

Perceptions of Current Virginia School Superintendents and Active Board
Chairpersons Concerning Essential Leadership Characteristics of Superintendents

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership has been studied and disputed for decades, but it remains an elusive topic. The superintendent is the lead advocate in the school district (Bjork, 2009). Research suggests that certain leadership characteristics are more effective than others (Gray & Lewis, 2011). The purpose of this study was to identify current superintendents' and active school-board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics. As a follow-up study, it compared the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016 to determine similarities and differences (Thornton, 2009).

Superintendents and school-board chairs agreed that effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. Superintendents and school-board chairs also agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for public-school superintendents. Superintendents and school-board chairs ranked instructional leader and visionary leader as the two most essential characteristics of the position of superintendent.

In 2009, the superintendents perceived instructional leader and visionary leader to be the most essential characteristics. In 2016, superintendents also rated instructional leader and visionary leader as the two most essential characteristics. In both 2009 and 2016, school-board chairs identified visionary leadership as the most essential characteristic.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

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Dedication

This accomplishment is dedicated to my family. Thank you for your patience and encouragement through this journey. Thank you mom for the prayers and inspiring words.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Overseeing a school district can be a daunting task; nonetheless, superintendents are expected to cultivate student learning (Kowalski, 2006). According to the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) Professional Standards for Superintendency (2010), superintendents should demonstrate proficiency in the following areas: (1) leadership and district culture, (2) policy and governance, (3) communications and community relations, (4) organizational management, (5) curriculum planning and development, (6) instructional organization management, (7) human resources management, and (8) values and ethics of leadership.

Today, the superintendent must be an educational leader as well as an overseer of the school district (Eadie, 2008). Likewise, the board must function as an effective unit and collaborate with the superintendent to improve student academic achievement (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). The work of school boards is challenging and complex, but they have an obligation to the community to create an environment of collaboration that fosters student success (Johnson, 2007).

School boards play an important role in American public education (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). The size of school boards varies depending on the size of the school district (Roberts & Sampson, 2011). Additionally, some boards consist of elected members, whereas others consist of appointed members (Dunn, 2009). School boards make decisions regarding teaching and learning, finances, facilities, personnel, and planning (Johnson, 2007). They also play a vital role in the hiring of the district superintendent (Roberts & Sampson, 2011).

Background

In May 2009, Michael Thornton, then a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, successfully defended his dissertation, *A Comparative Study of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics of Virginia School Superintendents* (Thornton, 2009). Thornton's findings were based on data obtained from the survey responses of 101 superintendents and 70 board chairpersons. His study offered the following conclusions:

1. The majority of the superintendents ranked the following leadership characteristics

- among the five most important: visionary leader, instructional leader, effective school-board relations, team builder, and school/community builder. The five least important characteristics, on the other hand, were political astuteness, school-finance experience, intellect, school-law experience, and professional-development experience.
2. The majority of the board chairpersons ranked the following leadership characteristics as among the five most important: visionary leader, team builder, instructional leader, effective school-board relations, and school/community builder. In their estimation, the five least important characteristics were: intellect, school-finance experience, political astuteness, professional-development experience, and school-law experience.

Thornton recommended that a follow-up study be conducted to determine if the characteristics perceived as important in 2009 remained constant. As a response to this recommendation, the present study replicates Thornton's research; it investigates the perceptions of superintendents and school-board members from the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Historical Perspective

The improvement of public education has been a focal point in American politics for several decades (Miller, Malley, & Owen, 2009). According to Arnold (2005), national policy makers have grappled with how to bring about significant reform in public schools. The process of modern-day public school reform originated in 1983 with the report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Later signed into legislation was the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which mandated that all children reach proficiency status on state assessments of educational performance by 2014 (Tekniepe, 2015). NCLB was the reauthorization of the Elementary School and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Tekniepe, 2015). More recently, in December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law to further address the recurring needs of public American education systems (McKenzie & Kress, 2015). Now, almost two decades after the initial piece of legislation, the US public education system is under unprecedented pressure to improve student achievement (Miller, Malley, & Owen, 2009). The performance of American students continues to be significantly poorer than that of their counterparts in other developed countries (Whittle, 2005).

The development of educational policies such as NCLB was to create accountability measures for school districts (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Before accountability measures were in place, most states set their own academic standards, established their own curriculums, and implemented their own methods to determine if schools were meeting performance targets (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Although the United States allocates more resources to education than any other nation (Hanushek & Lindseth, 2009), student achievement has remained stagnant even as other developed countries continue to generate improved academic outcomes (Schleicher & Stewart, 2008). Current trends indicate that as a result of this stagnant performance, American public school districts continue to struggle to produce students with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in an increasingly global economy (Levine, 2005). Leonardatos (2015) contended that this potential shortage of adequately prepared learners could have large-scale implications and went on to argue that the US economy may be adversely impacted in the coming decades.

Statement of Problem

In spite of educational-reform efforts, there is some consensus regarding the need for effective leadership in public education (Olson, 2000). At the school level, there is a deficit of skilled public school administrators (Elmore, 2005). Qualifications for present vacancies do not signify competence to fill the positions (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). In a human-capital setting characterized by limited personnel with the qualifications needed to direct organizations, many of those appointed to leadership positions are poorly prepared (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). A case can thus be made for the growing impact and importance of superintendent leadership.

Fink and Brayman (2006) noted that large numbers of teachers are exiting the profession within their first few years; simultaneously, a considerable number of experienced teachers are retiring from the profession. In addition to retirement and profession changes, fewer college students are pursuing education as a profession (Fink & Brayman, 2006). These findings align with Hanushek and Lindseth's (2009) study, which argued that critical shortages of teachers are lowering the number of quality candidates available for principal or midlevel district administrative positions. Gray and Lewis (2011) acknowledged that the failure to retain quality educators is having a negative impact on the number of candidates available for superintendency

positions. With a reduced pool of qualified site leaders to choose from and with the challenge of improving the performance of current leaders who are not excelling, boards everywhere are being put to the test, as the call for accountability and compliance continues (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). School boards are finding it more challenging to attract and retain quality applicants for current vacancies (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Changing roles. Superintendents are now required to take a more active role in improving the instruction in their districts. They are now tasked with improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of school districts (Cuban, 1998). Timar and Chyu (2010) maintained that in the new era of accountability, district superintendents should turn from a managerial focus in order to emphasize academic leadership. Storms and Gonzales (2006) argued that academically focused district leaders convey a strong belief in the ability of their school system's personnel to attain high standards of learning for all students. The authors further stated that effective superintendents make it a priority to develop specific objectives in order to ensure high standards of teaching and leadership from all instructional personnel in the school district (Storms & Gonzales, 2006).

Impact of superintendent leadership. Superintendents, in partnership with governing boards, carry the greatest power within a school district to influence policy and allocate resources (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The indirect impact of superintendent leadership is relatively easy to isolate; the direct effect remains more difficult to judge (Bird et al., 2013). Because of the varying characteristics and organization configurations of school districts, the direct impact of superintendents on student achievement likely varies (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). A comprehensive study conducted in 2006 by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning organization (McREL) investigated the influence of district superintendents on student achievement. The study sought to identify the superintendent practices that exerted the strongest influence on student achievement, and it offered four major findings: "(1) district leadership is relevant, (2) effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal oriented districts, (3) superintendent tenure is positively linked with student achievement, and (4) defined autonomy." Under the second finding, the study identified five district-level leadership responsibilities that have the potential to improve student academic achievement: (1) collaborative goal setting, (2) nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (3) board alignment and support of district

goals, (4) monitoring achievement and instructional goals, and (5) use of resources to support instructional goals.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of essential characteristics of educational leadership, specifically the superintendency. The study's purpose is to analyze the leadership characteristics perceived as significant by Virginia school superintendents and Virginia board chairpersons.

The need for superintendents will increase in the coming years. In 2014, the AASA reported that the mean age of superintendents of public school districts was 54–55 years. Anderson-Davis (2012) predicted that within the next five years, many of the current district superintendents could be eligible for retirement and exit the field of K–12 education. This would result in the need for suitable replacements (Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

School districts struggle to accurately determine where to focus their efforts and resources to get the best return on investment (Barker, 2007). Potentially, this study's findings can help school district leaders focus their efforts in a way that has the greatest impact on student achievement. The study's conclusions offer strategies that have been confirmed as effective means of improving student academic results.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions of current superintendents and school-board chairpersons concerning superintendent-leadership characteristics, as outlined by Thornton (2009). Additionally, this study identifies similarities and differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016.

Justification of the Study

Fullan (2010) argued that strong leadership at the district level increases the value of an educational system. This claim is in line with Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), who concluded that district leadership is linked to successful educational reform. As the primary executive of the school board, the superintendent is expected to be an efficient leader of the school district (Bird et al., 2013). Furthermore, the superintendent is expected to maintain other roles associated with serving as the chief executive officer of a large organization (Weiss,

Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2015). Superintendents play the significant role of monitoring instruction for the entire district; therefore, it is important to identify what instructional leadership practices are closely associated with improved instruction and student outcomes (Bjork, 2009).

The Constitution of Virginia authenticates the legal foundation for school boards (Dinan, 2014). Consequently, school-board members are considered officers of the Commonwealth of Virginia (Dinan, 2014). School boards have two main purposes: appointing a division superintendent of schools and determining educational policy (Eadie, 2005).

This study compares the perceptions of leadership characteristics. The data were based on rankings of characteristics performed by current Virginia school superintendents and active school-board chairpersons. School-board chairs were considered because they are selected by their colleagues—and because they are likely to communicate more frequently with the superintendent than other members of the board (Thornton, 2009). The perceptions of school-board chairs are valuable, because they bridge the gap between how superintendents see themselves and the way they are perceived by school boards (Wilson, 2006).

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this study are as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?
2. What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?
4. How do current perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified in 2009 by Thornton?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure 1. The figure illustrates the perspectives examined and what, if any, relationships exist. Each group of participants has its

own perceptions. The perceptions of the two groups were statistically compared to determine if differences exist between them.

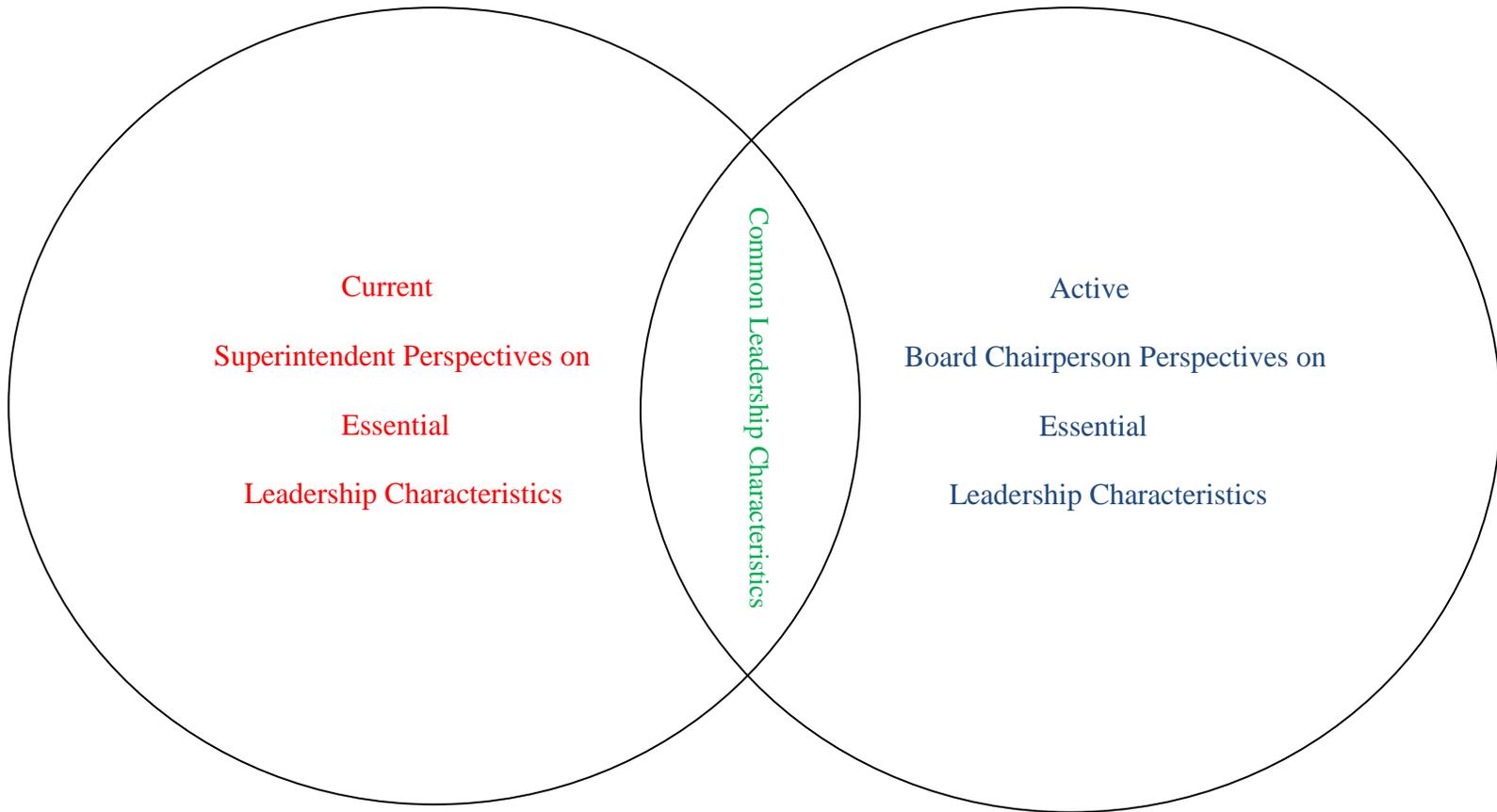


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Definition of Terms

A *school board* is a group that serves as the governing body for a local group of schools (Murphey & Hallinger, 1986). A *school-board chair/chairperson* is a member of the school board who is elected by his or her peers to serve as the leader of the group (Eadie, 2005). A *superintendent* is an official who oversees school administration within a school district (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of a study that are outside the control of the researcher (Lester & Bishop, 2000). Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of a study (Lester & Bishop, 2000).

This study included the following delimitations:

1. It was limited to a specific geographic location, that is, the Commonwealth of Virginia.
2. It was limited to superintendents and board chairs; that is, it involved no other members of the school board.

This study included the following limitation:

1. The research relied on participants to provide honest responses. Biases may exist due to the self-report nature of the study.

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, presents the research problem, outlines the study's purpose, articulates its guiding questions, and explains its significance. Chapter Two reviews the instructional-leadership literature that is relevant to research on district superintendency. Chapter Three describes the research methodology and methods. Chapter Four reports the outcomes of the quantitative study. Chapter Five presents the study's findings and offers reflections on its implications.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to analyze perceptions of current superintendents and school-board chairpersons concerning superintendent-leadership characteristics, as outlined by Thornton (2009). Additionally, this study identifies similarities and differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016.

This study replicates research conducted by Thornton (2009). Thornton investigated characteristics that current superintendents and active board chairs in the Commonwealth of Virginia perceived as important. Chapter Two presents the review of relevant literature and research that was conducted to lay a foundation for the study.

Current school superintendents are under tremendous pressure to meet the demands of both schools and communities (Storms & Gonzales, 2006). They are responsible for the progress and achievement of students in their school district (Meyer, 2007). Additionally, the superintendency encompasses responsibilities in instructional leadership, operational management, personnel management, and community relations (Barker, 2007). The position's complexity requires a specific skill set and particular leadership characteristics (Bjork, 2009)

This chapter is organized into eight sections, which address (1) the history of public education, (2) historical and changing roles of superintendents, (3) evolving functions of superintendents, (4) superintendents as mediators of improvement, (5) superintendents and academic achievement, (6) governing perspectives on superintendents, (7) superintendent-school board relations, and (8) superintendent-leadership characteristics. The chapter concludes with a brief synopsis. It should be noted that this study focuses on district-level rather than state-level superintendents.

Search Process

In an effort to conduct a comprehensive search of literature pertaining to superintendent-leadership characteristics, various search methods were used. ProQuest and EBSCOhost online databases were initially used to identify relevant studies. Using the search term "educational leadership," a search of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's online library resulted in approximately 48,200 journal articles, books, dissertations, and other sources related to the topic. This number was reduced to about 21,400 after refining the search and setting the

parameters for articles published within the last 11 years. Using the search terms “school superintendent leadership,” “school leadership characteristics,” and “school district leadership” and limiting the search to scholarly publications, the search yielded 1,233 items. The search was refined further by reviewing applicable titles and scholarly journals.

History of Public Education

The early American school system developed from the needs of small New England towns to educate their people (Monroe, 1940). Early on, American colonists educated their children to read and write from home and at church but recognized that this arrangement was insufficient, so they began to establish public schools in the early 1600s (Monroe, 1940). Education structures were highly localized and accessible only to those who could afford it (Barracough, 1973). The early colonial public schools had little similarity to our modern system of education. Initially, only boys attended these institutions, and their coursework seldom went further than what would now be referred to as a grammar school curriculum (Goodlad, 1978). Throughout the 17th century, only women whose families were wealthy received formal educations (Monroe, 1940).

Prior to the mid-19th century, students of all ages were educated together in one-room schoolhouses (Rutter et al., 1979). Over time, the Prussian system was adopted in America, first in Massachusetts in 1848 (Barracough, 1973). This was the system in which students were “age graded.” This method proved successful and quickly became the norm in public education across the country (Monroe, 1940).

The mid-1830s witnessed the establishment of the standardization of public school curricula. Theoretically, this standardization would ensure that children received the same high-quality education from any school in a given district (Rost, 1991). Prior to curriculum standardization, public education varied greatly between schools (Bacharach & Mitchell, 1983).

According to Monroe (1940), the fourth and fifth decades of the 19th century have been acknowledged as a time of great development in American education. This period has been referred to as the era of educational revival (Monroe, 1940). It was characterized by persistent attempts to improve the educational systems in New England and the middle states (Rutter et al., 1979). Many of these efforts were led by Mann, who is known as a leader in the establishment of the educational system (Barracough, 1973). Barracough (1973) asserted that Mann worked

to regulate free education by advocating for the elimination of laws and bills that required payments to attend school. This was also a time when Southern and Western states worked to establish free public school systems (Monroe, 1940).

By 1900, the economy, industrialization, and population growth had various effects on education. In the first few decades of the century, education and the financial well-being of households were closely related (Rost, 1991). The workplace was undergoing a transformation, and it was clear that American school systems would need to provide the education and training required to better prepare workers (Vinovskis, 1997). The significance of education began to grow as more Americans recognized its benefits (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). Immigration also had an effect on the American school system and its course offerings (Barraclough, 1973). Barraclough (1973) noted that large numbers of foreigners migrated to America, the majority of them from countries and ethnic groups that were not commonly represented in America at the time. As a result, new curricula were developed and introduced (Barraclough, 1973). This included the introduction of foreign languages. Vocational schools were created as a result of the growing bond between education and business (Wu, 1986).

The mid-1950s brought the end of segregation in public schools. In 1954, the Supreme Court heard *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. This case addressed the issue of segregation and ruled that the separation of students based on race was illegal. The 1960s represented an era of instructional reform. Teachers were encouraged to try new instructional practices and use their creativity to make learning more stimulating. They were encouraged to involve students rather than employing the standard textbook method of instruction that had characterized the 1950s (Touhill, 1969). During this time, students were given choices, flexible scheduling, individualized instruction, and non-graded assignments (Touhill, 1969). The instruction reform movement of the 60s did not achieve the expected educational outcomes (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). Test scores declined, enrollments fell, and public faith in teachers weakened (Marrou, 1982). There was a strong back-to-basics curriculum movement that emphasized reading, writing, and arithmetic along with a focus on teacher accountability (Goodlad, 1978).

The 1970s introduced the emphasis on educating all students regardless of their physical, mental, or emotional challenges. All students with disabilities underwent individual evaluations, which lead to an individualized education program designed as personalized plans that would fit

the educational needs of individual students (Skiba et al., 2008). In 1975, Congress passed the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, which granted free public education to children with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2008). Additionally, the act mandated that students be included in regular classrooms to the greatest degree possible and that they be assigned learning environments with relatively few restrictions while receiving access to the additional services they needed (Skiba et al., 2008). The new legislation brought about the need for specialized training for teachers and school officials (Marrou, 1982). Colleges and universities began partnering with school systems to offer the training needed to prepare teachers and leaders to handle the new federal special education requirements (Wu, 1986).

In the 1980s, the role of the federal government in public education was reversed. The federal government believed that its role in public education should be reduced (McGuinn, 2006). The report *A Nation at Risk* highlighted how far behind the American education system had fallen over the previous decade (McGuinn, 2006). As a result of the report, most school systems took drastic steps to meet the report's challenges in adopting a more rigorous curriculum and creating measurable standards for learning (Laguardia & Pearl, 2009). The majority of US educational systems shifted in the direction of a standards-based curriculum, which is widely used in today's educational system (McGuinn, 2006).

Historical and Changing Roles of Superintendents

The position of superintendent was created in American public education in the mid-1800s (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). According to Carter and Cunningham (1997), the first public school superintendent was appointed in 1837, in Buffalo, New York. Furthermore, as Carter and Cunningham (1997) pointed out in their book *The American School Superintendent: Leading in Age of Pressure*, the role of American superintendent has gone through four key phases since the superintendency was introduced as an official position:

1. The clerical role: the superintendent supported the school board with everyday school items
2. The master educator: the superintendent supplied leadership on curricular and instructional affairs
3. The expert manager: the superintendent emphasized a hierarchy of administration and scientific supervision

4. The chief executive officer of the board: the superintendent currently functions as the qualified expert of the school board, directing and managing reforms, supervising resources, and communicating with the public (pp. 24-25)

Cuban (1998), who collected documented information from numerous educational journals and superintendent proceedings from 1870 to 1950, pinpointed three superintendent roles and identified them as the dominant conceptions of leadership. These conceptions of leadership were teacher-scholar, administrative chief, and negotiator statesman (Cuban, 1998). Cuban (1998) described negotiator-statesman as the modern role of superintendents. This role requires superintendents to create policies, disseminate resources, establish relationships, and engage in conflict resolution (Anderson-Davis, 2012).

In the 1950s, superintendents supervised the activities of schools, developed budgets, and tended to buildings and everyday operations (Cuban, 1998). During this time they gained influence and respect as major community leaders (Blumberg, 1985). Superintendents were valued in the community for their business expertise and their valor as overseers of the nation's future (Houston, 2001). During this era of superintendency, education systems were handled with little influence from local boards (Norton, 1996).

The social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as increasing criticism of the public education system by Sputnik and civil rights leaders, women's rights activists, and disability rights advocates, weakened the influence and prestige of superintendents (Brunner, Grogan, & Björk (2002). Additionally, the growth and influence of teacher unions and special interest groups changed the way school-board members were selected, ultimately shifting the locus of control over the hiring of superintendents (Brunner, Grogan, & Björk, 2002). Federal measures, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Title IX, used legal guidelines for superintendents to specify the way pupils would be best served by their schools (Norton, 1996).

In the 1980s, Blumberg (1985) examined 25 superintendents from diverse-sized school districts. This research was the basis for the book *The School Superintendent: Living with Conflict*. Blumberg identified two crucial functions of the superintendent during this era: leader and politician. The superintendent's leadership obligations included building relationships between the school district and community (Blumberg, 1985). Blumberg (1985) went on to relate that this role included informing the public of educational needs and bringing people

together to develop a vision and identify goals. The superintendent's politician role involved a focus on school–community relations. Superintendents worked to build formal partnerships with schools and communities (Cuban, 1998). Superintendents were continuously engaged in dialogue with the community and businesses in an effort to increase their credibility (Blumberg, 1995).

The end of the 20th century witnessed major shifts in expectations for schools and those who led them (Kowalski, 2009). As the 21st century approached, the goal of access and opportunity for students had been reached (Bjork & Lindle, 2001). Public schools provided a place for every child, those fluent in English and those for whom English was a second language, those who were deemed capable and those who were not (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). Regardless of circumstance, they would be received by the school (Kowalski, 2006).

In the early 1980s, *A Nation at Risk* was published. This publication occasioned a number of reports that centered on the urgency of school reform and of higher standards and expectations for excellence in education (Johnson, 1996). Subsequently, the education of students and the superintendent role became politicized; legislators concentrated on large-scale educational reforms intended to improve the quality of schools rather than on the fairness of educational opportunities (Wirt & Kirst, 1982). Educators focused on establishing higher standards, intensifying the curriculum, increasing time of instruction and time at school, increasing productivity and excellence, and implementing more rigorous grading, testing, and discipline (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

During the early part of the 21st century, those who were displeased with the lack of progress of schools connected with those who were displeased with the lack of progress made toward excellence in America (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). This resulted in The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. With the enactment of NCLB, the conventional association between the states and the federal government shifted (Fink & Brayman, 2006). The federal government set the rules and mandates that all states were required to follow (Fullan, 2010).

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law to further address the recurring needs of the public American education system (McKenzie & Kress, 2015). This legislation also shifted the responsibility of establishing standards back to the states, and it offered states an opportunity to create a more balanced system of support and accountability (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). This balanced approach was intended to emphasize educating

young people to become productive, engaged citizens who are prepared for college and careers in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). The true impact of this legislation on the role of superintendent has yet to be determined (Hansen & Roza, 2016).

Evolving Function of Superintendents

After superintendents were first established as school-district heads, their roles and responsibilities grew (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Superintendents were expected to be effective communicators, consensus builders, and masters of teaching (Kowalski, Peterson, & Fusarelli, 2009). They were required to carry out directives from legislators and keep stakeholders from the private sector satisfied (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Educational leaders were also expected to be flexible enough to respond appropriately to pressure while remaining focused on the essential responsibility of improving student learning (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). As the primary executive of the school board, the superintendent was required to be resourceful in leading the organization and relating effectively to the board, to secure sufficient funding, and to relate well to the community (Cuban, 1998; Willower & Fraser, 1980; Wolf, 1988).

In 2012, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) reported on four successful superintendents who led instructionally effective school districts. The superintendents had an accomplished record of leading successful districts, and they led by taking a major role in the development of goals at the district and school levels (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). They were also influential in the selection of staff, specifically school administrators. The superintendents held administrators accountable for what took place instructionally at their schools (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). All the superintendents were active in establishing a focus on and monitoring district-wide instruction. Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) demonstrated that all four districts were firm on goals and communicated goals early and often to all stakeholders. Schools should decide how to carry out an instructional plan (Fullan, 2010). Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) emphasized that with freedom came the responsibility of producing necessary results.

The shift to site-based management in education has grown within the last decade (Barker, 2007). Fullan (2010) argued that the principles of site-based supervision are still relevant. Fullan (2007) suggested allowing more decisions at the school level versus the

traditional top down hierarchy in decision making. Through various studies, Fullan (2007) compared the concepts of loose and tight leadership and offered the following conclusion:

Top down change does not work because it fails to garner ownership, commitment, or even clarity about the nature of reform. Bottom-up change so-called let a thousand flowers bloom—does not produce success on any scale. A thousand flowers do not bloom and those that do are not perennial. (p. 11)

Regarding the idea of a less hierarchical setup, Fullan (2005) went on to affirm that structures and practices cannot be changed without horizontal sharing and capacity development. The role district superintendents continued to expand; they were expected to foster a shared, cross-categorical operational system (Marzano et al., 2005).

Superintendents need to be effective in team building (Leithwood et al., 2004). They should understand the process of school improvement and have the strategic knowledge to guide the school district's success. Superintendents must have the ability to build a network of leaders (Levine, 2005). Superintendents should make concerted efforts to include all stakeholders in the team-building process (Pitner & Ogawa, 1981) and should understand how to promote collegiality between stakeholders as they work toward common goals (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2007). Team participation allows input from all stakeholders, which can be valuable to leaders (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Superintendents as Mediators of Improvement

In 2006, the McREL consortium performed a comprehensive study of the superintendency. This study, a meta-analysis of effective school leaders, examined leadership practices that had the strongest impact on student achievement. The results from 27 inquiries performed since 1970 were examined. Contributions from 2,817 school districts and data on 3.4 million learners resulted in what has been credited as the greatest quantitative analysis of research on superintendent leadership ever conducted (Wilson, 2006). The intent of the meta-analysis was to examine effective superintendent practices as they relate to student performance (McREL, 2006). The report synthesized information from independent studies into a single study. This study resulted in four main conclusions, on the basis of which five district leadership responsibilities were identified (Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Marzano and Waters (2009) offered four main conclusions: (1) district-level leadership matters, (2) effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts, (3) superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement, and (4) superintendents should provide principals with defined autonomy. The report concluded that school autonomy had a positive correlation of .28 with average student achievement in the district. This correlation suggested that an increase in school autonomy is connected to an increase in student achievement. The study concluded that site-based management had a negative correlation of -.16 with student achievement. This suggested that an increase in site-based management is associated with a decrease in student achievement (Anderson-Davis, 2012). The investigators determined that effective superintendents should provide principals with defined autonomy. Superintendents must establish specific, nonnegotiable objectives for learning and instruction while establishing school-leadership teams that have the flexibility and authority to formulate ways to achieve those goals (Walters & Marzano, 2006).

Superintendents and Academic Achievement

Fullan (2010) asserted that student academic improvement does not materialize by chance but rather through effective leaders dedicating sufficient time to implementing broad, viable reform. Though superintendents do not work directly with students, they are still held accountable for the success or failure of students in their district (Fullan, 2005). For this reason, superintendents must have the ability to enhance the instructional practices of those they lead (Barker, 2007). District leaders should also understand assessment data (Hoyle, Bjork, Lars, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Superintendents must be able to clearly explain and defend their district's achievement levels relative to other districts in the state and nation (Elmore, 2005). The role of the superintendent, from its historical beginnings to the present day, has focused on improving student achievement (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Although current responsibilities such as operations, accountability, finance, and public relations have been noted as important, attentiveness to student achievement is essential (Dunn, 2009).

Governing Perspectives on Superintendents

Superintendents are an important part of school district leadership, but the governing body is an equally important facet of district leadership (Eadie, 2008). The governing board,

sometimes referred to as a school board, is responsible for the hiring and evaluation of the superintendent (Eadie, 2005). Additionally, board members and superintendents must cooperate to move school systems toward a shared vision (Eadie, 2005).

The Michigan Association of School Boards referenced board expectations in an article for new board members:

Board members expect their superintendent to be well informed about state legislation, educational policy and major operational issues. Boards look for dependable information communicated in an honest and thoughtful manner and expect the superintendent to be accessible for questions and concerns. They expect to be treated fairly, equitably and not be surprised. Finally, boards look to their superintendents for recommendations and direction when developing goals for the district. (Michigan Association of School Boards, 2015)

The process boards use to develop expectations for superintendents varies from district to district and state to state (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Glass (2014) demonstrated that student outcomes are tied to superintendent evaluation and confirmed the importance of established standards, expectations, and continuous feedback. Evaluations offer an opportunity to set and articulate high standards, review key performance metrics, and establish an ongoing dialogue about improvement (Eadie, 2008).

Superintendent–School Board Relations

Board–superintendent relations impact student achievement and the effectiveness of school districts (Kowalski, 2009). Carter and Cunningham (1997) noted that the superintendency is defined by its relations with school boards. This working relationship sets the tone and climate for all that happens in a school district (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). The quality and effectiveness of the school district can be a direct reflection of the quality and effectiveness of the relationship between the superintendent and the board (Kowalski, 2009).

Studies have demonstrated that communication, trust, and understanding role differences are central factors influencing the effectiveness of the superintendent–board relationship (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). In a study commissioned by the AASA, Glass and Franceschini (2007) indicated that school boards expect

superintendents to function primarily as educational leaders. The authors noted that this role is different from that of a managerial leader (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Educational leaders focus their energy on curriculum and instruction, whereas managerial leaders focus on personnel management, budget, and finance (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Superintendent-leadership Characteristics

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law. It increased accountability at the state level; as a result, superintendents are expected to be significant in the efforts to improve student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Visionary leadership has been proven to increase organizational success (Johnson, 2007). Like other organizations, school districts require visionary leadership to drive organizational goals (Johnson, 1996). Murphy and Hallinger (1986) maintained that visionary leaders use information and foresight to develop goals. Such leaders are persistent, lead by example, and demand excellence of themselves (Rost, 1991).

School-board perceptions. Though different expectations exist, governing boards believe certain leadership characteristics are more important than others (Wilson, 2006). In a study that examined perceptions of leadership characteristics among school-board members in Arizona, a list of 10 characteristics emerged (Wilson, 2006): focus on professional development, instructional leadership, effective school-board relations, understanding of school finance, understanding of school law, visionary leader, effective at building community, intellect, political astuteness, and team builder.

In Wilson's (2006) report, 80% of the governing board leaders ranked instructional leadership, effective school-board relations, and visionary leader as the most important characteristics. In a similar study conducted by Moody (2007), understanding school finance was named as the most important attribute, followed by superintendent-board relations. Meyer (2007) investigated the perceptions of board members in Texas regarding competencies deemed necessary in managing successful school districts. This study examined select school districts to identify key leadership characteristics as perceived by board leaders. Meyer's (2007) study concluded that integrity and fairness were the most important characteristics of superintendents.

Superintendent perceptions. Mextorf (2003) organized a study of Pennsylvania superintendents designed to identify the essential functions of the contemporary superintendent.

The study concluded that a high percentage of small districts' time was spent dealing with superintendent–board relations. Similarly, in a Nebraska study conducted by Moody (2007), superintendents listed superintendent–board relations as the most critical characteristic. Moreover, in research conducted in Arizona, instructional leadership was identified as the most critical characteristic in the superintendency (Wilson, 2006).

Bredeson and Kose (2007) examined how the work of school superintendents in a large Midwestern state was affected over a 10-year time span by educational reform initiatives that increased accountability. Initially, when the survey was given, attending to the budget and school finance dominated the survey (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). When the survey was given for the last time in 2003, curriculum and instructional leadership dominated the survey. Budget and finance themes were still identified as among the top five (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

Summary

Educational leadership has been examined and disputed for decades. Several studies have focused on specific characteristics that are essential for leaders (Mextorf, 2003; Moody, 2007; Thornton, 2009; Wilson, 2006). The information presented in this literature review varied in focus when considering all aspects of the superintendency. The role of today's superintendent has changed from teacher-scholar, to manager, to leader, and to collaborator, but all of these roles have been accompanied by a focus on student achievement (Thornton, 2009). Board presidents' and superintendents' perceptions of the importance of certain leadership characteristics varied from state to state. Perhaps the varied responses were based on what was going on in society at the time of research.

In May 2009, Thornton investigated characteristics that current superintendents and active board chairs within the Commonwealth of Virginia perceived as important. Thornton recommended that a follow-up study be conducted. The present study takes up this recommendation; it seeks to determine if the characteristics perceived as important in Thornton's study have remained constant.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify current superintendents' and active board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics, as outlined by Thornton (2009). Additionally, this study identifies similarities and differences in the perceptions of superintendents and active board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016.

This study's guiding questions are as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?
2. What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?
4. How do current perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified in 2009 by Thornton?

In May 2009, Thornton investigated characteristics that current superintendents and active board chairs within the Commonwealth of Virginia perceived as important. The present study follows up on Thornton's research; it seeks to determine if the characteristics perceived as important in 2009 have remained constant.

Research Design

According to Trochim (2006), research design is thought to provide a study with a framework. It holds the research together and allows a study to demonstrate how all its major parts work together to address the research questions (Trochim, 2006). This study used a Likert-style survey instrument to identify essential leadership characteristics as perceived by district superintendents (see Appendix A) and school-board chairpersons (see Appendix B). The study design was quantitative. A quantitative nonexperimental investigation was conducted to describe a phenomenon and examine relationships between variables (Lester & Bishop, 2000). Descriptive statistics were used to convey details of central tendency and dispersion, providing mean, mode, and standard deviation. Inferential statistics were used to formulate inferences

regarding the groups surveyed. *T*-tests were used to determine if significant differences exist between the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairpersons.

Quantitative research, as defined by Creswell (2003), is an approach for testing objective theories by examining relationships among variables. Survey research, as defined by Creswell (2003), provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions in a population by investigating a sample of that specific population. Descriptive statistics are used to explain the features of data in a study; they also provide summaries about the sample (Howell, 2011).

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this study are as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?
2. What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?
4. How do current perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified in 2009 by Thornton?

Population

Thornton (2009) modified a 17-item survey to investigate leadership characteristics essential to the superintendent position. In an attempt to gather the most dependable and valid information pertaining to leadership characteristics, the present study used the same instrument to survey all 133 K–12 public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Additionally, all 133 Virginia school-board chairs were invited to participate in the survey. Current district superintendents and school districts were identified using the Virginia Department of Education website. Telephone and e-mail contact information was available in this directory. The names of and contact information for school-board chairpersons were obtained through the office of the Virginia School Boards Association.

Data Collection

This study identified current superintendents' and active board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics. The researcher, having received Institute Review Board (IRB) training (see Appendix G), applied for and obtained approval from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University IRB (see Appendix H). The survey was e-mailed to 133 current Virginia superintendents (see Appendix C) and 133 active board chairpersons (see Appendix D). Potential participants were asked to respond within seven days of receiving the e-mail. After seven days, a second e-mail notification was sent to potential participants as a reminder to complete the survey (see Appendix E). At the end of that seven-day period, a paper copy of the survey instrument was mailed to participants in a self-addressed stamped envelope (see Appendix F). Ten days after the paper copy was mailed to potential participants, no additional reminders were distributed and the survey link was closed. No additional responses were collected.

Instrument Design

Fowler's (2009) model suggested five principles for making surveys effective instruments when developing the written survey:

1. The strength of survey research lies in asking people about their first-hand experiences. (In the present study, participants will be asked questions about superintendent leadership.)
2. Questions should be asked one at a time. (The Thornton survey was designed such that respondents would respond to each question before proceeding to the next.)
3. The survey instrument should ensure that all participants are responding to the same question. (In the case of this study, all participants, whether current superintendents or active board presidents, received the same survey.)
4. All respondents should understand what constitutes a sufficient response to a question. (For this study, detailed survey instructions were provided.)
5. Survey instruments should ensure that reading questions, following instructions, and recording answers are as simple as possible for the respondents. (Again, for this study, clear instructions were provided with the survey.)

The 17-item survey instrument used for this study was a modified version of the survey developed by Thornton (2009). Thornton granted the author permission to utilize the survey instrument. For validity, the survey instrument for this study was reviewed by former school-board chairpersons and retired superintendents. Establishing the validity of a survey instrument allows for greater confidence of the interpretation of the results of the survey (Creswell, 2003). The evaluation of a research instrument by specialists in the industry is a suitable way to validate an instrument (Fowler, 2009). As noted above, this study replicated Thornton's (2009) instrument design.

The survey instrument had two sections. The first section contained 17 statements regarding various leadership characteristics. To respond to each item, respondents were asked to use a Likert scale, the values of which corresponded to the level of agreement with the statement. The second section asked the respondents to rank a list of 10 characteristics in order of importance from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the most important characteristic. Additionally, at the conclusion of the survey, there was the opportunity for respondents to express concepts or ideas not presented with the structured responses.

Validity. A total of 133 current Virginia superintendents and 133 active Virginia school-board chairs were invited to participate in the survey. The sample size of 133 represented all school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Wilson's (2006) research on perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics had a response rate of 43%, and the response rate of Thornton's (2009) study was 76.5%. A 40% response rate for mailed or e-mailed survey responses is considered satisfactory in research (Fan & Yan, 2010). For this study, superintendent response rate totaled nearly 52% and the school-board chair response rate totaled nearly 49%, exceeding the acceptable response rate.

Data Analysis

Returned responses were recorded on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. A response consisting of a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* was used. A 4-point scale was chosen in order to eradicate an intermediate response. Each response was given a numerical value between 1 and 4, that is, a score equivalent to the Likert-scale response value. Data from the 17 Likert-scale survey statements from each response were totaled, combined, and averaged. Additionally, the data from the rank-ordered replies were

totaled, combined, averaged, and converted into percentages. The data were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for data analysis. Simple descriptive and inferential statistics were used to explain the data in terms of the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency? To address this question, the survey responses were analyzed using the mean for the first 17 items on the Likert-scale survey. The mean of the responses generated through the ranked responses was examined.

Research Question 2: What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent? The data analysis for this question paralleled that for the first research question.

Research Question 3: How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? Independent samples *t*-tests were used to determine if a significant difference existed between the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairpersons for each of the 17 survey questions.

Research Question 4: How do perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified by Thornton in 2009? The 2016 ranked responses were compared to the 2009 ranked responses.

Reliability. Reliability is related to the consistency, stability, and dependability with which an instrument measures a set of dimensions, characteristics, and behaviors of research participants (Creswell, 2003). Reliability coefficients are estimates of the degree to which a scale score for each respondent represents either true measurement or some degree of measurement error (Lester & Bishop, 2000).

Summary

This study was conducted using quantitative research methodology. This method allowed the use of numerical data and statistics to summarize, describe, and investigate relationships between variables. Additionally, to generate credible and reliable data, the use of a well-developed survey instrument was administrated to current superintendents and active board chairpersons in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The findings, implications and conclusions of this study can help superintendents and boards becoming more informed about leadership characteristics that are perceived to be important for public school superintendents.

Chapter Four

Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to identify current superintendents' and school-board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics, as outlined by Thornton (2009). Additionally, this study identified similarities and differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016.

The study's guiding questions are as follows:

1. What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?
2. What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?
4. How do perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified in by Thornton in 2009?

Data Results and Explanations

Research Question 1: *What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?* Response means and standard deviations were used to identify the means for the first 17 Likert-scale survey statements. The statements described characteristics and roles that superintendents might employ in their position as district leader. For each statement, respondents rated their level of agreement with each item using a 4-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each statement from superintendent survey responses.

Table 1
Mean Responses of Superintendent Survey

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|------|--------------------|
| Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. | 3.85 | 0.55 |
| Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. | 3.83 | 0.48 |
| Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership. | 3.70 | 0.71 |
| Curriculum, finance, professional development, school-board relations, and visionary leadership are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency. | 3.64 | 0.51 |
| Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times. | 3.62 | 0.57 |
| Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind. | 3.61 | 0.52 |
| Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent. | 3.54 | 0.82 |
| Superintendents must be comfortable with managing media relations and with public meetings and politically inspired pressures, and they must be adept at developing both permanent and temporary coalitions with often disparate community groups. | 3.52 | 0.58 |
| Superintendent–school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success. | 3.52 | 0.58 |
| In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader. | 3.50 | 0.95 |

(continued)

Table 1 (cont.)

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|------|--------------------|
| The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success. | 3.50 | 0.61 |
| Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning. | 3.29 | 0.52 |
| Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community. | 3.28 | 0.62 |
| Effectively managing buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency. | 3.08 | 0.51 |
| School-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover. | 2.64 | 0.71 |
| Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education. | 2.67 | 0.77 |

Table 1 shows that most items received mean scores between 3 and 4; these values align with agree to strongly agree on the Likert scale. The calculated means 3 and 4 indicate a general agreement with the statements. When examining means and standard deviations, the highest mean responses from superintendents were *effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership* ($M = 3.85, SD = 0.55$), followed by *personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent* ($M = 3.83, SD = 0.48$) and *establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership* ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.71$). Conversely, the statements that received the lowest mean responses from superintendents were *persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education* ($M = 2.67, SD = 0.77$), *school-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover* ($M = 2.64, SD = 0.71$), and *effectively managing buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency* ($M = 3.08, SD = 0.51$).

Section Two of the survey instrument asked school superintendents and school-board chairs to rank the characteristics perceived as necessary to be successful in the position of

superintendent. The survey presented 10 characteristics, and the value of 1 corresponded to the most important characteristic. The ranked orders of perceived necessary characteristics are presented in Table 2.

School superintendents ranked instructional leadership ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 2.04$), visionary leader ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 2.55$), and effective school-board relations ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 2.01$) as the three most essential leadership characteristics. Professional-development experience ($M = 9.00$, $SD = 1.50$), school-law experience ($M = 8.25$, $SD = 1.73$), and intellect ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 2.33$) were ranked by superintendents as the three least essential leadership characteristics.

Table 2

Ranked Means of Superintendent-leadership Characteristics by Superintendents

| Characteristic | Superintendents (n = 68) | | Ranked |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|--------|
| | M | SD | |
| Instructional Leader | 3.15 | 2.04 | 1 |
| Visionary Leader | 3.52 | 2.55 | 2 |
| Effective School-board Relations | 3.77 | 2.01 | 3 |
| Team Builder | 4.25 | 2.18 | 4 |
| School/Community Builder | 4.95 | 2.37 | 5 |
| School-finance Experience | 5.74 | 2.25 | 6 |
| Political Astuteness | 5.74 | 2.51 | 7 |
| Intellect | 6.57 | 2.33 | 8 |
| School-law Experience | 8.25 | 1.73 | 9 |
| Professional-development Experience | 9.00 | 1.50 | 10 |

The mode of the top characteristic, instructional leader was 1, meaning this is the value that was selected most often. The characteristic of visionary leader received the highest percentage of number-one rankings, at 32.31%. The mode for the lowest-ranked characteristic, professional-development experience, was 10, which indicates that professional-development experience was frequently ranked last by superintendents. The same characteristic received the highest percentage of number-10 rankings, at 55.38%.

Research Question 2: *What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?* Descriptive statistics were used to rate the level of agreement for each of the first 17 statements on the survey. The survey consisted of statements regarding characteristics and roles the superintendents might utilize in their position. For each statement, respondents rated their level of agreement using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. The means and standard deviations for each statement for school-board chairpersons are presented in Table 3.

The data presented in Table 3 show that of the responses received from school-board chairs, most items received mean scores between 3 and 4. This corresponds to responses ranging from agree to strongly agree. When examining means and standard deviations, the highest three mean responses from school-board chairs were effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.23$), personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.29$), and establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.39$). The items that received the lowest mean scores from school-board chairs were the following: school-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.88$), persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.82$), and finally effectively managing buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.73$).

Table 3
Mean Responses of School-board Chairpersons Survey

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|------|--------------------|
| Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. | 3.95 | 0.23 |
| Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. | 3.91 | 0.29 |

(continued)

Table 3 (cont.)

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership. | 3.82 | 0.39 |
| Superintendent–school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success. | 3.78 | 0.41 |
| Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent. | 3.78 | 0.41 |
| Curriculum, finance, professional development, school-board relations, and visionary leadership are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency. | 3.76 | 0.50 |
| In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader. | 3.75 | 0.48 |
| Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times. | 3.69 | 0.50 |
| 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. | 3.64 | 0.48 |
| Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of the vision. | 3.51 | 0.51 |
| Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning. | 3.42 | 0.59 |
| Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community. | 3.42 | 0.56 |

(continued)

Table 3 (cont.)

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind. | 3.24 | 0.57 |
| Effectively managing buildings, buses, books, and bonds are essential to the superintendency. | 3.02 | 0.73 |
| Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education. | 2.64 | 0.82 |
| School-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover. | 2.35 | 0.88 |

Section Two of the survey instrument asked school-board chairpersons to rank in order of significance 10 superintendent-leadership characteristics, with a value of 1 indicating the most important leadership characteristic. As illustrated in Table 4, school-board chairs ranked being a visionary leader ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 2.01$), being an instructional leader ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.81$), and being a team builder ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 2.16$) as the most essential characteristics. School-law experience ($M = 8.35$, $SD = 1.70$), professional-development experience ($M = 7.70$, $SD = 2.14$), and political astuteness ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 2.10$) were the three lowest-ranked characteristics.

For the responses of school-board chairs, the mode of the top characteristic, instructional leader, was 1. The characteristic of visionary leader also received the highest percentage of number-one rankings, at 48.98%. The mode for the lowest-ranked characteristic, school-law experience, was 10. The same characteristic received the highest percentage of number-10 rankings, at 29.17%.

Table 4

Ranked Means of Superintendent-leadership Characteristics by School-board Chairpersons

| Characteristic | Board Chairs (n = 64) | | Ranked |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|------|--------|
| | M | SD | |
| Visionary Leader | 2.55 | 2.01 | 1 |
| Instructional Leader | 3.04 | 1.81 | 2 |
| Team Builder | 4.21 | 2.16 | 3 |
| School/Community Builder | 4.89 | 2.34 | 4 |
| Effective School-board Relations | 5.04 | 2.22 | 5 |
| School-finance Experience | 5.51 | 2.54 | 6 |
| Intellect | 5.91 | 2.90 | 7 |
| Political Astuteness | 7.43 | 2.10 | 8 |
| Professional-development Experience | 7.70 | 2.14 | 9 |
| School-law Experience | 8.35 | 1.70 | 10 |

Research Question 3: *How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?* For the purpose of comparison, Table 5 offers a side-by-side presentation of the means for superintendents' and school-board chairpersons' responses to the 17 survey questions. The data revealed that the statement personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent received the highest mean response, followed by effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership, and then by establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership. The statements persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education; effectively

managing buildings, buses, books, and bonds is essential to the superintendency; and school-board turnover is the root cause of superintendent turnover received the three lowest mean responses.

Table 5

Mean Responses of Superintendent and School-board Chairperson Survey

| Statement | Supt. | Chair | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---|-------|-------|----------|----------|
| In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader. | 3.50 | 3.75 | 2.02 | 0.048* |
| Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent. | 3.54 | 3.78 | 2.16 | 0.034* |
| Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership. | 3.70 | 3.82 | 1.32 | 0.191 |
| Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. | 3.85 | 3.95 | 1.47 | 0.146 |
| Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community. | 3.28 | 3.42 | 0.97 | 0.334 |
| Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind. | 3.61 | 3.24 | 3.17 | 0.002* |
| Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education. | 2.67 | 2.64 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Superintendent–school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success. | 3.52 | 3.78 | 1.34 | 0.184 |
| Curriculum, finance, professional development, school-board relations, and visionary leadership are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency. | 3.64 | 3.76 | 0.92 | 0.357 |
| Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. | 3.83 | 3.91 | 0.89 | 0.375 |

(continued)

Table 5 (cont.)

| Statement | Supt. | Chair | t | p |
|---|-------|-------|------|-------|
| School-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover. | 2.64 | 2.35 | 1.84 | 0.071 |
| Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times. | 3.62 | 3.69 | 0.70 | 0.484 |
| The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success. | 3.50 | 3.62 | 1.38 | 0.170 |
| Effectively managing buildings, buses, books and bonds is essential to the superintendency. | 3.08 | 3.02 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| Superintendents ensure that curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning. | 3.29 | 3.42 | 1.24 | 0.220 |
| Superintendents should inspire a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology and foster an environment and culture conducive to the realization of that vision. | 3.38 | 3.51 | 1.86 | 0.067 |
| 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. | 3.52 | 3.64 | 1.27 | 0.208 |

*Indicates significant difference at the .05 level

To determine if significant differences existed between the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons for each of the 17 survey statements, independent samples *t*-tests were used. *T*-tests for equality of means between the composite means of both groups at the .05 confidence level indicated significant differences between superintendents and school-board chairs. The .05 confidence level existed with the statement that superintendent must be an instructional leader, the statement that superintendents should have experience in public education and the statement that superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability state and federal mandates. There was a significantly higher level of agreement with school-board chairs ($M = 3.75$) when compared to superintendents ($M = 3.50$), $t = 2.02$, $p = 0.048$ regarding the notion that superintendents must be an instructional leaders.

Regarding experience in public education as an essential need for the superintendency, active school-board chairs ($M = 3.78$) indicated a higher level of agreement than current superintendents ($M = 3.54, t = 2.16, p = 0.034$). Superintendents ($M = 3.61$), when compared to school-board chairs ($M = 3.24, t = 3.17, p = 0.002$), demonstrated a significantly higher level of agreement with the statement that superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates of state and federal legislation. These differences in agreement do not signify a difference in rankings. Rank order will be addressed in question research question four.

Table 6 presents a comparison of ranked means of the 10 leadership characteristics considered essential for the position of superintendent. Individuals from both groups provided rankings of the 10 characteristics, with 1 indicating the most essential characteristic. The characteristic of instructional leader was perceived as the most essential by superintendents ($M = 3.15, SD = 2.04$), whereas visionary leader was perceived as the most essential by school-board chairs ($M = 2.55, SD = 2.01$). Superintendents viewed visionary leader ($M = 3.52, SD = 2.55$) as the second most important characteristic, whereas school-board chairs viewed instructional leader ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.81$) as the second most important characteristic. Superintendents ranked navigating effective school-board relations ($M = 3.77, SD = 2.01$) third as an essential characteristic; school-board chairs ranked being a team builder ($M = 4.21, SD = 2.16$) as the third most essential characteristic.

Professional-development experience was ranked tenth and by superintendents ($M = 9.00, SD = 1.50$) and school-board chairs ($M = 7.70, SD = 2.14$), respectively. School-law experience was ranked ninth and tenth by superintendents ($M = 8.25, SD = 1.73$) and school-board chairs ($M = 8.35, SD = 1.70$), respectively. The characteristics political astuteness and intellect were ranked seventh and eighth by both groups. Superintendents ranked political astuteness ($M = 5.74, SD = 2.51$) seventh, whereas school-board chairs ranked intellect ($M = 5.91, SD = 2.90$) seventh. Superintendents ranked intellect ($M = 6.57, SD = 2.33$) as the eighth most essential characteristic, whereas school-board chairs ranked political astuteness ($M = 7.43, SD = 2.10$) eighth.

Table 6

Ranked Mean of Superintendent-leadership Characteristics by Both Respondent Groups

| Characteristic | Superintendents (n = 68) | | | Board Chairs (n = 64) | | |
|--|-----------------------------|------|-------------|--------------------------|------|-------------|
| | M | SD | Ranked M | M | SD | Ranked M |
| Instructional Leader | 3.15 | 2.04 | 1 | 3.04 | 1.81 | 2 |
| Visionary Leader | 3.52 | 2.55 | 2 | 2.55 | 2.01 | 1 |
| Effective School-board Relations | 3.77 | 2.01 | 3 | 5.04 | 2.22 | 5 |
| Team Builder | 4.25 | 2.18 | 4 | 4.21 | 2.16 | 3 |
| School/Community Builder | 4.95 | 2.37 | 5 | 4.89 | 2.34 | 4 |
| School-finance Experience | 5.74 | 2.25 | 6 | 5.51 | 2.54 | 6 |
| Political Astuteness | 5.74 | 2.51 | 7 | 7.43 | 2.10 | 8 |
| Intellect | 6.57 | 2.33 | 8 | 5.91 | 2.90 | 7 |
| School-law Experience | 8.25 | 1.73 | 9 | 8.35 | 1.70 | 10 |
| Professional-development Experience | 9.00 | 1.50 | 10 | 7.70 | 2.14 | 9 |

The data analysis of the responses pertaining to the third research question resulted in means and standard deviations for superintendents' and school-board chairpersons' ranking of the 10 essential leadership characteristics. Variations between superintendents and school-board chairpersons were identified using an independent samples *t*-tests and are shown in Table 7. The table shows the differences between the individual means of the two groups. Significant differences in the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairs existed in the following areas: visionary leader, effective school-board relations, political astuteness, and professional-development experience. School-board chairpersons ($M = 2.55$) viewed visionary leader as significantly more essential as did superintendents ($M = 3.52$, $t = 2.67$, $p = 0.010$). Superintendents ($M = 3.77$) perceived effective school-board relations as significantly more essential in the superintendency than did school-board chairs ($M = 5.04$, $t = 3.26$, $p = 0.002$).

Superintendents considered the characteristic of political astuteness to be significantly more important than did school-board chairs ($M = 7.43$, $t = 3.26$, $p = 0.002$). Superintendents believed that professional-development experience ($M = 9.00$) was far less essential than did school-board chairs ($M = 7.70$, $t = 3.05$, $p = 0.003$).

Table 7

Comparison of Perceived Significance of Superintendent-leadership Characteristics

| Characteristic | Means | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| | Superintendents (<i>n</i> = 68) | Board Chairs (<i>n</i> = 64) | | |
| Instructional Leader | 3.15 | 3.04 | 0.49 | 0.625 |
| Visionary Leader | 3.52 | 2.55 | 2.67 | 0.010* |
| Effective School-board Relations | 3.77 | 5.04 | 3.26 | 0.002* |
| Team Builder | 4.25 | 4.21 | 0.22 | 0.826 |
| School/Community Builder | 4.95 | 4.89 | 0.26 | 0.794 |
| School-finance Experience | 5.74 | 5.51 | 0.35 | 0.727 |
| Political Astuteness | 5.74 | 7.43 | 3.26 | 0.002* |
| Intellect | 6.57 | 5.91 | 0.69 | 0.491 |
| School-law Experience | 8.25 | 8.35 | 0.36 | 0.720 |
| Professional-development Experience | 9.00 | 7.70 | 3.05 | 0.003* |

Research Question 4: *How do current perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified by Thornton in 2009?*

Thornton's (2009) comparative study of superintendent-leadership characteristics of Virginia school superintendents reported the following:

School-board chairs ranked the essential characteristics of the position of superintendent 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) political astuteness, (9) professional-development experience, (10) school-law experience.

Superintendents ranked the same characteristics as follows: (1) visionary leader, (2) instructional leader, (3) effective school-board relations, (4) team builder, (5) school/community builder, (6) political astuteness, (7) school-finance experience, (8) intellect, (9) school-law experience, (10) professional-development experience.

In the responses submitted for the present study, Virginia school superintendents ranked the characteristics as follows: (1) instructional leader, (2) visionary leader, (3) effective school-board relations, (4) team builder, (5) school/community relations, (6) school-finance experience, (7) political astuteness, (8) intellect, (9) school-law experience, and (10) professional-development experience.

The responses submitted for the present study revealed that Virginia school-board chairpersons ranked the characteristics as follows: (1) visionary leader, (2) instructional leader, (3) team builder, (4) school/community builder, (5) effective school-board relations, (6) school-finance experience, (7) intellect, (8) political astuteness, (9) professional-development experience, (10) school-law experience.

Table 8 provides a comparative view of superintendents' responses from 2016 and 2009. An examination of the responses revealed that the top three characteristics were closely ranked. The superintendents' top-ranked characteristic in 2016 was instructional leader, which was ranked second in 2009. Visionary leader was ranked as the top characteristic in 2009 and as the third most important in 2016. Effective school-board relations were ranked second in 2016 and third in 2009. In both 2016 and 2009, superintendents ranked intellect, school-law experience, and professional-development experience in the same order, that is, eighth to tenth.

Table 8

Comparison of Superintendent Rankings

| Superintendent Ranking 2016 | Characteristic | Superintendent Ranking 2009 |
|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Instructional Leader | 2 |
| 2 | Visionary Leader | 1 |
| 3 | Effective School-board Relations | 3 |
| 4 | Team Builder | 4 |
| 5 | School/Community Builder | 5 |
| 6 | School-finance Experience | 7 |
| 7 | Political Astuteness | 6 |
| 8 | Intellect | 8 |
| 9 | School-law Experience | 9 |
| 10 | Professional-development Experience | 10 |

Table 9 provides a comparative view of school-board chairs' responses in 2016 and 2009. An examination of the responses revealed that the top three characteristics were closely ranked. The school-board chairs' top-ranked characteristic in 2016 was visionary leader, which was ranked first in 2009 as well. Instructional leader was ranked as the third most important characteristic in 2009 and was ranked second in 2016. Team builder was ranked third in 2016 and second in 2009. In both 2016 and 2009, school-board chairs ranked political astuteness, professional-development experience, and school-law experience in the same order, that is, eighth to tenth.

Table 9

Comparison of School-board Chair Rankings

| School-board Chair Ranking 2016 | Characteristic | School-board Chair Ranking 2009 |
|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Visionary Leader | 1 |
| 2 | Instructional Leader | 3 |
| 3 | Team Builder | 2 |
| 4 | School/Community Builder | 5 |
| 5 | Effective School-board Relations | 4 |
| 6 | School-finance Experience | 6 |
| 7 | Intellect | 7 |
| 8 | Political Astuteness | 8 |
| 9 | Professional-development Experience | 9 |
| 10 | School-law Experience | 10 |

Summary

This study identified the essential leadership characteristics for superintendents as perceived by current district superintendents and active school-board chairpersons. For this study, out of a total of 266 surveys issued to superintendents and school-board chairs, 132 were completed and returned. Analyses of the responses were run to determine if significant differences existed between the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairpersons regarding essential superintendent-leadership characteristics. Descriptive analyses were used to formulate conclusions regarding the groups surveyed. Moreover, the perceptions of Virginia district superintendents reported in 2009 and in 2016 were compared, as were the perceptions of school-board chairpersons reported in 2009 and in 2016. Chapter Five will provide further discussion of the data and data analysis as well as discussions of the study's findings and implications.

Chapter Five

Findings, Discussions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to identify current superintendents' and active school-board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics. As a follow-up study, it compared perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons in 2009 and 2016 to identify similarities and differences. Participants read 17 statements regarding the importance of characteristics related to the job of superintendent. For each statement, participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Participants were also asked to rank 10 superintendent-leadership characteristics based on their perceived importance. This study surveyed all 133 current district superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia as well as all 133 active Virginia board chairpersons. Of the 266 potential participants surveyed, 132 returned responses, representing a response rate of 49.62%.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics do current superintendents identify as critical in the superintendency?
2. What leadership characteristics do active board chairs identify as critical for the position of superintendent?
3. How do the perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs differ regarding leadership characteristics? How are they similar?
4. How do current perceptions of current superintendents and active board chairs compare to those identified in 2009 by Thornton?

Emergent Themes

The survey results revealed that approximately 96% of superintendents and 99% of school-board chairs agreed or strongly agreed that it is essential for school district superintendents to be able to effectively communicate with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community. Both superintendents and school-board chairs ranked instructional leadership, visionary leadership, team building, and school-board relations as the top leadership characteristics. The survey results indicated that a district superintendent must be comfortable leading instruction and building teams, must have a clear vision for leading a school district, and must maintain solid school-board relations.

Summary of Findings

Finding 1. Superintendents ranked instructional leadership, visionary leader, and effective school-board relations as the three most essential leadership characteristics. Of the superintendents surveyed, 73% ranked being an instructional leader, being a visionary leader, and being able to effectively manage school-board relations as the top three characteristics. Carter and Cunningham (1997) reported a similar finding, which suggests that the superintendency is defined by its relationship with school boards. The present study's finding is also supported by Thornton (2009), who found that both instructional and visionary leadership are important to the position of superintendent. Regarding instructional leadership, Kowalski (2006) argued that district-level instructional guidance has a positive impact on student achievement.

Finding 2. Superintendents and school-board chairs ranked professional-development experience and school-law experience lower in their rankings than other essential leadership characteristics. Professional-development experience and school-law experience received the largest percentage of ninth and tenth rankings by superintendents and school-board chairs. The two characteristics were ranked ninth or tenth by approximately 94% of superintendents and approximately 95% of school-board chairs. This finding confirms those of Wilson (2006) and Thornton (2009), in which survey respondents also ranked professional-development experience and school-law experience as nonessential to the position of superintendent.

Finding 3. School-board chairs responses indicated that establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership. All school-board chairpersons agreed or strongly agreed that the establishment of a clear vision for teaching and learning is essential to the position of superintendent. This perception lends support to Marzano and Waters' (2009) study, which maintained that the superintendent must establish and monitor district-wide instructional goals. Moreover, Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) suggested that superintendents must be firm on goals and communicate goals early and often to stakeholders.

Finding 4. School-board chairs ranked visionary leader, instructional leader, and team builder as the most essential leadership characteristics. When asked to rank essential leadership characteristics, over 90% of school-board chairs ranked visionary leader, instructional leader, and team builder as essential. The findings regarding the characteristics of visionary

leader and instructional leader align with Kowalski (2006), Wilson (2006), and Thornton (2009). The finding regarding the characteristic of effective team builder lends support to Pitner and Ogawa (1981), Leithwood et al. (2004), Levine (2005), and DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2007). Although the studies referred to above investigated these perceptions at varied times and locations, the perceptions remained consistent: instructional leadership, visionary leadership, and team building are important.

Finding 5. Superintendents and school-board chairs believed that effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership. This perception was confirmed by approximately 93% of superintendents and school-board chairs. This finding aligns with Kowalski et al. (2009) and Glass and Franceschini (2007). Elmore (2005) also confirmed the importance of effective communication, arguing that superintendents must be able to clearly explain and defend their district's goals and achievement levels.

Finding 6. Superintendents and school-board chairs agreed that personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent. Superintendents' ($M = 3.83$) and school-board chairs' ($M = 3.89$) responses corresponded with respect to personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness. This finding aligns with Meyer's (2007) comparative study of the perceptions of board members and superintendents in Texas, which concluded that truthfulness and impartiality were the main characteristics required in the superintendency.

Finding 7. Superintendents and school-board chairs ranked instructional leadership and visionary leader as the two most essential characteristics. Superintendents ranked instructional leadership ($M = 3.15$) and visionary leader ($M = 3.52$) as the two most essential characteristics. School-board chairs' ranked instructional leadership ($M = 3.04$) and visionary leader ($M = 2.55$) as the two most essential characteristics. This finding is supported by Wilson (2006), and Thornton (2009). In Wilson's (2006) study, approximately 76% responded that instructional leadership and visionary leadership were critical in the superintendency. Thornton (2009) had a similar finding. Superintendents and school-board chairs ranked instructional leadership and visionary leadership within the top three most characteristics essential to the superintendency.

Finding 8. Current perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairs are aligned with the perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairs reported in the Thornton's study in 2009. In Thornton's study (2009), superintendents ranked visionary leader ($M = 3.33$) and instructional leader ($M = 3.83$) as essential to the superintendency. In 2016, superintendents also ranked visionary leader ($M = 3.52$) and instructional leader ($M = 3.15$) as essential. This finding was also recorded in Wilson's (2006) study who indicated that over 75% of the superintendents surveyed ranked instructional leadership and visionary leader as the most essential characteristics.

Data from the 2009 study revealed that superintendents perceived intellect ($M = 6.61$), school-law experience ($M = 7.71$), and professional-development experience ($M = 8.99$) as the least essential characteristics. In 2016, superintendents ranked intellect ($M = 6.57$), school-law experience ($M = 8.25$), and professional-development experience ($M = 9.00$) as the least essential characteristics. This finding is comparable to a finding of Meyer's (2007) study, in which approximately 80% of superintendents regarded these characteristics as nonessential.

Thornton (2009) revealed that visionary leader ($M = 3.05$) and instructional leader ($M = 4.00$) are perceived as essential characteristics in the superintendency. Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) concluded that there must be an active concentration on the monitoring of instruction. In 2016, visionary leader ($M = 2.55$) and instructional leader ($M = 3.04$) were identified by school-board chairs as essential. This finding is confirmed by Carter and Cunningham (1997) who established that superintendents in successful school districts have a sound focus on instruction.

In Thornton's (2009) study, school-board chairs categorized political astuteness ($M = 7.10$), professional-development experience ($M = 7.31$), and school-law experience ($M = 7.84$) as nonessential to the position of superintendent. This conclusion is contrary to Wilson's (2006) finding regarding the ranking of political astuteness, according to which approximately 41% of school-board chairs ranked political astuteness among the five most essential characteristics. In 2016, school-board chairs ranked political astuteness ($M = 7.43$), professional-development experience ($M = 7.70$), and school-law experience ($M = 8.35$) as the least essential characteristics.

Discussion of Findings

This study followed up on Thornton's (2009) comparative investigation of perceptions of superintendents and school-board chairpersons. The goal of this study was to investigate current superintendents' and active school-board chairpersons' perceptions of superintendent-leadership characteristics. The conclusions of Thornton's study and of the present study were similar with respect to the characteristics and tasks that were considered the most and least essential for the position of superintendent. Superintendents and school-board chairs perceived effective communication to stakeholders and personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness as essential characteristics. Superintendents and school-board chairs also perceived instructional leadership, visionary leadership, and effective school-board relations as the most essential leadership characteristics, and both groups perceived professional-development experience, school-law experience, and intellect as the least essential leadership characteristics.

The conclusions of this study support the belief that the superintendent must be an instructional and visionary leader who is capable of developing and maintaining effective relationships between the school and community, while simultaneously ensuring that the operational tasks of the school district are sustained. The stated conclusion is consistent with those of Wilson (2006), Glass and Franceschini (2007), and Moody (2007) regarding the relationship between school and community. Awareness of the perceptions of superintendents and school boards is important, especially in view of the many negative consequences that can develop when an understanding does not exist between the groups (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).

The mean scores of superintendents and school-board chairs revealed that personal and professional integrity, honesty and fairness, and effective communication with stakeholders, followed by the establishment of a clear vision of teaching and learning, are essential and have the largest impact on the position of superintendent. Two of the three highest-rated characteristics could be categorized as people- or relationship-oriented, and this is consistent with a finding of Thornton's (2009). School-board turnover as a root cause of superintendent turnover received the lowest mean score. This finding aligns with Wilson's (2006) research on school-board turnover ($M = 2.62$).

The second section of the survey comprised a list of 10 characteristics for participants to rank in order of importance from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the most important characteristic. As

ranked by both superintendents and school-board chairs, none of the characteristics received a mean score between 1 and 2. Thornton (2009) reached the identical conclusion. Due to the complexities of the position of a district superintendent, it is difficult to identify the single most definitive characteristic. This can be further obscured by division demographics, such as the size of divisions (Thornton, 2009). Instructional leader and visionary leader were ranked as the most essential leadership characteristics by both groups. These two characteristics are necessary for leading people (Wilson, 2009). This is contrary to the skills taught to leaders pursuing higher education (Thornton, 2009). Houston (2001) reached similar conclusions regarding superintendent-leadership characteristics.

Implications of Findings

The role of the district superintendent has evolved over time. The superintendent's function has shifted from its original clerical role to the role of the expert manager, to the role of the master educator, and finally to its current role—the chief executive officer of the board (Cuban, 1998). This study presents an enhanced understanding of the function of the superintendent as perceived by current superintendents and active board chairs. The study's findings can be useful for practicing and aspiring superintendents. The findings can also offer insight to those who make decisions in the recruitment and hiring of superintendents.

Implication 1. Superintendents should effectively communicate with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community regarding the vision, goals, and needs of the school district (supporting Finding 5). Effective communication is a significant interpersonal skill, and effectively honing this skill is critical for aspiring superintendents. The superintendent is the lead advocate for the school district and must be able to compellingly communicate the needs of the school district. Additionally, as part of this practice, superintendents must be actively aware and responsive to the needs of the school community.

Implication 2. Public school superintendents should exhibit personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness (supporting Finding 6). This should be a practice of all educational leaders; however, it is particularly significant in the position of superintendent. Superintendents should constantly be attentive to moral leadership in decision

making. Deliberate efforts emphasizing fairness, honesty and professional integrity can feasibly establish an environment of trust and openness to facilitate a more productive organization.

Implication 3. Current and aspiring superintendents should develop instructional leadership and visionary leadership skills (supporting Findings 1, 3, 4, and 7). Educational leaders must be able to craft and communicate a vision, while simultaneously guiding results-driven instruction for the 21st-century learner. Superintendents should recognize instructional leadership as a primary function in their respective roles. While superintendents are occupied with the many complexities of running a school district, focus must be maintained on the quality of instruction in the classroom.

Implication 4. Professional associations as well as colleges and universities should continue to offer professional development that is appropriate to the needs of superintendents (supporting Finding 2). Professional associations, colleges and university should consider local as well as global needs when developing professional development offerings for superintendents. Organizations should survey active superintendents to determine if professional development needs are being fulfilled. If existing offerings are not substantial, additional professional development offerings should be considered.

Implication 5. Superintendents and aspiring superintendents should place confidence in the findings of this study, especially in view of its consistency with previous findings (supporting Finding 8). The acknowledged leadership characteristics have been consistent for the last eight years. Superintendents' and school-board chairs' perceptions of essential leadership characteristics have exhibited little change over that period. Those that aspire to move into district level leadership should develop a deeper understanding of essential leadership characteristics. Time should be devoted to developing the essential skills. There should also be a time for self-reflection and feedback from others to assess leadership readiness.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Similar research can be performed to examine superintendents' and school-board chairs' perceptions concerning essential school-board leadership characteristics and experiences.
2. Similar research can be performed to examine superintendents' and school-board chairs' perceptions by geographic region.

3. Qualitative research can be performed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of school-board chairs and superintendents concerning the essential leadership characteristics of superintendents.
4. Qualitative research can also be performed to investigate high-performing school districts in an effort to determine if the district's success is correlated to superintendent-leadership style.
5. Research can be performed to determine if the professional-development offerings to superintendents coincide with the functions of the position.

Reflections

Since my entry into the field of education, I have always been curious about the position of district superintendent. This curiosity was my motivation to research the role of district superintendent and the leadership characteristics considered essential to the position. Conducting this research has been one of the most difficult but rewarding projects I have ever pursued. The pursuit of knowledge has given me the confirmation that anything can be accomplished with grit, desire, and discipline.

The findings of this study are closely aligned with my view of leadership characteristics essential to the position of superintendent. It was satisfying to see that the beliefs of leaders in the Commonwealth of Virginia were similar to my own. In leading school districts, superintendents must be team-building, instructional leaders who are able to effectively communicate the vision of the school district and effectively guide the practices of the school district. Although the position of superintendent is complex, practical application to these principles should generate positive experiences.

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Appendix A

Superintendent Leadership Survey

Section 1

Using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents agree, and 4 represents strongly agree, please respond to the following statements:

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. Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
4. Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
5. Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.
1 2 3 4
6. Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind.
1 2 3 4
7. Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.
1 2 3 4
8. Superintendent–school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.
1 2 3 4
9. Curriculum, finance, professional development, school-board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
10. Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.
1 2 3 4
11. School-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.
1 2 3 4

12. Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.
1 2 3 4
13. The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.
1 2 3 4
14. Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books, and bonds" is essential to the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
15. The superintendent ensures that curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.
1 2 3 4
16. The superintendent 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
17. The superintendent 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 perceive as necessary for the position of superintendent. The most vital characteristic should receive the numerical value of 1.

| <i>Characteristic</i> | <i>Ranked Value (1 to 10)</i> |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Instructional Leader | |
| School-finance Experience | |
| Professional-development Experience | |
| Effective School-board Relations | |
| Visionary Leader | |
| School-law Experience | |
| School/Community Builder | |
| Political Astuteness | |
| 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 Leadership Survey

Section 1

Using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents agree, and 4 represents strongly agree, please respond to the following statements:

18. In the current educational environment, a superintendent must be an instructional leader.
1 2 3 4
19. Experience in public education is essential for the position of superintendent.
1 2 3 4
20. Establishing a clear vision for teaching and learning is critical to superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
21. Effective communication with board members, division and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent leadership.
1 2 3 4
22. Superintendents are perceived to be leaders of the community as opposed to being led by the community.
1 2 3 4
23. Superintendent leadership has been significantly influenced by the accountability mandates associated with Virginia Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind.
1 2 3 4
24. Persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent of public education.
1 2 3 4
25. Superintendent–school board relations can have an impact on achieving and sustaining division-wide success.
1 2 3 4
26. Curriculum, finance, professional development, school-board relations, and vision are the areas of responsibility inherent in the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
27. Personal and professional integrity, honesty, and fairness are essential leadership characteristics for the public school superintendent.
1 2 3 4
28. School-board turnover is a root cause of superintendent turnover.
1 2 3 4

29. Developing and managing resources necessary to support the instructional system must be a priority for superintendents at all times.
1 2 3 4
30. The superintendent's ability to articulate an instructional vision has a significant relationship to the division's academic success.
1 2 3 4
31. Effectively managing "buildings, buses, books, and bonds" is essential to the superintendency.
1 2 3 4
32. The superintendent ensures that curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning environments integrate appropriate technologies to maximize teaching and learning.
1 2 3 4
33. The superintendent 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
34. The superintendent 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 perceive as necessary for the position of superintendent. The most vital characteristic should receive the numerical value of 1.

| <i>Characteristic</i> | <i>Ranked Value (1 to 10)</i> |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Instructional Leader | |
| School-finance Experience | |
| Professional-development Experience | |
| Effective School-board Relations | |
| Visionary Leader | |
| School-law Experience | |
| School/Community Builder | |
| Political Astuteness | |
| Team Builder | |
| Intellect | |

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

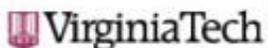
Appendix C

Certificate of Training



Appendix D

IRB Approval Memo



Office of Research Compliance
 Institutional Review Board
 North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
 300 Turner Street NW
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
 email irb@vt.edu
 website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 14, 2016
TO: Ted S Price, Shawn Devell Green
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)
PROTOCOL TITLE: PERCEPTIONS BY CURRENT VIRGINIA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS AND ACTIVE BOARD CHAIRPERSONS ON ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS
IRB NUMBER: 16-1096

Effective December 13, 2016, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at: <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 2,4**
 Protocol Approval Date: **December 13, 2016**
 Protocol Expiration Date: **N/A**
 Continuing Review Due Date*: **N/A**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

Appendix E
Superintendent Cover Letter

(Date)

(Superintendent Name)
(Name of School Division)
(School Division Address)

Dear (District Superintendent Name):

My name is Shawn D. Green and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Additionally, I serve as Principal at John Yeates Middle School in Suffolk, Virginia, where Dr. Deran Whitney is superintendent. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in completing a survey that will investigate the skills that current superintendents and active school board chairs perceive as essential in the role of superintendent. This study is a follow up study completed in 2009, titled *A Comparative Study of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics of Virginia School Superintendents*, by Dr. Michael Thornton.

The results of this study will provide information of interest to practicing and perspective superintendents, school boards as well as add to the literature in the field. The results of this survey will be published in a dissertation and participation in the survey is voluntary.

Please note, all responses will be kept strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be identified when analyzing the data. If you agree to participate, please take a moment to complete the survey questionnaire using the Qualtrics system on or before December 10, 2016. The survey can be completed using the link below. I thank you in advance for you participation.

https://viriniatech.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cTJ3LIY4tafHtad

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at [REDACTED] or email me at sdevell@vt.edu. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

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

Sincerely,

Shawn Green
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix F
School-Board Chair Cover Letter

(Date)

(School-board Chair Name)

(Name of School Division)

(School Division Address)

Dear (School-board Chair Name):

My name is Shawn D. Green and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Additionally, I serve as Principal at John Yeates Middle School in Suffolk, Virginia, where Dr. Deran Whitney is superintendent. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in a survey that will investigate the skills that current superintendents and active school board chairs perceive as essential in the role of superintendent. This study is a follow up study completed in 2009, titled *A Comparative Study of Superintendent Leadership Characteristics of Virginia School Superintendents*, by Dr. Michael Thornton.

The results of this study will provide information of interest to practicing and perspective superintendents, school boards as well as add to the literature in the field. The results of this survey will be published in a dissertation and participation in the survey is voluntary.

Please note, all responses will be kept strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be identified when analyzing the data. If you agree to participate, please take a moment to complete the survey questionnaire using the Qualtrics system on or before December 10, 2016. The success of this study is dependent on timely participation by school board chairs and superintendents. The survey can be completed using the link below. I thank you in advance for your participation.

https://viriniatech.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0rECHVlyLzkKtZr

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at [REDACTED] or email me at sdevell@vt.edu. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

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

Sincerely,

Shawn Green
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix G

Superintendent Follow-up Letter

(Date)

(Superintendent Name)
(Name of School Division)
(School Division Address)

Dear (District Superintendent Name):

My name is Shawn D. Green and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Additionally, I serve as Principal at John Yeates Middle School in Suffolk, Virginia, where Dr. Deran Whitney is superintendent. I am in the process of completing the research requirements for my dissertation. The title of my dissertation is *Perceptions by Current Virginia School Superintendents and Active Board Chairpersons on Essential Leadership Characteristics for Superintendents*. As part of the research process, you should have received approximately one week ago a survey questionnaire from me via email through Virginia Tech's Qualtrics System. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in completing the survey.

For this study to be representative of all Virginia's public school divisions, the sample size and response rate needs to be as large as possible. Please note, all responses will be kept strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be identified when analyzing the data. This study involves a survey of 17 questions. It will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete.

If you agree to participate, please take a moment to complete the survey questionnaire using the Qualtrics system on or before December 17, 2016. The results of this survey will be published in a dissertation and participation in the survey is voluntary. The survey can be accessed using the link below. I thank you in advance for your participation.

https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cTJ3LIY4tafHtad

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at [REDACTED] or email me at sdevell@vt.edu. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

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

Sincerely,

Shawn Green
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H

School-Board Chair Follow-up Letter

(Date)

(School-board Chair Name)
(Name of School Division)
(School Division Address)

Dear (School-board Chair Name):

My name is Shawn D. Green and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Additionally, I serve as Principal at John Yeates Middle School in Suffolk, Virginia, where Dr. Deran Whitney is superintendent. I am in the process of completing the research requirements for my dissertation. The title of my dissertation is *Perceptions by Current Virginia School Superintendents and Active Board Chairpersons on Essential Leadership Characteristics for Superintendents*. As part of the research process, you should have received approximately one week ago a survey questionnaire from me via email through Virginia Tech's Qualtrics System. My purpose for writing you is to seek your participation in completing the survey.

For this study to be representative of all Virginia's public school divisions, the sample size and response rate needs to be as large as possible. Please note, all responses will be kept strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be identified when analyzing the data. This study involves a survey of 17 questions. It will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete.

If you agree to participate, please take a moment to complete the survey questionnaire using the Qualtrics system on or before December 17, 2016. The results of this survey will be published in a dissertation and participation in the survey is voluntary. The survey can be accessed using the link below. I thank you in advance for your participation.

https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0rECHVlyLzkKtZr

If you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or the research, please do not hesitate to call me at [REDACTED] or email me at sdevell@vt.edu. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

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

Sincerely,

Shawn Green
Doctoral Candidate