—visionary leader and instructional leader was 1, while the mode of the third ranked characteristic—effective school board relations was 3. Additionally, visionary leader received the largest percentage of number one rankings at 42.55% from responding superintendents; while instructional leader received the second highest percentage of number one ranking at 25.53%. The mode for the bottom three ranked characteristics—professional development experience, understanding of school law, and intellect was 10; with professional development experience receiving the highest percentage of number 10 rankings, followed school law experience and intellect.

Table 2

Ranked Means of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics by Superintendents

Characteristic	Superintendents (<i>n</i> = 94)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranked <i>M</i>
Visionary Leader	3.33	2.745	1
Instructional Leader	3.83	2.474	2
Effective School Board Relations	3.98	2.190	3
Team Builder	4.74	2.355	4
School/Community Builder	5.03	2.358	5
Politically Astute	5.21	2.271	6
School Finance Experience	5.56	2.534	7
Intellect	6.61	2.528	8
School Law Experience	7.71	2.133	9
Professional Development Experience	8.99	1.418	10

Research Question 2: *What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?* Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to identify the level of agreement for each of the first 17 items on the survey. The items consisted of statements about different characteristics and roles that superintendents might utilize in their position. For each item, the respondent rated their level of agreement with each statement using a four-point Likert-type scale (*1 = Strongly Disagree*; and *4 = Strongly Agree*). The means and standard deviations for each item for school board chairpersons are presented in Table 3.

As was the case with superintendent responses, the data illustrated in Table 3 reveals that most items received mean scores between 3 and 4 from responding school board chairpersons; values corresponding with agree and strongly agree. The means indicate a general agreement with the statements. A closer look at the composite mean scores revealed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent ($M=3.97$, $SD=.168$), along with the importance of effective communication with board members and other school community stakeholders ($M=3.96$, $SD=.204$), and that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success ($M=3.83$, $SD=.380$) received the highest composite mean scores from school board chairpersons. Conversely the suggestion that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover ($M=2.23$, $SD=.765$), followed by the suggestion that persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent ($M=2.63$, $SD=.802$), and the idea that effective management of buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency ($M=3.07$, $SD=.666$) received the lowest composite mean scores. As

noted in the analysis of superintendent responses, the analysis of the standard deviation of each mean response of school board chairpersons revealed that the lowest degree of variability in mean responses occurred with the characteristics that received the highest mean responses from school board chairpersons, indicating greater consistency in responses. In contrast, the highest degree of variability was noted with those characteristics or statements that received the lowest mean responses from school board chairpersons; with the exception of the statement suggesting that superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with state and federal accountability mandates ($M=3.41$, $SD=.712$).

Section two of the survey instrument also asked school board chairpersons to rank in order of importance the ten superintendent leadership characteristics, with a value of 1 corresponding to the most important leadership characteristic. As indicated in Table 4, survey results revealed that school board chairpersons ranked the following characteristics as the three most important for the position of school superintendent: visionary leader ($M=3.05$, $SD=2.327$), team builder ($M=3.97$, $SD=2.295$), and instructional leader ($M=4.00$, $SD=2.757$); while the following characteristics were ranked as the three least important by school board chairpersons: school law experience ($M=7.84$, $SD=2.403$), professional development experience ($M=7.31$, $SD=2.328$), and politically astute ($M=7.10$, $SD=2.554$). An analysis of the standard deviations for each composite mean score revealed that the highest degree of variability among the scores occurred with the third ranked characteristic—instructional leader ($SD=2.757$), while the lowest degree of variability occurred with the fourth ranked characteristic—effective school board relations ($SD=2.284$).

Table 3

Mean Responses of School Board Chairpersons to the Survey

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.	3.97	0.168
Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.	3.96	0.204
Superintendent-School Board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.	3.83	0.380
Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.	3.70	0.548
Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations, public meetings and politically-inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups.	3.66	0.508
Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.	3.60	0.575
Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.	3.59	0.577
Curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.	3.56	0.528
In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.	3.51	0.583
The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.	3.49	0.583

Table 3 cont'd

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) and NCLB.	3.41	0.712
Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision.	3.37	0.569
Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.	3.36	0.615
Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.	3.23	0.616
Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books and bonds" are essential to the superintendency.	3.07	0.666
Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.	2.63	0.802
School Board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.	2.23	0.765

Supplemental analysis of school board chairperson responses disclosed that the mode ratings of the three most important characteristics—visionary leader, team builder, and instructional leader were 1, 2, and 1 respectively. In contrast, the modes for the three least important characteristics—understanding of school law, professional development experience, and politically astute were 10. As with superintendent rankings, visionary leader received largest percentage of number one rankings at 42.62% from

responding school board chairpersons, followed by instructional leader at 21.31% and effective school board relations at 11.48%. The modes for the bottom three ranked characteristics— understanding of school law, professional development experience, and politically astute were 10; with school law receiving the highest percentage of number 10 rankings at 32.79%, followed by professional development experience at 22.95%, and politically astute at 21.31%.

Research Question 3: *How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?*

Table 5, located on page 57, provides a side-by-side illustration of the means of both responding superintendents and school board chairpersons for comparison purposes to the 17 Likert-response survey questions. A review of the mean responses of superintendents and school board chairpersons revealed that the following characteristics or statements received the three highest mean responses: personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent, followed by the importance of effective communication between the superintendent and school/community stakeholders, and the suggestion that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success; while the suggestions that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover, followed by the idea that persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent, and the effective management of buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency received the lowest mean responses. The findings also revealed that in 15 out of 17 statements, the mean value of superintendent responses were

Table 4

Ranked Mean Superintendent Leadership Characteristics by School Board Chairpersons

Characteristic	Board Chairs (<i>n</i> = 61)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranked <i>M</i>
Visionary Leader	3.05	2.327	1
Team Builder	3.97	2.295	2
Instructional Leader	4.00	2.757	3
Effective School Board Relations	4.44	2.284	4
School/Community Builder	4.82	2.480	5
School Finance Experience	6.11	2.443	6
Intellect	6.20	2.441	7
Politically Astute	7.10	2.554	8
Professional Development Experience	7.31	2.328	9
School Law Experience	7.84	2.403	10

higher than those of school board chairpersons. The lone two statements that received a higher composite mean score from school board chairpersons were related to superintendent/school board relations and technology integration into instruction.

Independent samples *t* tests were utilized to determine whether significant differences existed between the perceptions of superintendents and school board chairpersons for each of the 17 Likert-response survey statements. *T* tests for equality of means between the composite mean scores of both groups at the .05 confidence level indicated that significant differences existed between superintendents and school board chairpersons regarding the requirement that a superintendent must be an instructional leader; as well as the influence that federal and state accountability mandates have had on superintendent leadership; the relationship between the superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision and the school division's academic success; the suggestion that persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education; the idea that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover; and that curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency. With respect to the statement regarding the superintendent as an instructional leader, superintendents ($M=3.77$) indicated a significantly higher level of agreement than did the school board chairpersons ($M=3.51$), $t(171) = 3.206$, $p = .002$. With the respect to the influence of federal and state accountability mandates on superintendent leadership, superintendents ($M=3.69$) indicated a significantly higher level of agreement that superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with the Virginia

Table 5

Mean Responses of Superintendents and School Board Chairpersons to the Survey

Statement	Supt.	Chair	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.	3.77	3.51	3.206	0.002 *
Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.	3.75	3.70	0.681	0.497
Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) and NCLB.	3.69	3.41	2.948	0.004 *
Superintendent-School Board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.	3.81	3.83	-0.28	0.782
Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.	4.00	3.97	1.713	0.088
Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.	3.98	3.96	0.877	0.382
Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.	3.72	3.59	1.704	0.090
Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.	3.74	3.60	1.837	0.068
The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.	3.67	3.49	2.319	0.022 *
Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.	2.89	2.63	2.451	0.015 *

Table 5 cont'd

Statement	Supt.	Chair	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Effectively managing “buildings, buses, books and bonds” are essential to the superintendency.	3.14	3.07	0.659	0.511
School Board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.	2.65	2.23	3.430	0.001 *
Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.	3.38	3.23	1.649	0.101
Curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.	3.78	3.56	3.114	0.002 *
Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision.	3.40	3.37	0.284	0.777
Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.	3.32	3.36	-0.47	0.641
Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations, public meetings and politically-inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups.	3.75	3.66	1.283	0.201

*Indicates significant difference at the .05 level

Standards of Learning and the No Child Left Behind Act, than did school board chairpersons ($M=3.51$), $t(171) = 2.948$, $p = .004$. Superintendents ($M=3.67$) also indicated a significantly higher level of agreement that the superintendent’s ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division’s academic

success than did the school board chairpersons ($M=3.49$), $t(171)$, $p = .022$. In contrast, school board chairpersons ($M=2.63$) indicated significantly less agreement with superintendents ($M=2.89$), $t(2.451)$, $p = .015$ regarding the use of persuasion as a tool for a superintendent. As well, school board chairpersons ($M=2.23$) indicated significantly less agreement with superintendents ($M=2.65$), $t(3.430)$, $p = .001$ regarding school board turnover being a root cause of superintendent turnover. Finally, superintendents ($M=3.78$) indicated a significantly higher level of agreement as to the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency than did school board chairperson ($M=3.56$), $t(3.114)$, $p = .002$.

Table 6 reflects the comparative results of the responding groups' ranking of the most important leadership characteristics for the position of school superintendent. Individual respondents rated their perception of the importance of each of ten superintendent leadership characteristics using a rank ordering response structure, with one representing the most important characteristic. Overall, no single characteristic received a composite mean score between 1.00 and 2.00 from either group. Both superintendents ($M=3.33$, $SD=2.745$) and school board chairpersons ($M=3.05$, $SD=2.327$) perceived visionary leader as the most important leadership characteristic for the superintendency, relative to the ten characteristics rated. However, the high degree of variance in the mean responses indicates less consistency in the rankings by both groups. Superintendents indicated that instructional leader ($M=3.83$, $SD=2.474$) was the second most important characteristic, while school board chairperson perceived this characteristic as the third most important ($M=4.00$, $SD=2.757$). Superintendents rated

Table 6

Ranked Mean of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics by Both Respondent Groups

Characteristic	Superintendents (n = 94)			Board Chairs (n = 61)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranked <i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranked <i>M</i>
Visionary Leader	3.33	2.745	1	3.05	2.327	1
Instructional Leader	3.83	2.474	2	4.00	2.757	3
Effective School Board Relations	3.98	2.190	3	4.44	2.284	4
Team Builder	4.74	2.355	4	3.97	2.295	2
School/Community Builder	5.03	2.358	5	4.82	2.480	5
Politically Astute	5.21	2.271	6	7.10	2.554	8
School Finance Experience	5.56	2.534	7	6.11	2.443	6
Intellect	6.61	2.528	8	6.20	2.441	7
School Law Experience	7.71	2.133	9	7.84	2.403	10
Professional Development Experience	8.99	1.418	10	7.31	2.328	9

effective school board relations as the third most important characteristic ($M=3.98$, $SD=2.190$), while school board chairpersons ranked this as their fourth most important

characteristic ($M=4.44$, $SD=2.284$). School board chairpersons ranked team builder ($M=3.97$, $SD=2.295$) second, while superintendents ($M=4.74$, $SD=2.355$) ranked this leadership characteristic fourth.

Both superintendents and school board chairpersons were consistent in their ranking of the least important characteristics for the position. Professional development experience was ranked tenth and ninth, respectively, by superintendents ($M=8.99$, $SD=1.418$) and school board chairpersons ($M=7.31$, $SD=2.328$). School law experience ranked ninth and tenth, respectively, by superintendents ($M=7.71$, $SD=2.133$) and school board chairpersons ($M=7.84$, $SD=2.403$). Superintendents ranked intellect ($M=6.61$, $SD=2.528$) as eighth, while school board chairpersons ranked politically astute ($M=7.10$, $SD=2.554$) as eighth. Finally, superintendents rated 5 of the 10 characteristics higher than school board chairpersons.

The data analysis of the responses to research question 3 produced means and standard deviations for superintendents and school board chairpersons for each of the ten leadership characteristics. Differences between superintendents and school board chairpersons' perceived importance of each characteristic were determined using an independent samples t tests and are presented in Table 7. It illustrates the differences between the respective mean scores of each respondent group. Differences between superintendents and school board chairpersons' perceived importance of each characteristic were determined using an independent samples t test. Test for equality of means between the composite mean rankings of both groups at the .05 confidence level indicated that significant differences existed between superintendents and school board chairpersons. Significant differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school

Table 7

Comparison of Perceived Importance of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics

Characteristic	Means		<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	
	Superintendents (<i>n</i> = 94)	Board Chairs (<i>n</i> = 61)			
Instructional Leader	3.83	4.00	-0.400	0.690	
School Finance Experience	5.56	6.11	-1.341	0.182	
Professional Development Experience	8.99	7.31	5.578	0.000	*
Effective School Board Relations	3.98	4.44	-1.267	0.207	
Visionary Leader	3.33	3.05	0.659	0.511	
School Law Experience	7.71	7.84	-0.334	0.739	
School/Community Builder	5.03	4.82	0.536	0.592	
Politically Astute	5.21	7.10	-4.806	0.000	*
Team Builder	4.74	3.97	2.028	0.044	*
Intellect	6.61	6.20	0.999	0.319	

* Indicates significant difference at the .05 level

board chairpersons were observed for the following characteristics: professional development experience, politically astute, and team builder. Superintendents ($M=8.99$) perceived professional development experience to be significantly less important than did

school board chairpersons ($M=7.31$), $t(155)$, $p=.000$. The superintendents ($M=5.21$) perceived politically astute to be significantly more important than the school board chairpersons ($M=7.10$), $t(155)$, $p=.000$. Finally, school board chairpersons ($M=3.97$) considered the characteristic of team builder to be significantly more important than superintendents ($M=4.74$), $t(155)$, $p=.044$. No other differences were significant at the .05 level.

Comparison of Findings

Wilson's research on superintendent leadership characteristics was conducted and reported in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at the University of Arizona in 2006. As a result of his research, Wilson (2006) reported the following:

Superintendents ranked the characteristics perceived to be essential to the position as follows: (1) visionary leader, (2) instructional leader, (3) team builder, (4) effective school board relations, (5) school/community builder, (6) intellect, (7) school finance experience, (8) politically astute, (9) school law experience, and (10) professional development experience.

School board presidents ranked the characteristics perceived to be essential to the position as follows: (1) effective school board relations, (2) visionary leader, (3) instructional leader, (4) school/community leader, (5) team builder, (6) politically astute, (7) school finance experience, (8) intellect, (9) school law experience, and (10) professional development experience.

The data from this study indicate that superintendents of Virginia public schools ranked the characteristics perceived to be most important for the position of school

superintendent as follows: (1) visionary leader, (2) instructional leader, (3) effective school board relations, (4) team builder, (5) school/community builder, (6) politically astute, (7) school finance experience, (8) intellect, (9) school law experience, and (10) professional development experience; while school board chairpersons in Virginia ranked the characteristics perceived as most important for the superintendency as follows: (1) visionary leader, (2) team builder, (3) instructional leader, (4) effective school board relations, (5) school/community builder, (6) school finance experience, (7) intellect, (8) politically astute, (9) professional development experience, and (10) school law experience. Table 8 presents comparisons of the 2009 superintendent rankings to Wilson's 2006 rankings.

A closer look at the rankings presented in Table 8 reveal that superintendents in Arizona and Virginia ranked the following characteristics as their respective top four: visionary leader, instructional leader, effective school board relations, and team builder; while also ranking professional development experience and school law experience as their two least important characteristics.

Table 9 as located on page 66 presents comparisons of the 2009 school board chairperson rankings to Wilson's 2006 rankings. A closer look at the rankings presented in Table 9 revealed that Virginia school board chairpersons ranked visionary leader as the most important characteristics, while Arizona school board presidents ranked effective school board relations as their most important characteristic. Virginia school board chairpersons also differed in their rankings of the second most important leadership characteristic for superintendents. In Virginia, school board chairpersons indicated that team builder was the second most important characteristic for a superintendent; while

Table 8

Comparison of Superintendent Rankings

Superintendent Ranking <i>Virginia</i>	Characteristic	Superintendent Ranking <i>Arizona</i>
2009		2006
1	Visionary Leader	1
2	Instructional Leader	2
3	Effective School Board Relations	4
4	Team Builder	3
5	School/Community Builder	5
6	Politically Astute	8
7	School Finance Experience	7
8	Intellect	6
9	School Law Experience	9
10	Professional Development Experience	10

school board presidents in the state of Arizona perceived visionary leader as the second most important characteristic. Both groups agreed that instructional leader was the third most important characteristic for their respective superintendents. Finally, school board leaders from both states agreed that school law experience and professional development experience were the two least important characteristics for the position of superintendents

Table 9

Comparison of School Board Chairperson Rankings

Board Chair Ranking Virginia 2009	Characteristic	Board Presidents Ranking Arizona 2006
1	Visionary Leader	2
2	Team Builder	5
3	Instructional Leader	3
4	Effective School Board Relations	1
5	School/Community Builder	4
6	School Finance Experience	7
7	Intellect	8
8	Politically Astute	6
9	Professional Development Experience	10
10	School Law Experience	9

in their respective states.

Emergent Themes

Based upon the results of the data collection and the analyses, emergent themes were identified. First, the leadership characteristics that emerged as most important for the position of public school superintendent were the ability to develop and cultivate effective relationships for the advancement of the school division and the ability to lead with integrity, honesty, and fairness. Additionally, the superintendent is expected to be a visionary instructional leader who understands and practices team building, while cultivating and sustaining effective board relations.

Summary

With 171 surveys returned out of 264 mailed, the superintendents' and school board chairpersons' responses provided a representative cross-section of their perceptions of leadership characteristics for Virginia's public school superintendents. Statistical and descriptive analyses were conducted to determine the respondents' perceptions regarding the importance of specific leadership characteristics and roles of the school superintendent. In addition, statistical analyses were conducted to determine if significant differences existed between the perceptions of superintendents and school board chairs for each specific characteristic. Additional discussion of the findings presented in this chapter follows in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

This study was designed to determine the leadership characteristics that practicing superintendents and school board chairpersons in the Commonwealth of Virginia deem necessary in the role of school superintendent. This chapter is divided into seven sections. These sections include a review of the study, a summary of the findings, discussion of the findings, conclusions, implications, recommendations for future study, and reflections.

Review of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership characteristics of school superintendents in today's complex education environment as perceived by school superintendents and school board chairpersons in Virginia. Additionally, this study sought to gather and evaluate perspectives from practicing superintendents and their board chairs to determine similarities and differences between the perceptions of these two groups of individuals.

The data answered the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?
2. What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?

The population selected for this study was comprised of all 132 K-12 public school superintendents and school board chairpersons in the Commonwealth of Virginia

during the 2008-2009 school year. The findings of this study were based on data collected through the use of a two-tier survey questionnaire that was mailed to all superintendents (Appendix A) and school board chairpersons (Appendix B) in Virginia. A total of 101 school superintendents (76.52%) responded to the survey, and 70 (53.03%) of the school board chairpersons responded. The data collected from the respondents were loaded into SPSS for data analysis purposes. Responses to the survey items were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Summary of Findings

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were used to identify the level of agreement for each of the 17 items in section one of the survey instrument. The items consisted of statements about different characteristics and roles that superintendents might utilize in their position. For each item, the respondents rated their level of agreement with each statement using a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; and 4 = Strongly Agree). In addition, respondents were asked to rank in order of importance ten superintendent leadership characteristics, with the value of 1 corresponding to the most important characteristic and 10 as the least important. The findings resulting from the analysis of the data collected are presented below:

Research Question 1: *What leadership characteristics do superintendents identify for the position of superintendent?*

1. All responding superintendents ($M=4.00$, $SD=.000$) strongly agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. This parallels studies by Glass & Franceschini (2007) and Meyer (2007).

2. Superintendents ($M=3.98$, $SD=.140$) also agreed that effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. This finding is also supported by national studies conducted by Glass & et al. (2000) and Glass & Franceschini (2007); and statewide research conducted by Meyer (2007). Kowalski (2006) also supports the importance of effective communication skills for the position of superintendent.
3. Superintendents ($M=3.81$, $SD=.393$) also indicated that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success. This finding is also support by Carter & Cunningham (1997); Kowalski (2006); Mextorf (2003); Moody (2007); Sharp & Walter (1997); and Wilson (2006). In addition to being the top three highest composite mean scores from superintendents, the standard deviation calculation for these three scores were the lowest among the seventeen items indicating a higher degree of agreement by superintendents.
4. Superintendents ($M=2.65$, $SD=.818$) indicated the lowest mean response with regard to the suggestion that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.
5. Superintendents ($M=2.89$, $SD=.598$) rated the statement regarding persuasion as the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education with the second lowest mean score. The above mentioned findings were consistent with previous research findings presented by Wilson (2006).

6. Superintendents ($M=3.14$, $SD=.649$) also rated the idea that effective management of buildings, buses, books and bonds as essential to the superintendency as its third least important. This finding is supported by previous research conducted by Bredeson & Kose (2007) and Meyer (2007). In addition to receiving the lowest three composite mean score values, the standard deviation calculations were the highest among the seventeen items indicating a higher degree of variability and lower degree of agreement among the mean responses among superintendents.
7. Superintendents ranked visionary leader ($M=3.33$, $SD=2.745$), instructional leader ($M=3.83$, $SD=2.474$), and effective school board relations ($M=3.98$, $SD=2.190$) as the three most important characteristics. These findings are supported in studies by Bredeson & Kose (2007); Carter & Cunningham (1997); Glass & Franceschini (2007); Kowalski (2006); Mextorf (2003); Meyer (2007); Moody (2007); and Wilson (2006). However, it should be noted that the composite mean score for the top ranked characteristic, visionary leader, also resulted in the highest standard deviation calculation indicating the highest degree of variability among the ten ranked characteristics.
8. Superintendents ranked professional development experience ($M=8.99$, $SD=1.418$), school law experience ($M=7.71$, $SD=2.133$), and intellect ($M=6.61$, $SD=2.528$) as the three least important leadership characteristics among the ten. This is consistent with studies by Bredeson & Kose (2007); Meyer (2007) and Wilson (2006). It should also be noted that the lowest ranked characteristic, professional development experience, also resulted in the lowest standard

deviation calculation indicating the lowest degree of variability among the ten ranked characteristics.

Research Question 2: What leadership characteristics do school board chairpersons identify for the position of superintendent?

9. School board chairpersons ($M=3.97$, $SD=.168$) strongly agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. Previous research conducted by Collins (2005); Glass & Franceschini (2007); and Meyer (2007) support this finding.
10. School board chairpersons ($M=3.96$, $SD=.204$) also agreed that effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. Similar findings were noted by Collins (2005); Glass & Franceschini (2007); and Moody (2007).
11. School board chairpersons ($M=3.83$, $SD=.380$) also indicated that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success. This finding parallels studies by Moody (2007) and Wilson (2006). In addition to receiving the top three highest composite mean scores from school board chairpersons, the standard deviation calculation for these three scores were the lowest among the seventeen items indicating a higher degree of agreement by school board chairpersons.
12. School board chairpersons ($M=2.23$, $SD=.765$) provided the lowest mean response rating to the suggestion that school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.

13. School board chairpersons ($M=2.63$, $SD=.802$) also rated persuasion as the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education with the second lowest mean response.
14. School board chairpersons ($M=3.07$, $SD=.666$) rated the effective management of buildings, buses, books and bonds as essential to the superintendency with its third lowest composite mean response. These findings are consistent with those presented by Wilson (2006). In addition to receiving the lowest three composite mean score values, the standard deviation calculations were the highest among the seventeen items indicating a higher degree of variability and lower degree of agreement among the scores.
15. School board chairpersons ranked visionary leader ($M=3.05$, $SD=2.327$), team builder ($M=3.97$, $SD=2.2295$), and instructional leader ($M=4.00$, $SD=2.757$) as the three most important characteristics. The findings on visionary leader and team builder are consistent with research conducted by Meyer (2007) and Wilson (2006). An analysis of the standard deviations for each composite mean score revealed that the highest degree of variability among the scores occurred with the third ranked characteristic—instructional leader ($SD=2.757$), while the lowest degree of variability occurred with the fourth ranked characteristic—effective school board relations ($SD=2.284$).
16. School board chairpersons ranked school law experience ($M=7.84$, $SD=2.403$), professional development experience ($M=7.31$, $SD=2.328$), politically astute ($M=7.10$, $SD=2.554$) as the three least important leadership characteristics among the ten. These findings are similar to findings presented by Wilson (2006).

Research Question 3: *How do the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics compare between school board chairpersons and superintendents?*

17. Superintendents ($M=4.00$, $SD=.000$) and school board chairpersons ($M=3.97$, $SD=.168$) agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are the most essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. This finding was consistent with previous research (Collins, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Mextorf, 2003; Moody, 2007; Wilson, 2006).
18. Superintendents ($M=3.98$, $SD=.140$) and school board chairpersons ($M=3.96$, $SD=.204$) also agreed that effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. This finding was consistent with previous research (Collins, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Mextorf, 2003; Moody, 2007; Wilson, 2006).
19. Superintendents and school board chairpersons also reached similar conclusions regarding school board turnover as a root cause of superintendent turnover and persuasion as the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education, with the lowest two composite mean score ratings among the seventeen statements. This finding is consistent with study results from Wilson (2006).
20. The findings also revealed that in 15 out of 17 statements, the mean rating of superintendent responses were higher than those of school board chairpersons. The statements regarding superintendent/school board relations and the superintendent's role in integrating technology into instruction received a higher

- composite mean score from school board chairpersons. Previous research conducted by Wilson (2006) disclosed an opposite trend, in that 14 of 17 mean responses by school board chairperson were higher than those revealed in the current study. In addition, no significant differences were revealed in Wilson's study.
21. Statistically significant differences existed between superintendents and school board chairpersons regarding the superintendent's role as an instructional leader in the current educational environment; the level of influence that federal and state accountability mandates have had on superintendent leadership; the relationship between the superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision with the school division's academic success; persuasion as the ultimate tool for a superintendent; school board turnover as a root cause of superintendent turnover; and the areas of responsibility that are inherent in the superintendency.
 22. Superintendents ranked visionary leader ($M=3.33$), instructional leader ($M=3.83$), and effective school board relations ($M=3.98$) as the three most important characteristics, while school board chairpersons ranked visionary leader ($M=3.05$), team builder ($M=3.97$), and instructional leader ($M=4.00$) as their three most important characteristics for the position of superintendent. The ranking of visionary leader as the most important characteristic is also supported by research conducted by Wilson (2006) and Glass and Franceschini (2007).
 23. Superintendents ranked professional development ($M=8.99$), school law experience ($M=7.71$), and intellect ($M=6.61$) as the three least important characteristics, while school board chairs ranked school law experience ($M=7.84$),

- professional development experience ($M=7.31$), and politically astute ($M=7.10$) as their three least important characteristics. Meyer (2007) research findings also revealed that staff development was the least important competency identified by superintendents in Texas.
24. Statistically significant differences were noted between superintendents and school board chairpersons in the perceived importance of the following leadership characteristics: professional development experience, politically astute, and team builder.
25. Superintendents ($M=8.99$) perceived professional development experience to be significantly less important than did school board chairpersons ($M=7.31$), $t(155)$, $p=.000$. Superintendents also perceived political astuteness to be significantly more important than the school board chairpersons ($M=7.10$), $t(155)$, $p=.000$. Conversely, school board chairpersons ($M=3.97$) considered the leadership characteristic of team builder to be significantly more important than superintendents ($M=4.74$), $t(155)$, $p=.044$.
26. Superintendents ranked 5 of the 10 leadership characteristics higher than school board chairpersons. These characteristics were as follows: instructional leader, school finance experience, effective school board relations, school law experience, and politically astute. However, statistically significant differences were only present with the ranking of political astuteness.
27. School board chairpersons ranked the following five characteristics higher than superintendents: visionary leader, team builder, school/community builder, intellect, and professional development experience. Of these five, statistical

significance was noted with the rankings professional development and team builder.

28. The leadership characteristics to which the highest level of agreement were indicated could be considered people or relationship oriented, as they centered around the personal and professional character attributes of the superintendent, the importance of effective communication and the relationship between the superintendent and the school board.

Discussion of Findings

Wilson (2006) conducted similar research in Arizona in 2006 and ascertained similar findings to this study. Results from both studies reached similar conclusions regarding those characteristics and roles that were considered most and least important for the position of superintendent. Although the demographics of the states of Arizona and Virginia are very different in many areas, the results of the Wilson study were similar to the findings of this research, therefore validating and strengthening the reliability of the survey instrument as well as both research projects. Like the Wilson study, this study revealed that visionary leadership, instructional leadership, and effective school board relations were considered the most important characteristics by both superintendents and school board chairpersons, while professional development experience and an understanding of school law were considered the least important characteristics for the superintendency.

The findings of this study uphold the view that a superintendent of schools should possess the characteristics of a visionary instructional leader who understands the importance of cultivating and maintaining an effective relationship between the

superintendent and school board, while at the same time overseeing the operational functions of a complex and multifaceted public school system. Similar findings were noted by Mextorf (2003) and Moody (2007) regarding the relative importance of effective superintendent and school board relations. Given the many complexities associated with the position of school superintendent, it is important that school boards and superintendents develop a better understanding of the perceptions of each group with respect to the leadership characteristics required and expected for the position.

A review of the composite mean scores of each group on the Likert-rating survey indicate that personal and professional integrity as an essential leadership characteristic, followed by the importance of effective communication with school board members and other school community stakeholders, and the suggestion that superintendent-school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success received the highest mean response rating along with the lowest degree of variability in responses from both superintendents and school board chairpersons. These characteristics to which the highest mean response ratings were indicated could be considered people or relationship oriented, as they center on the personal and professional character attributes of the superintendent, the importance of effective communication with school division stakeholders, and the relationship between the superintendent and the school board. The survey results also revealed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness in the position of superintendent received the highest level of agreement as indicated by mean scores of 4.00 and 3.98 out of a possible 4.00, respectively, from superintendents and school board chairpersons. On the other hand, superintendents and school board chairpersons rated school board turnover as a

root cause of superintendent turnover, followed by the use of persuasion as an ultimate tool for a superintendent, and effective management of “buildings, buses, books, and bonds” as essential to the superintendency with the lowest composite mean responses. In addition, the greatest degree of variability also occurred in the mean response ratings of these characteristics.

In 15 of the 17 Likert-scale survey statements, the composite mean scores for superintendents were higher than those of responding school board chairpersons. This finding could be a reflection of and influenced by the fact that superintendents are more sensitive to the realities and expectations of the position based on their practical experience. The lone two statements that received higher mean ratings from school board chairpersons were related to superintendent and school board relations and superintendent’s role in integrating technology into instruction. However, it should not come as a surprise that perceptions regarding superintendent/school board relations and its perceived impact on achieving and maintaining division-wide success was one of the two.

The second part of the survey consisted of a list of ten characteristics for the respondents to rank in order of importance from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the most important characteristic. The finding that appears most evident is that no single characteristic received a composite mean score between 1 and 2 from either group. Perhaps this is an indication of the multifaceted and complex requirements and expectations of the position and difficulties in identifying a single characteristic as being the clear-cut, most important characteristic for the position of school superintendent. In addition, this could be an indication that individual local school division demographics

such as size of division and staff could dictate that different skills are more important than others. However, visionary leader did emerge as the highest ranked leadership characteristic by both superintendents and school board chairpersons, relative to the others. What is interesting about this finding is that this particular characteristic or attribute is not clearly defined by any obvious quantifiable and objective criteria such as educational level or functional expertise. In addition to visionary leader, both groups ranked instructional leader, team builder, and effective school board relations as the four most important characteristics for the position. These results indicate that superintendents and school board chairpersons, alike, viewed characteristics that require working with and leading people as more important than the traditional characteristics based on functional skills attained through formal education. These results are also supported by Kowalski's (2006) research regarding the emergence of a fifth role characterization of the superintendent as communicator. Houston (2001) also proffered similar thoughts regarding the superintendent's need to be a master of communication, collaboration, and community building in the 21st century.

A closer look at the findings also disclosed that superintendents rated 5 of the 10 leadership characteristics higher than school board chairpersons. The five characteristics ranked higher by superintendents included: instructional leader, school finance experience, effective school board relations, school law experience, and politically astute. However, political astuteness was the only one of these five characteristics where the mean scores between superintendents and school board chairpersons ranking was statistically significant. Perhaps superintendents perceived these characteristics as more important because of the related accountability measures associated with each. For

example, the importance of instructional leadership can be influenced and determined by external accountability measures such as student, school, and division-wide performance on high stakes testing as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act and the Virginia Standards of Learning. School finance experience is another characteristic that is subject to internal and external accountability measures such as mandated financial audits, budgeting and spending practices, compliance with public procurement laws, and compliance with other state mandated financial reporting requirements. In addition, school law experience may have been ranked higher by superintendents because of the federal and state laws that govern public education in the areas of special education, student discipline, and personnel law. As is the case with the previously mentioned characteristics, superintendents also ranked effective school board relations higher than school board chairpersons. This ranking could be attributed to the fact that superintendents are acutely aware of the fact that one of the primary responsibilities of the school board is to hire, evaluate, and terminate the school superintendent. Finally, political astuteness could be ranked higher by superintendents because of the political realities that are prevalent in public education today. The realities include elected school boards and local appropriating bodies, along with the influence that local, state, and federal legislators can have on the public education policy and practice in today's complex society.

The remaining five characteristics that were ranked higher by school board chairpersons when compared with superintendents were: visionary leader, team builder, school/community builder, intellect, and professional development experience. These characteristics, in contrast to those ranked higher by superintendents; do not appear to

have the same degree of objective accountability measures. However, each of these characteristics with the exception of professional development experience directly reflects on the leadership style and images that school boards desire in their school superintendent.

Findings

The position of school superintendent is multifaceted and has evolved over time, as have the perceptions of superintendent leadership characteristics. The findings of this study should provide the reader with a more in depth understanding of the position of school superintendent from the perspectives of practicing superintendents and school board chairpersons. Specific findings revealed through this study should also assist the reader in gaining deeper insight into this very demanding position. Among these findings were:

1. Superintendent leadership should be guided by a strong sense of personal and professional ethics that reflect integrity, honesty, and fairness. Aspiring and practicing superintendents should demonstrate these leadership qualities in carrying out the important leadership role of public school superintendent.
2. The public school superintendent must understand the importance of developing and sustaining quality relationships with a diverse group of school and community stakeholders. Aspiring and practicing superintendents should seek opportunities to develop and enhance their ability to effectively communicate with a wide range of school and community stakeholders.
3. Aspiring and practicing superintendents must understand their role as a visionary instructional leader and the impact that accountability standards can and do have

- on their perceived effectiveness. As such, these leaders must develop and articulate a vision for effective instruction in this age of accountability.
4. Superintendents and school board chairpersons must ensure that a proper understanding of the responsibilities and roles of the superintendent is in place and documented to strengthen the effectiveness of the school division.
 5. An understanding of the desired leadership characteristics of the superintendent by both the superintendent and the school board is critical to the process of improving public education in today's complex society. Aspiring and practicing superintendents must gain this understanding as they prepare for and lead through this very daunting position.
 6. There are specific leadership characteristics expected for the position of public school superintendent. Based on the findings of this research, these leadership characteristics would include personal and professional integrity; the ability to articulate a vision for effective instruction; and the ability to develop and cultivate effective relationships with a wide range of school community stakeholders. It is recommended that superintendents and school board chairpersons identify a set of essential leadership characteristics required to meet the needs of their school community.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the findings of this study and previous research:

The position of public school superintendent is a career position that is filled with many challenges and opportunities. Superintendents hold one of the most demanding and

complex jobs in the nation. This study and previous research included in chapter two provides empirical evidence that the position is multifaceted and ever-evolving. The need to gain better and more in-depth understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the position is required. As such, the conclusions that follow are based upon the findings summarized below.

Overall, Virginia school superintendents and school board chairpersons were similar in their ranking of the most important and least important leadership characteristics for school superintendents. Superintendents and school board chairpersons strongly agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness were essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. More specifically, the composite mean scores for this Likert scale statement were 4.00 and 3.98 out of a possible 4 from superintendents and school board chairpersons, respectively. No single leadership characteristic received a composite mean score between 1 and 2 from superintendents or school board chairperson from the rank ordering section of the survey; in fact the highest rated leadership characteristic received a composite mean score of 3.05, with a high degree of variability among the scores. This finding could be a reflection of the different priorities of superintendents and school board chairpersons as determined by such local factors as location and size of the school district they serve. In addition, the diverse backgrounds of both superintendents and school board chairpersons could influence the perceived importance of various leadership characteristics specific to their current school and community culture. However, both groups perceived visionary leader as the most important leadership characteristic relative to the other nine provided for ranking. Superintendents ranked instructional leader as

second, while school board chairpersons ranked this characteristic third. Superintendents ranked effective school board relations third, while school board chairpersons ranked this characteristic fourth. For school board chairpersons, team builder was ranked as the second most important characteristic, while superintendents ranked this characteristic fourth.

Both superintendents and school board chairpersons were consistent in their ranking of the least important characteristics for the position. Professional development experience was ranked tenth and ninth, respectively, by superintendents and school board chairpersons. School law experience ranked ninth and tenth, respectively, by superintendents and school board chairpersons.

Superintendents ranked instructional leader, school finance experience, effective school board relations, school law experience, and politically astute as more important than did school board chairperson; while school board chairpersons ranked visionary leader, team builder, school/community builder, intellect, and professional development experience higher than superintendents. Finally, in 15 out of 17 statements regarding the level of agreement as to the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent, the composite mean scores of superintendent responses were higher than those of school board chairpersons. This could be a reflection of the fact that the perceptions of superintendent leadership of practicing superintendents are different than those of elected and appointed school board members.

Implications for Practice

The following implications for practice have been determined as a result of this study:

1. The findings from this study should help school board members and superintendents identify specific characteristics for the superintendency. The identification of specific leadership characteristics may be utilized in the development and enhancement of superintendent performance evaluation tools. As this study indicated, superintendents and school board chairpersons reached agreement that visionary instructional leadership guided by honesty, integrity, and fairness are considered most important for the individual who is called to be a superintendent.
2. Superintendents and school boards should maintain ongoing discussion regarding the leadership characteristics required and expected for the position of school superintendent. As revealed in this study, effective superintendent-school board relations are important to achieving and sustaining division-wide success.
3. Institutions of higher learning that prepare individuals to become school superintendents should work closely with professional organizations to become aware of the characteristics and skills important to the position of school superintendent. As indicated in this study and previous research, there are specific leadership characteristics required and expected for the position.
4. Professional organizations that service superintendents and school boards should develop and maintain ongoing training programs for practicing and aspiring superintendents based on the characteristics identified in this study. This recommendation is based, in part, on the fact that training programs developed around the perceptions of important leadership characteristics by practicing

superintendents and school board chairpersons provide the strongest foundation of superintendent training programs.

Recommendations for Future Study

1. A follow-up study could be conducted in five years to determine if those characteristics perceived to be most important to the position of the superintendent remained constant. The follow-up study could be expanded to determine if district size has any influence on superintendent leadership perceptions.
2. A similar study could be conducted to determine what characteristics are attributed to superintendent turnover in Virginia.
3. A study could be conducted to determine if superintendent evaluation instruments are aligned with specific leadership characteristics or performance outcomes.
4. A similar study could be expanded to determine how much time school superintendents actually devote to specific characteristics.
5. A similar study could be expanded to include a qualitative aspect that could include interviews with practicing superintendents and chairpersons.

Reflections

My interest in conducting this study was generated as a result of having served in the capacity of assistant superintendent for finance and operations with four different superintendents in three school divisions in three geographic regions of Virginia. These superintendents differed in gender and years of experience and displayed divergent leadership characteristics and styles. As I reflect on the experiences encountered during this scholarly pursuit, two words come to mind: challenge and opportunity. The greatest

challenge confronted during this process was the requirement to maintain discipline and focus. However, the pursuit of new empirically based knowledge represented an invigorating opportunity.

Overall, I was not surprised by the findings that emerged from the study. But I must say that the discovery of scholarly research in support of my personal belief that leadership must be founded on competence and ethics was affirming and encouraging. The findings supported the traditional role characterization of the superintendent as instructional leader; while at the same time strengthening my personal and professional belief that leadership is also about the creation and cultivation of relationships. Again, this scholarly pursuit of a very practical reality has been a very positive and relevant experience for me.

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APPENDIX A

Superintendent's Leadership Survey

Section 1:

Utilizing a Likert Scale 1-4, where one (1) represents Strongly Disagree, two (2) represents Disagree, three (3) represents Agree, and four (4) represents Strongly Agree, please respond to the following statements by circling your choice:

1. In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.
1 2 3 4
2. Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.
1 2 3 4
3. Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) and NCLB.
1 2 3 4
4. Superintendent-School Board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.
1 2 3 4
5. Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.
1 2 3 4
6. Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
7. Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.
1 2 3 4
8. Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
9. The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.
1 2 3 4
10. Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.
1 2 3 4
11. Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books and bonds" are essential to the superintendency.
1 2 3 4

12. School Board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.
1 2 3 4
13. Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.
1 2 3 4
14. Curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
15. Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision.
1 2 3 4
16. Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.
1 2 3 4
17. Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations, public meetings and politically-inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups.
1 2 3 4

Section 2:

Please rank order the characteristics you believe to be necessary for the position of superintendent. The most essential/important should receive the numerical value of one (1).

Characteristic	Ranking (1 to 10)
Instructional Leader	
School Finance Experience	
Professional Development Experience	
Effective School Board Relations	
Visionary Leader	
School Law Experience	
School/Community Builder	
Politically Astute	
Team Builder	
Intellect	

You may add other essential characteristics that you deem vital for the position of superintendent in the space provided below.

APPENDIX B

School Board Chair's Leadership Survey

Section 1:

Utilizing a Likert Scale 1-4, where one (1) represents Strongly Disagree, two (2) represents Disagree, three (3) represents Agree, and four (4) represents Strongly Agree, please respond to the following statements by circling your choice:

3. In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.
1 2 3 4

4. Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.
1 2 3 4

3. Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) and NCLB.
1 2 3 4

4. Superintendent-School Board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.
1 2 3 4

5. Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.
1 2 3 4

6. Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4

7. Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.
1 2 3 4

8. Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4

9. The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.
1 2 3 4

10. Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.
1 2 3 4

11. Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books and bonds" are essential to the superintendency.
1 2 3 4

12. School Board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.
1 2 3 4
13. Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.
1 2 3 4
14. Curriculum, finance, professional development, school board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
15. Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision.
1 2 3 4
16. Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.
1 2 3 4
17. Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations, public meetings and politically-inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups.
1 2 3 4

Section 2:

Please rank order the characteristics you believe to be necessary for the position of superintendent. The most essential/important should receive the numerical value of one (1).

Characteristic	Ranking (1 to 10)
Instructional Leader	
School Finance Experience	
Professional Development Experience	
Effective School Board Relations	
Visionary Leader	
School Law Experience	
School/Community Builder	
Politically Astute	
Team Builder	
Intellect	

You may add other essential characteristics that you deem vital for the position of superintendent in the space provided below.

APPENDIX C

Michael E Thornton
2100 Brush Hill Lane
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

February 1, 2009

Superintendent's Name
Name of School Division
Address

Dear _____:

My name is Michael E Thornton and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. In addition, I am currently serving as the Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations for Hanover County Public Schools in Ashland, Virginia, where Dr. Stewart D. Roberson is superintendent. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in completing a survey to determine the leadership characteristics that practicing superintendents and school board chairs in the Commonwealth of Virginia deem necessary in the role of school superintendent.

The results of the study will provide information of interest to practicing and aspiring superintendents, school boards, as well as to add to the literature in the field. The questionnaire has also been reviewed by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) and the Virginia School Board Association (VSBA).

Each survey has been coded for tracking purposes only, and the coding will be destroyed once the research process is completed and/or the survey responses are received. In addition, the coding procedure will prevent unnecessary follow-up mailings to those respondents who would have already returned their surveys. Please note that all responses will be kept strictly confidential. As such, no individual responses will be identified when analyzing the data or during the reporting of results.

If you agree to participate, please complete and return the survey questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope on or before February 13, 2009. The success of this study is dependent on your timely participation. Therefore, I would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at (757) 617-0873 or email me at mtdtant3@vt.edu.

Thanks again for taking time out of your busy schedules to assist me in this research study.

Sincerely,

Michael E Thornton
Doctoral Candidate

Encl: Survey

APPENDIX D

Michael E Thornton
2100 Brush Hill Lane
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

February 1, 2009

School Board Chair's Name
Name of School Division
Address

Dear _____:

My name is Michael E Thornton and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. In addition, I am currently serving as the Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations for Hanover County Public Schools in Ashland, Virginia, where Dr. Stewart D. Roberson is superintendent. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in completing a survey to determine the leadership characteristics that practicing superintendents and school board chairs in the Commonwealth of Virginia deem necessary in the role of school superintendent.

The results of the study will provide information of interest to practicing and aspiring superintendents, school boards, as well as to add to the literature in the field. The questionnaire has also been reviewed by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) and the Virginia School Board Association (VSBA).

Each survey has been coded for tracking purposes only, and the coding will be destroyed once the research process is completed and/or the survey responses are received. In addition, the coding procedure will prevent unnecessary follow-up mailings to those respondents who would have already returned their surveys. Please note that all responses will be kept strictly confidential. As such, no individual responses will be identified when analyzing the data or during the reporting of results.

If you agree to participate, please complete and return the survey questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope on or before February 13, 2009. The success of this study is dependent on your timely participation. Therefore, I would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at (757) 617-0873 or email me at mtdtant3@vt.edu.

Thanks again for taking time out of your busy schedules to assist me in this research study.

Sincerely,

Michael E Thornton
Doctoral Candidate

Encl: Survey

APPENDIX E

Michael E Thornton
2100 Brush Hill Lane
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

February 23, 2009

Dear School Board Chairperson:

My name is Michael E Thornton and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. In addition, I am currently serving as the Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations for Hanover County Public Schools in Ashland, Virginia, where Dr. Stewart D. Roberson is superintendent. I am in the process of completing the research requirements for my dissertation. The title of my dissertation is *A Comparative Study of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics of Virginia School Superintendents*. As a part of the research process, you should have received approximately three weeks ago a survey questionnaire from me via the U.S. mail. My purpose for writing you today is to seek your participation in completing the survey.

For the study to be representative of all Virginia's public school divisions, the sample size and response rate needs to be as large as possible. Each survey has been coded for tracking purposes only, and the coding will be destroyed once the research process is completed and/or the survey responses are received. Please note that all responses will be kept strictly confidential. As such, no individual responses will be identified when analyzing the data or during the reporting of results.

If you agree to participate, please complete and return the survey questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope on or before March 6, 2009. The success of this study is dependent on your timely participation. Therefore, I would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at (757) 617-0873 or email me at mtdtant3@vt.edu.

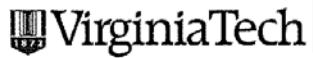
Thanks again for taking time out of your busy schedules to assist me in this research study.

Sincerely,

Michael E Thornton
Doctoral Candidate

Encl: Survey

APPENDIX F




Office of Research Compliance
 Carmen T. Green, IRB Administrator
 2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4358 Fax 540/231-0959
 e-mail ctgreen@vt.edu
 www.irb.vt.edu
 FWA00000572(expires 1/20/2010)
 IRB # is IRB00000867

DATE: January 27, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: Travis W. Twiford
 Michael Thornton

FROM: Carmen Green 

SUBJECT: **IRB Exempt Approval:** "A Comparative Study of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics of Virginia School Superintendents", IRB # 09-089

I have reviewed your request to the IRB for exemption for the above referenced project. The research falls within the exempt status. Approval is granted effective as of January 27, 2009.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in the research protocol. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

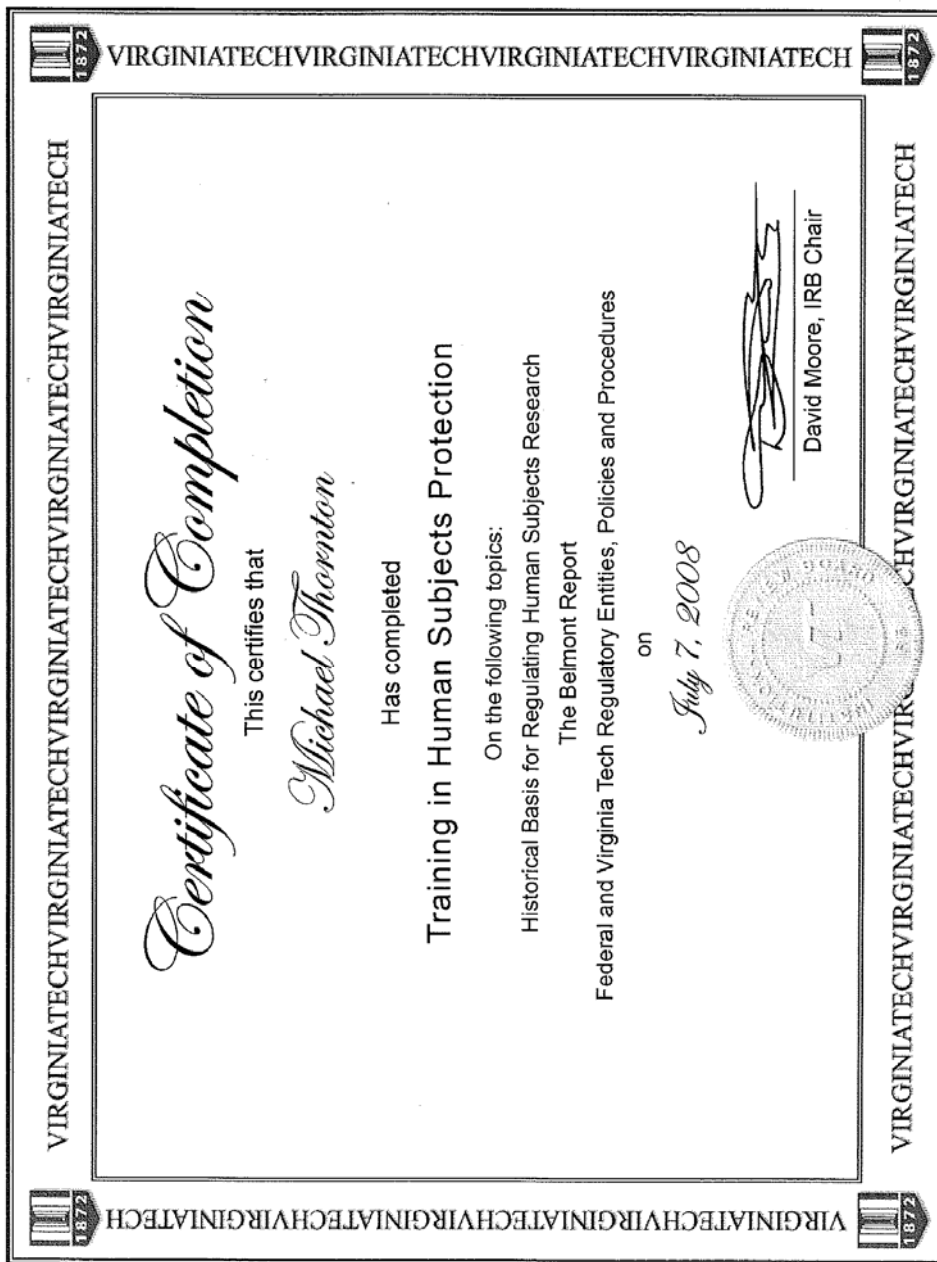
cc: File

Invent the Future

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An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

APPENDIX G



APPENDIX H

Page 1 of 1

Michael Thornton

From: "Michael Thornton" <mthornton@hcps4.hanover.k12.va.us>
To: "Michael Thornton" <mthornton10@cox.net>
Sent: Friday, March 20, 2009 1:42 PM
Subject: FW: 2006 Dissertation

-----Original Message-----

From: DWilson@pueblo60.k12.co.us [mailto:DWilson@pueblo60.k12.co.us]
Sent: Wednesday, April 16, 2008 11:22 AM
To: Michael Thornton
Subject: Re: 2006 Dissertation

Michael,

You most certainly have my consent to you utilize my research in any way that assists you. Best of luck to you as you complete this phase of your doctoral work.

Regards,

Doug Wilson Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources
Pueblo City Schools
719-549-7156

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."