

DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	1
Uncharted Waters: My Personal Story Navigating COVID-19 as an Administrator and Parent	1
Masks, Social Distancing, and Quarantine	7
New Normal.....	8
Problem Statement	11
Purpose of the Study	11
Research Questions.....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Four-Frame Model	13
Cyclical Model of Crisis Management Strategy.....	15
Significance of the Study	17
Key Terms.....	17
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
Schooling in the United States.....	19
Leading Through a Crisis.....	23
Leadership Expectations	24
COVID-19 Crisis Leadership	26
Summary	28
III. METHODOLOGY	30
Phenomenology.....	31
Research Participants and Recruitment	32
Data Collection Procedures.....	34
Data Analysis	36
Researcher’s Role	37
Limitations	38

Conclusion	38
IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS.....	40
Participant Profiles.....	40
Superintendent John.....	42
Superintendent Sally	43
Superintendent Maria.....	44
Superintendent Jamal	44
Superintendent Joe	46
Superintendent Daniel.....	47
Superintendent Veronica.....	48
Superintendent Greg	49
Superintendent William	50
Superintendent Rose	51
Themes.....	52
Overarching Theme 1: The Unforeseen.....	53
Overarching Theme 2: Emotional State.....	62
Overarching Theme 3: Team Alignment	66
Overarching Theme 4: Comparing Pre-Pandemic and Pandemic Leadership	72
Unexpected Crisis: Uvalde	78
Summary	80
V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	81
Summary of Findings.....	82
Research Question 1	82
Research Question 2	83
Research Question 3	84
Implications and Connections to Theory	85
Recommendations for Future Research	90
Conclusion	91
APPENDIX SECTION.....	93
REFERENCES	101

ABSTRACT

There are many forms of crises a district leader may experience, including school closure, severe weather, school shooting, flooding, student or staff death, and more recently, a pandemic. There is a lack of research concerning how leaders make sense of widespread societal crises such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Daily, superintendents must make decisions that will affect students and staff. As the leader of an organization, there are always multiple factors superintendents must keep in mind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents led their districts without having prior knowledge of leading in a pandemic such as this and were forced to adjust and adapt schooling to new COVID-19 regulations. My goal in this study was to, through phenomenological research, develop a holistic view of each participant's lived experience as a district leader to better understand the reasoning for how they processed and reacted to the crisis created by COVID-19. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 public-school superintendents. Data were collected that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them to lead through future crises.

Bolman and Deal's (2017) Reframing Organizations Four Frame Model as well as Smith and Riley's (2012) cyclical model of crisis management guided this qualitative study. From the data collected, four themes emerged: the unforeseen, emotional state, team alignment, and pre-pandemic and pandemic leadership. A summary of the findings, as well as implications, connections to theory, and recommendations, are provided in this dissertation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic that occurred during the 2019–2020 school year required school district leaders to step out of their comfort zone and make decisions concerning schooling while facing a crisis with only the guidance of their states' education agencies and recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Superintendents had to lean on each other, their leadership teams, and support systems while facing uncharted waters created by COVID-19. On April 17, 2020, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered districts to shut down all campuses and to only provide virtual instruction to students in the hopes of preventing the spread of COVID-19. After this mandate, students continued to receive remote instruction for the rest of the 2019–2020 school year, and though some district leaders chose to open their schools to in-person learning sooner than others after that, overall, no one knew how long the pandemic would persist.

Uncharted Waters: My Personal Story Navigating COVID-19 as an Administrator and Parent

As a school principal, Friday, March 13, 2020, was my last day on campus that spring. It was a great day and it just so happened to be the day before our Spring Break. Everyone enjoyed learning all about our great state as we celebrated Texas Day. Despite stations being set up for students, a cannon set up to fire outside, guest speakers, and smiles on my students' faces, I had an uneasy feeling. I had a premonition that we would not return to campus that semester. Before heading home, I took all the items I needed just in case we did not return so I would be prepared to work from home. This new virus

called Coronavirus 2019 had made its way to Texas and was beginning to hit closer and closer to home. This virus was like nothing we had ever seen before. Day by day, there were news reports of more and more people across the world dying or becoming very ill from this highly contagious disease. There was no cure. Well, the premonition I had on March 13th came to fruition. “In March, school districts across the nation shut their doors and more than 50 million American students finished the 2019-2020 school year through a variety of remote learning and home-schooling programs” (Markel, 2020, para. 3).

At the onset of the pandemic, I was a first-year elementary principal. I remember having mixed emotions and realizing there was no set plan for leaders to follow that would guide us on how to lead our staff and students through a pandemic. For the first time in my 14-year career in public education, despite my 6 years as a teacher and 8 years as a school administrator, I felt inadequately equipped in my position. Almost every single rule, policy, and procedure had to be changed. For schooling, this was the beginning of a “new normal” all educators had to quickly discover. I began to wonder—if I, as a principal, felt unprepared, how were superintendents feeling? The pandemic began during my second year as a doctoral student in the School Improvement and Superintendency program at Texas State University. Although I had originally chosen a different topic to research, my personal experience of leading a campus during a pandemic sparked a new interest. I wanted to know more about superintendents and their experiences during the crisis created by COVID-19. No one had ever faced a crisis such as this one in our lifetime. In thinking about the information I learned in my superintendency courses and my own personal experience leading a campus during a pandemic, I wondered what I would do if I were a superintendent of a district. Would I

feel prepared to lead a district during a crisis? These questions then led to more questions regarding superintendents' preparedness and response while leading during a crisis.

Our district leadership team supported each other and made decisions together. I was appreciative of this because we at least had each other to lean on, as we had no clue what was going to happen next. I am not sure how effective I would have been as a campus leader if I would have had to make decisions all on my own. We, the district leadership team, had always met monthly. Once the pandemic began, leadership and cabinet meetings went from monthly to weekly. These meetings helped create alignment among our district leaders during a challenging time. Due to meeting weekly and reviewing the information available from the Williamson County and Cities Health District, TEA Public Health Guidance, and the CDC, we were able to make decisions that we felt would be best for our district. Although the TEA provided some overall guidance, there were still a plethora of decisions that had to be made by leaders in each individual district. "This is the most difficult moment to be a teacher, a principal, a superintendent, a school educator in — in at least a generation" (Natanson, 2020, para. 13). This was the first time in my career that I did not have anyone I could call and ask for advice. There was no one who could tell me exactly what to do. Every administrator and educator in Texas experienced a lack of guidance due to the fact that everyone was experiencing a crisis like this for the first time. The pandemic created by COVID-19 changed schooling as we knew it. In response to the uncertainties presented by this contagious disease, for most Texas students, in-person schooling turned into remote learning. As Maxlow (2021) stated, "Superintendents and their leadership teams had to navigate multiple stakeholder

needs while also considering effective leadership strategies” (p. 4). Superintendents were quickly faced with making decisions they had never made before.

During the time period of March to May 2020, districts leaders in the State of Texas had to determine whether or not students would receive number grades or be graded on a pass/fail scale. New systems for attendance, online engagement, and faculty/staff support were created in every district. Although most teachers had never taught on an entirely virtual platform before, they had to quickly learn how to transition from in-person teaching to virtual teaching. Some districts had enough Chromebooks and hotspots readily available for students and staff whereas others had to create and provide students with copies of worksheets for completion.

This was a stressful time for all. As one administrator said, “I’ve never been so worried for myself, for my family, for my kids, for my community, for my students. I’ve never been so concerned about the existence of so many people at the same time” (Natanson, 2020, para. 5). I too was worried about my staff, students, parents, colleagues, friends, and family. How was this adjustment truly affecting my students as well as my three daughters? When was this new way of living going to end? Cases were steadily rising with no cure in sight. Did my staff feel supported considering we were all working from home? We continued with having our weekly campus planning meetings and I made a point to attend all of them virtually. This was the only way I felt I could be present for my grade-level or department teams. With lockdowns in place, we could not come together on campus and physically plan together. We had a quick turnaround to teach parents and students how to use our technology platforms. Leading an elementary campus virtually was one of the lowest points in my career. It was not what I had in mind

for the last 9 weeks of my first year as an elementary principal. There were so many thoughts racing through my mind with regard to the well-being of students and staff. Eventually, the TEA announced the cancellation of our state standardized test, the STAAR, which was a relief for educators. There was no space on my plate for the stress associated with STAAR testing considering the situation created by COVID-19 in education was already stressful enough. Leading a campus is not the same from behind a computer screen compared to in person. It is much more taxing.

Toward the end of April, my daughter made a comment after she completed her online work for the day that I will never forget. She said, “Even though I dislike school mommy, I’d rather be in school.” You see, the social interaction of being around her peers was an aid to her, as were the support services at her school. Being able to physically be around family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other friends and family was an aid to her. During the online schooling phase of COVID-19, none of these supports were available, and this crisis triggered feelings in my girls that I had not noticed before. After the death of a beloved cousin on the last day of the year in 2019 as well as the death of my daughters’ great grandmother in April of 2020, the stress of these traumatic events combined with the still-unknown risks of COVID-19 were beginning to become too much to bear within 4 short months. After my daughter’s comment, I truly realized how this pandemic was not only affecting adults, but children, too. This was a depressing time.

School ended in May of 2020 and during the summer, school leaders planned accordingly for the upcoming school year while also actively monitoring COVID-19 data in their area. Leaders had to determine whether or not campuses would begin in-person

schooling on the scheduled start date for the school year or begin virtually. In July, parents and guardians were able to select between the option of in-person or virtual schooling as their preference for their student for the first grading period of the upcoming school year. As Natanson (2020) described, “Where they wind up will depend on how many families request in-person learning, and whether they or family members suffer health issues rendering them more susceptible to the virus” (para. 7). Many districts created a document/survey for parents to select the option of either in-person or virtual schooling as their preference for their student during the first grading period of the 2020–2021 school year. This was a process that was repeated weeks before every grading period and assisted campus leaders in knowing how many students would be enrolled in person or virtual before the grading period began, which assisted with class schedules and any adjustments that needed to be made before each grading period’s start date. Our district remained virtual for the first 4 weeks of school, but unlike last semester and to the governor’s orders, staff could at least work on campus. Based on the selections of our parents, we created rosters for our first 9 weeks. Our campus had in-person classes along with one virtual class in each grade (i.e., first through fifth). We were going to start the year off with about 40% of our students enrolled virtually. It was a benefit being an administrator and parent during this time, as I was able to understand and see both a parent’s perspective and an educator’s perspective. Although two of my girls attended school on my campus, my husband and I chose to keep all three virtual for the first grading period. We considered all factors and at the time, we chose health over academics.

Masks, Social Distancing, and Quarantine

As planning for the 2020–2021 school year moved along, COVID-19 moved along right with us. With all the decisions made by our district leaders as well as my campus leadership team, I still felt uneasy because it was my job to keep 580 students and 75 staff members safe. Based on to American Academy of Pediatrics suggestion (Markel, 2020), I better understood the reasoning as to why students should return to campus:

Some of the reasons the AAP has suggested children return to school in the fall has to do with their educational, social and developmental needs. That includes better means of learning in the classroom under the tutelage of a skilled teacher, the critical role of play in the daily lives of children, access to school-based health and meal programs, and disparities of internet and computer access for many American families without the financial resources to purchase such commodities. (para. 8)

We did what needed to be done in preparation for our students' return by first creating a safety plan specifically for our campus. My assistant principal and I created a video of the safety plan to share with our staff and families. This was the best way to communicate the plan, and this plan was the best way for us to make an attempt at ensuring everyone's safety for this school year. In our safety plan, we explained our updated student arrival and dismissal process. We also explained how students would be socially distanced during lunches, as well as new behavioral expectations for students in the hallways and classrooms, including the wearing of masks. No visitors would be allowed on campus.

Because parents had the option to send their student to school in person or virtually and the ability to revise that decision every grading period, every grading period (i.e., 9 weeks) of school was unique. During the first 9 weeks, about 40% of our students were virtual. As the year progressed, the number of virtual students decreased, which meant the class size of the one virtual class in every grade level became smaller, and

those students returning to school in person then had to be placed in in-person classes, which meant those class sizes became larger. When the virtual classes became too small to justify, in-person classes began to include virtual students, with teachers having to work both with the students in their classrooms and those Zooming in from home. That is when I prayed and hoped that my staff would be able to make it through the rest of the school year because in order to meet the needs of our students, some teachers had to teach virtually and in person simultaneously.

We were lucky to not have any student positive cases until December of 2020. Vaccines became available during the middle of this school year for adults, which provided a glimmer of hope; however, by the end of the 2020–2021 school year, we had to quarantine multiple classes and over 470 students. Between completing my doctoral coursework in Fall of 2020, completing the HB 3 Reading Academies 60-hour credit course requirement for all elementary principals and kindergarten–third grade teachers, as well as the day-to-day responsibilities of leading a campus, not to mention being a mother and a wife, the 2020–2021 school year became a blur. One thing I had to remember to do throughout the year was make time for my self-care. This consisted of exercising, going for walks, and just relaxing in a dark room with no noise. I knew I could not be a productive individual if I did not also pay attention to my mental health.

New Normal

As I prepared for the 2021–2022 school year, I thought things should have been better, as we had lived through the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year and also, we finally had vaccines. At both the district and school building levels, we had already had extensive experience with lockdowns and the challenge of balancing asynchronous

and synchronous learning. But honestly, for me as a school principal, the 2021–2022 school year was even more difficult than the 2020–2021 school year. As Scudellari (2020) put it, “The world has been in pandemic mode for a year and a half. The virus continues to spread at a slow burn; intermittent lockdowns are the new normal” (p. 22). In 2020, throughout the globe, 250 million people have been infected with COVID-19 and 1.75 million people have died (Scudellari, 2020). Despite still living in the midst of a pandemic, schools are operating to some degree as we did pre-COVID-19. Texas school superintendents’ hands are tied due to the governor’s mandates and TEA guidelines. As a leader, I am still concerned. I want to ensure everyone on my campus is safe and will not contract the virus—however, I have limited control.

As of Fall of 2022, social distancing has ended and I cannot compel anyone on campus to wear a mask. The only individuals who need to quarantine are those who have tested positive for COVID-19. It is hard to believe we are still dealing with the coronavirus nearly 3 years later. Educators are resigning across the nation. David Jeck (2021), Superintendent of Fauquier County Schools, said it thusly: “Today, we find ourselves in a national teacher shortage that we have been able to avoid over the past few years” (para. 1). Educators are overwhelmed and exhausted. As Gonzalez (2021) noted,

On top of that, they are adding new stuff: new technology, new curricula, new programs. This stuff might be good, it might be outstanding, but it’s still new, and it comes with a learning curve, which means more time. Meanwhile, extra work has been added in order to comply with COVID-related requirements, help students make up work missed due to quarantining, and cover classes that have no responsible adult in charge due to an accelerating shortage in teachers and substitutes. (PART 2: THE PROBLEM, BRIEFLY, TIME section, para. 7)

The effects of COVID-19 have created a new set of problems for us as educators.

The mental health of individuals has become an increasing concern across the nation. As Tate (2021) stated, “Now that they [students] are back in school, this lost time

is showing up in the form of increased violence at schools, poor academic performance, cheating, and widespread mental health issues among students” (para. 5). Some have had to endure circumstances such as the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, and the fear alone associated with the possibility of contracting this deadly virus.

As I reflect on my time as an elementary principal leading during a pandemic, I recognize that my personal and professional support team has helped me to stay strong. My upbringing and character will not allow me to give up. These past few years have not been easy and every day is a new challenge—but my determination, hope, and faith have kept me focused and driven to stay strong as a leader for my staff and students, as well as a mother and wife for my family. Working with a selfless staff has been a blessing from God. The staff of Ray Elementary faced all challenges head on and did the very best they could to meet the needs of our students. The pandemic has not ended yet. Just when it seems as though things are getting better, new variants of COVID-19 emerge. This pandemic has been a test of my strength, yet has allowed me to see how much I can handle. With all of the negativity it has created, one positive for me has been the gift of time. Due to limiting exposure by staying at home more, previous lockdowns, and class courses and meetings becoming virtual, I have had more time than ever before to focus on myself and my family. At this point, we still do not know when this pandemic will come to an end, but I will continue to pray and have faith that one day soon it will be over and educators can use the knowledge gained from the lessons learned in the past couple of years to begin implementing the changes needed in our educational system. However, in order for us to do that, we need to more effectively pool and share our experiences so we can learn from each other. That was the purpose of the present study.

Problem Statement

There is a gap in the literature regarding how leaders make sense of extreme situations like COVID-19 and a lack of possible framings and models for how those working during a society-wide crisis can make sense of and work in such difficult times (Holenweger et al., 2017). More research is needed to address the issue of how leaders align with their teams in extreme situations and understand the situation before them. With the many possibilities of crises a district may experience, such as a school closure, severe weather, school shooting, flooding, student or staff death, and, more recently, a pandemic, there is a lack of research concerning how leaders make sense of a crisis when they are faced with one and how their perception, understanding, and decision making within that crisis affect the situational outcomes around them. I designed this study to begin to fill that gap by exploring how school district leaders in Texas have reacted to and made sense of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose of the Study

As I explained in detail above when sharing my own COVID-19 story as a campus leader and parent, I have particularly paid attention to the way the pandemic has affected education in Texas. Due to my personal experience of leading a campus through a pandemic, I soon realized the schooling I received as an undergraduate, and even the experience I have accumulated over the years as a teacher and administrator, did not fully prepare me for all of the changes and challenges I have faced since schools shut down during the 2020 Spring semester. This led to my wanting to know more about school district superintendents' preparedness while facing the current COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders must be prepared when facing any type of crisis or situation. The lack of

preparedness affects the way a superintendent leads, which affects staff, which then affects students. The lack of preparedness has an effect on the decisions school leaders make, which then affects the educational outcomes created by those decisions. As Bolman and Deal (2017) stated, “Effective managers need the skill to sort through the alternatives, and the wisdom to match the right story to the situations” (p. 21). As organizational leaders, superintendents must have the skills necessary to lead effectively through any type of situation experienced. The purpose of this dissertation was to begin to collect and pool together the skills and wisdom district leaders in Texas have accumulated by leading through the COVID-19 crisis.

Research Questions

1. What has been the experience of participating superintendents while leading their district during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In what ways did these superintendents feel prepared or unprepared to confront the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What leadership skills and personal characteristics do participants feel are important for a leader to have in order to be effective in decision making during a crisis?

Theoretical Framework

Merriam (2009) explained a theoretical framework as a way of building concepts and as support of your research. By using this theoretical framework, new knowledge and theories can be formed through data analysis. As stated by Merriam,

The sense we make of the data we collect is equally influenced by the theoretical framework. That is, our analysis and interpretation- our study’s findings- will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place. (p. 70)

My goal was to develop a holistic view of each participant's lived experience as a district leader and to better understand the reasoning for how they processed and reacted to the crisis created by COVID-19. I developed this holistic view by using a phenomenological focus when researching each participant's experiences. I used Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model and Smith and Riley's (2012) cyclical model of crisis management as the theoretical framework that guided my qualitative study.

Four-Frame Model

The four frames of Bolman and Deal's (2017) model are structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The structural frame of the four-frame model focuses on placing employees into a position that is a good fit for them. Goals are set and the leader assists with everyone moving forward in the same direction. This is a frame that has to be solid before a crisis even occurs. Superintendents must ensure they have the right people on their team and a common vision. This team must be able to move in unison with the superintendent and be able to tackle any problem faced as one. As Bolman and Deal (2017) stated, "Structural logic dictates that an organization's success requires alignment of strategy, structure, and environment" (p. 50). If alignment and structure are not in place, then employees will become unsure of their responsibilities. Leading through a crisis alone is not ideal. It takes a team of minds to weigh all options and then make decisions.

Within the human resource frame, leaders empower their subordinates and meet the needs of each individual within the organization. Leaders also support, listen, and keep everyone informed. As stated by Bolman and Deal (2017), "The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another" (p. 113). For

example, throughout the COVID-19 crisis, did participating superintendents think of having a plan in place to ensure their employees felt supported? Were employees able to communicate their feelings without being judged? Was professional development provided to enhance teachers' technology skills so they would feel prepared to teach virtually? It takes teamwork and everyone having a role in the success of the organization.

The political frame includes networking and building coalitions. According to this theory, there should be a connection with all stakeholders and clear and consistent goals from the top. This frame relates to conflict within the organization and the different sources of power. As Levi (2017) articulated, "The organization's culture and systems must be compatible with teamwork, and organizations must supply teams with the necessary power and resources (e.g. personnel, financial means, training) for task performance" (p. 31). According to this framework, a superintendent's positional power should be used to ensure subordinates are able to express their interests and are provided the opportunity to have some form of power within the organization.

The symbolic frame focuses on organizational culture and the organization sharing its story. The superintendent is a symbolic leader and leads by example. Boyte and Steckler (2015) reminded leaders to be purposeful in creating a positive and supportive culture. Leaders need to believe in what their subordinates have to offer and need to be genuine. Rituals, ceremonies, and branding are important in this frame. The superintendent should be transparent and communicate frequently. All stakeholders should know of the district's successes and failures.

A district superintendent is in charge of monitoring all four frames and must have multiframe thinking. As Bolman and Deal stated, “Like physicians, they reframe, consciously or intuitively, until they understand the situation at hand. They use more than one lens to develop a diagnosis of what they are up against and how to move forward” (p. 19). I have experienced superintendents gathering feedback from all stakeholders involved when presented with a dilemma. Whether it be from a committee formed, a survey administered, or a meeting held with their leadership team, they will use the feedback to make an informed decision. However, “It can be liberating to realize there is always more than one way to respond to any problem or dilemma” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 21).

Through the four-frame model, I used data collected from each participant to determine each participant’s strengths and weaknesses in each frame as an organizational leader while leading during a pandemic. Themes emerged, and I was able to determine, by comparing the data collected from all participants, whether participating superintendents felt a lack of preparation in certain frames of the four-frame model or whether there was an overall lack of preparedness for superintendents when facing a crisis.

Cyclical Model of Crisis Management Strategy

In addition to building on the four-frame theoretical model, I drew on Smith and Riley’s (2012) theoretical work on crisis management. As they stated,

Crises of one form or another inevitably occur in all schools, no matter how well they are led and managed. Many crises occur with no warning whatsoever; others emerge slowly but steadily over time. Some crises can be resolved quickly, while the resolution of others can be quite protracted. (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 58)

The model of crisis management is “cyclical in nature because the learning involved in dealing with a current crisis feeds back to enhance the ability of organizational leaders to detect, prepare for, contain, resolve and recover from any future crisis they may experience” (p. 61). Building on the work of Gainey (2009), Smith and Riley (2012) argued that with this model, organizational leaders can prepare for the unknown: “It is a process that attempts to take leadership thinking away from notions of ‘what has been’ and ‘what works now’ to a rigorous consideration of realistic alternative futures” (p. 63). Within this process, leaders should think of scenarios and the strategies they would use if the scenario were to occur. Reflection and learning from previous crisis experience are needed. According to this view, organizational democracy is needed before, during, and after a crisis. Two-way communication plays a key role and the model is used as a way of being proactive and prepared before a crisis occurs, as outlined in Figure 1.

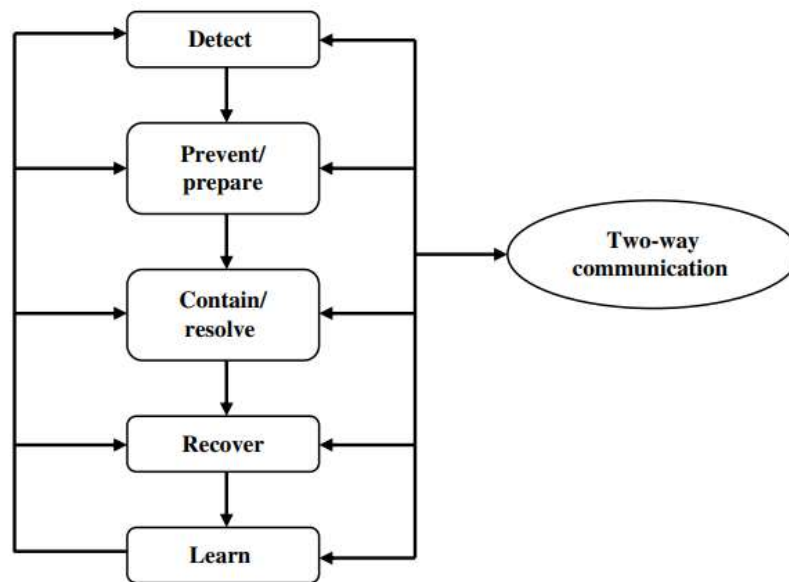


Figure 1. Model of Crisis Management Strategy (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Significance of the Study

There is a lack of research (Holenweger et al., 2017) concerning how leaders make sense of an extreme crisis. Leaders have to be equipped with the skills to make decisions for each situation they experience. Schooling in the United States has evolved over time and will continue to evolve. Although superintendents are currently facing the COVID-19 crisis, it will not be the last crisis they experience. School closures, natural disasters, suicides, and school shootings are just some of the crises a superintendent could possibly experience. As Maxwell (2007) stated, “The leaders who make the greatest impact are often those who lead well in the midst of uncertainty” (p. 159). With this in mind, superintendents will need to be prepared and equipped with skills to lead effectively through any type of situation. One way to become better prepared is by learning from the lived experience of other superintendents who have already faced a crisis. “In a world of uncertainty and ambiguity, a key function of symbolic leadership is to offer plausible and hopeful interpretations of experience” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 354). In this study, I collected the experiences of superintendents during COVID-19, and in so doing provided data that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them to lead through future crises.

Key Terms

Asynchronous learning – Assignments that learners complete at a learner-chosen time, though usually within a timeframe specified by the teacher. This work may be done using traditional paper and pencil methods or completed using online tools (Maxlow, 2021, p. 22).

COVID-19 –

A mild to severe respiratory illness caused by a coronavirus . . . transmitted chiefly by contact with infectious material . . . or with objects or surfaces contaminated by the causative virus, and characterized especially by fever, cough, and shortness of breath and may progress to pneumonia and respiratory failure. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a, Definition 1, para. 1)

Crisis – “A situation that has reached a critical phase” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b, Definition 3, para. 1).

Leadership – “The act or instance of leading” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c, Definition 3, para. 1).

Pandemic – A disease “occurring over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affecting a significant portion of the population” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-d, Definition 1, para. 1).

Quarantine – “To isolate from normal relations or communication” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-e, Definition 2, para. 1).

Superintendent – The Chief Executive Officer of a school district, appointed by and answerable to a School Board (Maxlow, 2021, p. 22).

Synchronous learning – Learning or assignments all learners complete at the same time. This is frequently, though not always, done via an online live video conferencing platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams (Maxlow, 2021, p. 22).

Virtual learning/Online learning – A type of distance learning in which all or almost all of the teaching and learning take place online. This typically includes synchronous online live learning sessions over a platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams, as well as supplemental asynchronous instructional time, generally conducted on a learning management system such as Google Classroom, Schoology, or Canvas (Maxlow, 2021, p. 22).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 has affected everyone across the globe. It has affected people's livelihood, many people have experienced illness and even death, and even our normal day-to-day activities and way of living have been altered. The pandemic in which we are still currently living forced school entities to move away from the typical idea of schooling toward making decisions while navigating uncharted waters. According to Harris (2020), "Teaching and learning practices have dramatically altered, the core functions of schools have shifted, and education leaders have been pushed to the very limit" (p. 321). With the guidance of the TEA and its commissioner, Mike Morath, district leaders in Texas had to lean on each other while facing a crisis created by COVID-19. No district or school administrator really knew what the best decision would be for staff and students considering they had never experienced a crisis like this before.

The focus of this review of literature is on how schooling has evolved in the United States, the impact of COVID-19 in schools, and how leaders lead through a crisis. Although this research is limited (which is why this study was necessary), the information discovered was beneficial as a starting point upon which I based my own study.

Schooling in the United States

Schooling in the United States is designed to provide students with the knowledge they need to become productive citizens in society. Schools are also a safe haven for some students. Schooling has evolved over time but during the 2019–2020 school year as our world faced a crisis never experienced before, schooling during a pandemic exposed how schooling is not conducive for all. Schooling is uniform, has a hidden curriculum,

and lacks equity. “Beyond questioning the precise effects of the ‘schooled society’ there is good evidence that social inequalities are regenerated through education as we know it, whether its institutions are consciously or not dedicated to that process” (Flint & Peim, 2012, p. 128). In order for schooling to become what it should be, educators will need a mutual and aligned understanding of the purpose of schooling and its intended outcomes and expectations for students. They must know their “why” (Sinek, 2009).

“Education became a business and in fact was modeled after the industry” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 27). In the book, *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era: Teaching and Learning in an Age of Accountability*, Slattery (2012) wrote about how schooling has evolved and is constantly changing. Women now dominate as teachers, accountability measures are in place, school choice options are available, the purpose of schooling is not what it used to be, and the roles and responsibilities of supervision have changed. Educators are continuously adjusting to the new curriculum in use at any given time. Slattery described the many changes in curriculum and focus they have experienced thusly: “In the process, I was ‘Hunterized’ (Madeline Hunter’s *Master Learning and Mastery Teaching*) and ‘Canterized’ (Lee Canter’s *Assertive Discipline*). Later I ‘Bloomed’ (Allen Bloom’s *Cultural Literacy*), and then I was ‘Bushed’ (The first president George Bush’s *America 2000*)” (p. 64). Time after time, educators are presented with the latest and greatest curriculum, resources, and policies that they are expected to follow, but schools need to “improve efficiency and to be more inclusive, in the name of social justice” (Flint & Peim, 2012, p. 110). Schools should be a place where teachers are afforded the autonomy to incorporate their personal experiences into their lessons and where students can also incorporate aspects of their

culture into their learning. I agree with Slattery's (2012) assertion: "I deeply fear the loss of creativity, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, environmental connections, autobiographical sensibilities, spiritual awareness, emotional maturity, heightened consciousness, and educational passion in our teachers, students, and citizens" (p. 73).

In response to these challenges, school reform can occur through internal and external professional development. There has to be campus-wide consistency, support from administrators, and availability of needed resources. With regard to resources, funding should be equitably dispersed among districts to aid in achieving the outcomes expected (Baker, 2016). Not having the trust and discretion in schools from most supervisors to teach is not what is best for schools. Teachers need autonomy along with training provided by their district so they can continue to grow in their profession.

In a post-No Child Left Behind world, schooling is oriented around standardized testing. I can remember taking the TAAS in high school, which then changed to TAKS and now to the STAAR. Our novice teachers have taken standardized tests since they were in the third grade. This is their norm. How can we move toward reconceptualization when teachers may feel they have no choice but to teach to a test because this is what they have experienced throughout their education? They feel the pressure of testing accountability and teacher evaluations. What is interesting is that we tell our teachers to differentiate for students because every child learns differently, but yet we stifle teachers' creativity. We have become so consumed with testing and teaching to the test that learning is not as enjoyable as it could be. If lessons are more enjoyable (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012), students will gain a better understanding of the material being taught.

Learning should be fun and engaging. Instead of standardized testing, schools should use authentic accountability measures where everyone is held accountable:

Authentic accountability begins with the cultivation of a culture in which everyone feels responsible to one another and to the success of the school community as a whole. Authentic accountability, then, is predicated on schools creating a culture of professional integrity among staff. (Meier & Gasoi, 2017, p. 132)

Authentic accountability measures would measure more aspects of students' understanding because it could be created with student diversity and prior knowledge in mind.

Leaders of schools can support their staff and lead their schools while providing a postmodern curriculum. Administrators can ensure ecological sustainability along with holistic models of teaching are the focus. "Scholars committed to the dual role of curriculum as informative and transformative have sounded an urgent warning to educators: ecological sustainability and holistic models of teaching should be the primary focus of the post-modern curriculum" (Slattery, 2012, p. 208). But, due to what schooling currently is, mindsets will have to be adjusted and teachers will need examples and a clear understanding of what a holistic model is, what ecological sustainability truly means, and what a postmodern curriculum entails.

When we as a society think of our schools and schooling, some of the key words we should keep in mind while moving toward the changes needed are empowerment, ecological sustainability, holistic models, reconceptualization, and cultural diversity. Educators and those who make decisions for schooling must be open to new ideas, vulnerable, and realize schooling is not "one size fits all." "In the postmodern era there is no single method or practice that works for all people" (Slattery, 2012, p. 209). School leaders should empower. According to Slattery (2012), "The postmodern utopia offered

here is not the perfect world of apocalyptic and idealistic dreams, rather it is a vision of hope, justice, compassion, phronesis, community, inclusiveness, and dialogue” (p. 239). Our students need and deserve better than what we are currently offering. We must move away from reciting and rote memorization. As discussed in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* by Gert Biesta (2013), when we begin to provide an emancipatory education, equality then becomes one of the outcomes in education.

As stated previously, for schooling to become what it should be, educators will need a mutual and aligned understanding of the purpose of schooling and its intended outcomes and expectations for students. As Biesta (2013) asserted,

There is only one way in which we can answer this question, and that is the question about the purpose of education. It is, after all, only if we can articulate what it is we want to achieve, that we can judge where a change in practice gets us close to this or further away from it. (p. 127)

Once we know what we want to achieve, we can then begin to adjust current practices and move toward reconceptualization. We can learn from the pandemic and instead of going back to the status quo of schooling, continue moving forward in a new direction (Zhao, 2020).

Leading Through a Crisis

As a leader, there will always be the possibility of having to lead your organization through a crisis. In the more recent past, leaders have faced unexpected events such as natural disasters, which can include wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes. They have also faced school shootings as well as suicides. The last known severe pandemic in recent history was the 1918 influenza pandemic that caused at least 50 million deaths worldwide (CDC, 2019). At the time, recommendations for overcoming this influenza, also known as the Spanish Flu, included focusing on hygiene, social

distancing, disinfecting, and quarantining. Leaders at that time were also faced with making the decision of whether or not students should return to school in the midst of a pandemic. But what leaders faced back in 1918 did not include the additional factors educational leaders face in today's society:

Schools in the United States are faced with more challenges than ever before. School leaders are challenged with situations that administrators twenty years ago did not have to deal with such as classroom misbehavior, students' work ethics, and teacher and parent autonomy. (Cantrell, 2017 p. 2)

Superintendents have the responsibility of making tough decisions when tragedy occurs while having to keep in mind the effects their decisions will have on all stakeholders in the organization. They are expected to have an answer for every question (Cantrell, 2017) and become the incident commander for any crisis, while also serving as the educational leader of the school. For some crises, such as school shootings or natural disasters, superintendents may be able to get advice from another administrator who lived through the experience, but regarding the COVID-19 crisis, advice is limited. Unlike school shootings, tornadoes, and floods, this catastrophe is neither localized nor a single, one-time event:

The situation evolves by the hour, and the endgame is unknown, which means that even as school system leaders scramble to meet the immediate needs of students, families, teachers, and staff, they must also plan for what may stretch into weeks or even months of school closures. (Starr, 2020, p. 60)

The COVID-19 crisis has presented many unknowns and changes for superintendents to address.

Leadership Expectations

For a superintendent, leading during what would be considered a normal year can be difficult. But now that superintendents must lead through a pandemic, there is even more responsibility and pressure added on to their role. "The ability to lead the school

system, manage the crisis, and maintain the integrity of the position, coupled with sustaining a high level of student achievement is paramount to the success of a superintendent” (Cantrell, 2017, p. 27). Superintendents may not be ready for every potential crisis but should be proactive and become prepared as best they can. Professor Ronald Riggio, PhD, stated, “You need to train, prepare, and execute” (Abrams, 2020, p. 2). Leaders cannot just assume things will work themselves out.

Abrams (2020) listed clear communication, honesty, transparency, and readiness as essential elements of crisis leadership. Leaders must think first about their internal experience of the crisis by tuning in to their internal emotional response and understanding how those responses can influence their decision making. This is a step that must occur first because time is critical and decisions have to be made in a timely manner. “In times of crisis, we expect leadership from people in high places, and we are grievously disappointed if they fail to provide it” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 336). Members of a school organization will look to the superintendent to have the answers and lead them through the crisis.

The superintendent is responsible for overseeing an entire school organization. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, their roles and responsibilities as leaders were drastically affected. The superintendency is not a job for the faint-hearted even on the best of days (Sawchuk, 2021, ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown’ section, para. 1). Superintendent Diann Kitamura shared her challenge of leading an organization through the Tubbs, Glass, and Kincade wildfires and now COVID-19. After a long tenure in education, she decided to retire:

“Mostly when I’m emailing her or texting her, it’s, ‘Are you OK? Are you sleeping?’ Because it is like a hit to the gut over and over again,” said Laurie

Fong, the president of the school board and an ally of Kitamura's. "Because no matter how hard you try with everyone's interests at heart . . . there is still somebody who's unhappy and criticizing your decision." (Sawchuk, 2021, Crises like the pandemic section, para. 9)

Fullan and Kirtman (2019) discussed how leaders can feel alone during opposition but should keep in mind that it is unrealistic to be good in all aspects of leadership. While facing our current pandemic, leaders must do what they feel is best.

COVID-19 Crisis Leadership

Although this study focused on public-school superintendents in Texas, the COVID-19 crisis affected leaders across the globe. New systems were created and leaders had to alter their plans for the school year. "The onset of the pandemic profoundly shifted the superintendents' work and invited new questions that they had not previously considered. These shifts reflected an abrupt departure from their standard work practices" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2). The pandemic was not favorable to anyone and, in some ways, it added more pressure to districts that were already strained. "The public health crisis has thus intensified the pressures already placed on rural leaders, especially superintendents, as it has introduced new threats to an already overtaxed segment of American society" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2). Superintendents planned for academics and the overall safety of their campuses, but they also had to include a plan related to health and safety. "Health and safety measures were important procedures that were instrumental in operating campuses effectively" (Gonzalez, 2022, p. 115). Overnight, superintendents quickly shifted from leadership to crisis leadership.

As crisis leaders, superintendents juggled additional responsibilities and requirements created by the pandemic. "School districts were required to pivot and provide educational services remotely, a concept embraced by cyber schools but

unfamiliar to traditional public education” (Aiken, 2021, p. 125). Due to this pivot, superintendents and their teams had to make some tough decisions they had never made before. “Superintendents were expected to make informed decisions and have a vision toward safety and student achievement” (Hernandez, 2022, p. 173). Meetings were held often with teams. “Teamwork was one essential component that was described as a critical element of decision-making and coordinating in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and one that set the tone for leaders in public education (Gonzalez, 2022, p. 113). With teamwork, teams could discuss topics triggered by the pandemic. They could review all options before deciding on the best option to incorporate moving forward.

A district is led by a superintendent, but its board of trustees plays a major role in decision making as well. During the pandemic, superintendents worked alongside their executive leadership team but also with their district board of trustees. Lochmiller (2021) stated superintendents

repeatedly stressed the importance of keeping board members informed about conditions in the district and pointed to the value of sharing information with the board members. Most of the superintendents perceived that their board members became more supportive as they shared information and collaborated with them. (p. 11)

During the pandemic, superintendents needed to be transparent and communicative with all stakeholders, especially their board of trustees. “Superintendents and school board trustees have an incredible responsibility, are faced with a variety of directions from many stakeholder groups and find themselves challenged by their own group dynamic” (Jackson, 2016, p. 39). During crisis, it was beneficial if the board of trustees and superintendent worked together.

With supports, a number of recent studies showed superintendents were able to lead their organizations through a pandemic. “Having a high functioning team and a

strong network to lean on has helped these superintendents and so many others not only survive but thrive as leaders” (Cooper, 2022, p. 56). Gonzalez (2022) found, “Leading by example in a calm, empathic manner was an approach that was identified” (p. 114). Superintendents in these studies were mindful of their emotions because they knew the entire organization was watching them and expecting them to lead them through this crisis. “The pandemic has been a transformational event in our world—our world will never be the same; therefore, our approach to leadership should naturally evolve based on the lessons we have learned” (Cooper, 2022, p. 72).

The work done by superintendents is at the same time admirable, challenging, political, complex, and rewarding in the midst of the worst pandemic of the 21st century. Their courageous leadership to help students, families, and staff during a global health pandemic is no less than extraordinary. (Hernandez, 2022, pp. 172–173)

Superintendents in these studies rolled up their sleeves and faced the pandemic head on. In my study, I found similar resilience and tenacity in the face of COVID-19 among my participants in Texas, as I will share in the following chapters.

Summary

Superintendents should be proactive in preparing themselves to lead through any unexpected crisis. A leader’s preparedness or lack thereof can make or break them (Abrams, 2020) in times of disaster. They should keep in mind the essential skills needed for crisis leadership. Members of the superintendent’s organization will be depending on them to make the right decision for all, but superintendents must self-reflect first and then move forward with decision making.

Schooling in the United States has evolved over time and gains have been made but schooling is still not conducive for all students. This has become even more noticeable during the current pandemic. “A crisis can leave leaders and their communities

shaken, but it can also present an opportunity for growth” (Abrams, 2020, p. 5). Now is the time for superintendents to learn from the lived experience of others and begin making the changes needed to improve education.

It’s a tall order asking executives to plot the optimal course when they are trying to ride out the storm of a lifetime. However, the leaders that can quickly toggle between strategic and tactical thinking will allow their organization to not just survive, but thrive when the crisis abates. (Marko, 2020, para. 2)

Leading through a crisis of course will have its challenges, but in any situation, being prepared is key.

III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter reviews the methodology I used to conduct my qualitative study with public-school superintendents in Texas concerning the crisis they are currently facing while leading their districts through the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, in this study, I examined the following research questions:

1. What has been the experience of participating superintendents while leading their district during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In what ways did these superintendents feel prepared or unprepared to confront the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What leadership skills and personal characteristics do participants feel are important for a leader to have in order to be effective in decision making during a crisis?

Criteria to participate in this study and how participants were recruited are reviewed in this chapter, as are the limitations that occurred while conducting the research. Data collection focused on the crisis faced by superintendents related to the COVID-19 pandemic, knowing that “no single formula is possible for the great range of situations leaders encounter” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 337). With this statement in mind, my goal was to develop a holistic view of each participant’s lived experience to better understand the reasoning for how they processed and reacted to the crisis. I developed this holistic view by using a phenomenological focus when researching each participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Further in the chapter, details of the qualitative research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis are provided.

Phenomenology

On a daily basis, superintendents must make decisions that will affect students and staff. As the leader of an organization, there are always multiple factors superintendents must keep in mind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents led their districts without having prior knowledge of leading in a pandemic such as this and were forced to adjust and adapt schooling to the new COVID-19 regulations. “Leaders at all levels of education systems struggle to reconfigure ways of connecting with learners and supporting the well-being of millions of young people” (Harris, 2020, p. 322). The purpose of this research was to collect data from participants who have first-hand experience with leading a district as a public-school superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic, “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). A qualitative rather than quantitative design supported the purpose of this study. “Qualitative data tells a story” (Patton, 2002, p. 47). I wanted to hear their stories. From a sample of superintendents, as a researcher, I wanted to “uncover the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

My epistemology perspective is constructionism, which indicates “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 2003, p. 43). In other words, “Meaning is not discovered but constructed” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). I intended to uncover the meaning of the COVID-19 phenomenon constructed by my participants. I chose phenomenological research as the type of methodology for my study because it provided a means for me to collect in-depth data on

the phenomenon experienced by the participants. The sole method used was interviewing to collect the in-depth data I needed.

Research Participants and Recruitment

I sought 10 district leaders for this qualitative study using a purposeful sampling strategy of criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). “The logic of criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance, a strategy coming in quality assurance efforts” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The predetermined criteria included (a) leading a district as a public-school superintendent in Texas during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years; (b) serving a public-school district ranging from 2A to 6A; and (c) participants of mixed age, experience, gender, and race. All superintendents faced the need to make decisions during a time of crisis that ultimately affected their students, staff, and community. Thus, using criterion sampling was the key “to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information-rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). I chose to use a broad range of criteria for participants because all superintendents experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and I wanted to eliminate the possibility of potentially limiting the number of individuals available to participate. The goal was to have a diverse sample of participants while keeping in mind the level of difficulty I might have encountered in finding superintendents who had the time to participate in this study.

With the predetermined criteria in mind, I used my networks as a school leader in Central Texas to find district leaders who were willing to participate in this study. I asked my current district superintendent, professors from my superintendency courses, and

professors of the Texas State PhD program to help in the recruitment process. During the three Texas State University superintendency courses I took in 2019 and 2020, I was introduced to at least seven superintendents who were guest speakers for our classes. Also, while attending the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) conference 2 years ago, I took advantage of being in the same location with multiple superintendents in attendance for the conference and networked. Being in a leadership role for the past 10 years has also afforded me the opportunity to meet and form relationships with many district leaders. Acquiring a list of superintendents from the TEA website was also beneficial.

Along with criterion sampling, I used the purposeful sampling strategy of snowball sampling. Initially, a recruitment email was sent to several superintendents, though only two responded and were eager to participate in my study. After accumulating my first few participants, I used the snowball sampling approach to find more participants. This approach included asking participants, as well as colleagues and friend, if they had a relationship with other superintendents who met the criteria for this study, asking for recommendations of possible participants, and asking participants to link us together.

After I secured consent from the 10 participants who fit the criteria outlined above, I coordinated a time for the interview by email or with their administrative assistant. Due to the restricted living circumstances in the COVID-19 pandemic and both federal and state guidelines on how to stay safe, I set up phone conversations with each participant so we could reach an agreement on how the data would be collected in order for both myself and the participant to feel comfortable, with the option of conducting our

interview by phone, virtually using a platform such as Zoom or Google Meet, or in person. I recorded all interviews after getting permission to conduct the research from each participant.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative interviewing is the technique I used to collect data for this study. This technique allows an interviewer to learn about participants' personal perspective. Interviewers cannot observe certain things such as thoughts or how a person may feel. "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Qualitative interviewing gives the participant the opportunity to share their story, how they felt, and what they were thinking when the interview topic occurred. "It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). To gather as much data as possible, I avoided using dichotomous response questions, and instead asked open-ended questions. If a researcher were to give a survey, they would be limited to only the questions and responses of that survey. With qualitative interviewing, being able to see facial expressions and body language while questioning is helpful. Through qualitative interviewing, I was able to learn about my participants' meaning of the world, culture, intentions, opinions, values, and behavior.

Before each individual interview began, the consent form was reviewed. I reminded participants of the fact that participation in this study was voluntary and then obtained consent. I explained the steps I would be using to conduct, transcribe, and analyze the data. For the purpose of protecting the identities of my participants, I assigned each a pseudonym. "Of the three basic ways to record interview data, the most

common by far is to tape record the interview. This practice ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 109).

The only data collected for this study were data from interviewing. “To get to the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Participants were asked to participate in a 13-question 60- to 90-minute semi-structured audio or video recorded interview. Background and demographic data were obtained for each participant. During interviews, I also took notes on the information that stood out to me. I sent the recording from each interview to a transcription service to be transcribed. Once all interviews were transcribed, I began the data analysis. All interview transcripts, notes, member check feedback, peer review feedback, informed consent forms, and recordings were kept either electronically on my password-encrypted computer or in a locked filing cabinet in my home. These data will be stored for 3 years. All digital data will be stored and encrypted on Dr. Straubhaar’s on-campus computer or office located at ASBS 324 for 3 years.

Risks associated with participating in this qualitative study were unlikely, but I kept in mind the fact that COVID-19 has affected everyone differently. Some of the questions caused participants to relive a sensitive time in their life, and it was possible participants could have felt uncomfortable answering some of the questions. In response to this, I made sure to be clear that this study was voluntary and participants had the opportunity to take a break during their interview, skip a question that made them uncomfortable, or withdraw their participation at any time.

Data Analysis

I used the Moustakas modified van Kaam method of data analysis along with the process of data analysis discussed in the book, *Qualitative Research, A Guide to Design and Implementation*, by Sharan B. Merriam. Moustakas (1994) described the researcher using the approach of transcendental phenomenology as one who

engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naive in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (p. 22)

The steps include epoché, listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application, and constructing a textural description. I began this process by trying to be intentional about recognizing my biases and how they could have influenced my data collection and analysis. Reflecting on my story as a school leader during the pandemic was a strategy I used to address my biases as well as to help me refrain from leading the conversation during the interviews. There were times I wanted to interject and share my story—but I remembered I was the researcher listening to the participant’s story.

I first printed all participants’ transcribed interviews in different colors. I decided to hand-code the data due to my inexperience with using qualitative data analysis software. While reading the transcribed interview, I noted words and phrases in the margin. “Because you are being open to anything possible at this point, this form of coding is often called open coding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). The next step was to review the open coding to create meaning units. “After working through the entire transcript in

this manner, you go back over your marginal notes and comments (codes) and try to group those comments and notes that seem to go together” (Merriam, 2009, p. 179). This process is called axial coding. After categorizing the open codes, meaning units were formed. I was able to categorize the open codes by cutting out the transcription and then sorting them. After categories were sorted, four themes were created. Due to printing each transcription in a different color, I was able to determine which code was provided by participants. The process of data analysis discussed in the book *Qualitative Research, A Guide to Design and Implementation* by Sharan B. Merriam (2009) was my primary reference point when coding but due to conducting a phenomenological study, I adapted this learned way of coding to the Moustakas (1994) phenomenological way of coding data as well.

Researcher’s Role

As the primary instrument used to conduct the research, I needed to be cognizant of my biases. My experience leading a campus during the COVID-19 pandemic caused me to construct my own meaning of what I experienced. In the Moustakas modified van Kaam method of analysis, the first step of data analysis is epoché.

Prior to interviewing those who have had direct experience with the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. (Merriam, 2009, p. 25)

This is in large part what I did in Chapter I when I retold the story of my own experience as an administrator during COVID-19 at length.

Strategies I used to aid in the credibility of my data included member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, and peer reviews. Via member checks, I asked some participants for feedback on my preliminary analysis. This aided in ensuring there

were no misunderstandings of the data collected. The use of adequate engagement in data collection helped me determine whether I had collected enough data or if more interviews needed to be conducted with participants.

The best rule of thumb is that the data and emerging findings must feel saturated: that is, you begin to see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces as you collect more data. (Merriam, 2009, p. 219)

By the eighth interview, I began to hear the same data over and over again. Along with these two strategies, I used peer reviews of the interview questions and raw data after interviewing to help ensure validity and credibility.

Limitations

Due to restrictions caused by COVID-19, I was not able to follow the typical procedures used when collecting data. Challenges occurred related to virtually conducting research instead of in person. Also, as superintendents are extremely busy with leading during uncertain times, scheduling was at times a problem. Although I used the networks I had already formed, I was unable to network at conferences as usual due to social distancing guidelines and conferences being held virtually and in-person simultaneously.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the processes I used during this qualitative study. Public-school superintendents have experienced a phenomenon first-hand that I then researched. I determined, given my own epistemological position and other contextual factors, that interviewing the participants was the best way to collect data to gain an in-depth understanding of each superintendent's lived experience during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the limitations I faced, the research and data I collected begin to address

the gap in the literature related to school superintendents leading during crises. In the following chapters, I present the findings from my study.

IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In this chapter, I provide an overview of each participant and the themes I discovered when analyzing their experiences using the interview data collected. According to the TEA (2021) Public Open Data Site, in 2020–2021, there were 1,019 public-school districts in the State of Texas. From those public-school districts, I interviewed 10 superintendents for this study. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. As stated in a previous chapter, my goal was to interview a diverse group of superintendents serving in different sized Texas public-school districts, superintendents with a variety of years of experience, male and female superintendents wp, as well as superintendents of different ethnicities. This goal was achieved.

The interviews allowed participants to share their experiences as a superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were similarities and differences across the board in how participants led during the pandemic compared to how they led before the pandemic began. There were also similarities and differences when comparing the experiences of the 10 superintendents. From the 13 questions asked, a deeper insight into each superintendent’s story was obtained, and in this chapter, I present those findings.

Participant Profiles

Pseudonyms were used in place of each superintendent’s name to protect the identity of each superintendent. Among the 10 participants, four were female and six were male. During the pandemic, participants led districts that ranged in size from 2A to 6A. A district’s size/classification is determined by student population. Five participants were White, one was African American, and four were Hispanic. I wanted to have a diverse sample of participants while keeping in mind that

there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. (Patton, 2002, p. 244)

In terms of gender, race, and size of district, there was a good mixture of representation of Texas superintendents among my participants. Participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	District size during the crisis
John	Male	White	6A
Sally	Female	White	4A
Maria	Female	Hispanic	5A
Jamal	Male	African American	4A
Joe	Male	Hispanic	6A
Daniel	Male	White	4A
Veronica	Female	Hispanic	5A
Greg	Male	White	3A
William	Male	White	3A
Rose	Female	Hispanic	2A

Nine of the 10 superintendents interviewed served as a superintendent for the same district during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. In conducting the semi-structured interviews, as the researcher, I was able to gather more data and not be limited by the use of highly structured or standardized interviews. Flexibility enabled the interviews to flow and participants to elaborate on their experience. Patton (2002) stated, “In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if

the cases are information rich” (p. 244). This was true to my experience in conducting this study.

Superintendent John

John was the first participant I interviewed. We were connected through a mutual friend. John is the superintendent of a 6A district and has over 30 years of experience as an educator with over half of those years as a superintendent. He has experienced leading districts ranging from 3A up to 6A and began serving as the superintendent of his current district a year before the COVID-19 pandemic began. John was a coach and teacher early on in his career. He was encouraged by his principal at the time to move into administration, as his principal knew what type of impact John could have within his community.

John moved forward and became an assistant principal and then an elementary principal. In a short period of time, he was asked by his superintendent to become the high school principal, and then once again was approached by his superintendent to become an assistant superintendent. John explained his philosophy of leadership as follows: “Putting in great systems, taking care of people, and have the best interest of all students at heart and value all people.” John expressed how he wanted to be a good superintendent, so he knew early on having extensive experience working in PK–12 would be beneficial.

Similar to most of the superintendents I interviewed, COVID-19 was not the first time John experienced a crisis:

I’ve been doing this a long time and I’ve dealt with a lot of different crises, so to speak, over the years. So, I went through Hurricane Ike, I’ve gone through Hurricane Rita, went through the swine flu, the bird flu, I mean, you name it, I’ve

been through it. The difference between those types of pandemics and this is they had an ending point.

Although we continue to feel the effects of COVID-19 in education, John is dedicated to leading his district through the many challenges his school district currently faces.

Superintendent Sally

Sally and I were introduced through a mutual friend, who described Sally as one of the sweetest people you will ever meet. Well, I agree! Even though the interview was our first time meeting each other, Sally was very personable and easy to talk to. Sally serves as the superintendent of a 4A district. Her story is unique due to the fact that she has almost 4 decades of experience as an educator and the majority of those years have been within the district she leads. She made history in being named the first female superintendent of her district and she has a plethora of experience ranging from teaching, to running an alternative campus, to leading as an assistant superintendent, to now leading as a superintendent. She started in her current role before the pandemic began.

Sally has been committed and loyal to her district for a number of years. She was in a leadership role when her district was affected by a crisis that made national news. As she reflected on the more recent COVID-19 crisis, she said, “I would say the hardest thing about COVID was I’m a planner. And one of the hardest things with COVID is we didn’t know what the end goal was.” When I interviewed Sally, she was not only still dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19, but also the more recent Uvalde school shooting that occurred in May of 2022 at Robb Elementary as she prepared for the return of her students in Fall of 2022. At the time of our interview, she was feeling particularly mindful of how her students within her district may feel with regard to their safety.

Superintendent Maria

Maria and I have known each other for quite some time and she has always been supportive of my endeavors. I admire her and I am reminded when I look at all of her accomplishments that anything is possible. Like most of the participants in this study, Maria had people in her personal and professional life who encouraged and mentored her:

I had some really great mentors as a high school student who encouraged me and that's how I ended up teaching. And then once I got into teaching, I continued to have good mentors who encouraged me, you know, to pursue my master's and eventually get into administration.

Maria then went on to state, "And so I think when you have that encouragement, it just, you know, inspires you to do more." Maria became the first Latino superintendent of her then 5A district that she continues to lead. She has experience in a variety of leadership roles as well as elementary and high school experience. With 40 years of experience as an educator, Maria has witnessed a lot during her time. She still leans on her dad for personal support.

At the time of our interview, Maria felt concerned about the future of public education:

I think the pandemic revealed many of our strengths that we have just as human beings who are in this profession for the good of our kids. But I think it also revealed some severe antiquated ways of educating kids that are not going to work anymore.

With teacher shortages on the rise, Maria and her leadership team continue to find ways to adapt to the new norm of education while leading an innovative district.

Superintendent Jamal

Superintendent Jamal was one of the first participants to respond to my email seeking participation for my dissertation. There was no connection, just an interest in my topic and his desire to play a role in my study. Jamal grew up in a small town and was

raised by his grandmother, who was also an educator. Jamal knew at an early age that he wanted to become a teacher. With a degree in education under his belt from a historically Black university, he began his teaching career. After years of teaching and then leading a campus, he soon realized he “wanted to do something broader than just the principalship.” He also knew that continuously growing in the area of curriculum and instruction would set him apart from other school or district leaders, so he began to apply for district-level leadership positions. With the experience gained from those district-level positions, along with his mentor who intentionally prepared him to become a superintendent, Jamal earned his first superintendency in a 4A district. Similar to Sally and Maria, Jamal also made history. He was the first Black superintendent in the county where his district resides. Little did he know that when he took that position, he would lead his district through a pandemic.

Although we have never faced a crisis such as this in our lifetime, this was not the first crisis Jamal faced as a district leader. With the crisis created by natural disasters in his district, he already had experience in managing in times of crisis. He was on the ground leading his district through one crisis after the next. As he mentioned, “The silver lining was that the community got to see me roll up my sleeves and do work. And I will tell you, that actually solidified my longevity.” With the sequence of natural disasters that occurred in his district, Jamal’s leadership during those critical events proved he had his community’s best interests in mind. He was able to gain the trust of his community from those previous crises and successfully lead his district through the critical years of the pandemic.

Superintendent Joe

Joe was another superintendent recruited via email. He was one of the many superintendents who spoke in one of my three superintendency courses at Texas State University, and I was interested in hearing more of his story as a superintendent and his story of leading during a pandemic. He has been the superintendent of a 6A district and he has 30 years of experience as an educator. One unique fact about Joe's story is that he did not graduate from college with the intent of being an educator. The idea came from his wife at the time as a result of conversations held regarding the work ethic of students at his place of employment. After some thought, Joe decided to enroll in an alternative certification program and begin the steps needed to become a teacher.

Joe is another superintendent who was noticed while teaching and encouraged to become an administrator. "There were leaders who saw more in me than I saw in myself." The potential was there, and Joe ended up becoming known as a turnaround administrator. He worked at the secondary level and in alternative education. Despite his strong background, Joe was reminded as we talked that it was a hard journey to become a superintendent. Despite being turned down for one position after the next, he persevered and his grit along with hard work in the end paid off.

Joe had also experienced a crisis prior to COVID-19 that was caused by a natural disaster in his area. He mentioned,

We dealt with tropical storms and hurricanes. I had to ride my bicycle in the flooding to check on campuses. I had some experience with natural disasters and what to look for. I wasn't prepared for this kind of pandemic.

Joe and his team felt prepared during the crisis from an instructional standpoint and like all districts, they worked as a team to battle the challenges for which they felt unprepared.

Through it all, he maintained focus on his students. His goal is to always do what is best for both his students and teachers, but students are his number one priority.

Superintendent Daniel

Daniel and I have known each other for almost 10 years. I was aware of some of Daniel's experiences that led to him becoming a superintendent, but the first question during our interview afforded me the opportunity to become even more knowledgeable of his previous experience. Daniel knew he wanted to be a superintendent when he was a little boy:

I wanted to teach, I wanted to be a principal and I wanted to be a superintendent. So, you know, at a very young age, I didn't even know what that meant. I didn't know what a superintendent was and what it meant, but that was the goal.

Daniel stayed on the path to becoming a superintendent by gaining experience at the elementary and secondary levels as well as working in the central office. He mentioned how he truly enjoyed every position he held leading up to becoming a superintendent. He deliberately took the time to make a difference within the districts he served. All roles he held prepared him for district leadership.

During the pandemic, Daniel was leading his 4A district. This is Daniel's second district to lead as a superintendent. In his previous positions, he had experienced crises caused by Hurricane Ike, Hurricane Katrina, suicide, and murder. As he mentioned, he "dealt with all kinds of what we would consider the normal crisis. . . . Looking back, all those things bring you together as leaders and teams and COVID was no different."

Daniel is a district leader who is visible and involved within his community. During the years affected by COVID-19, Daniel not only collaborated with his leadership team and board of trustees, he also brought in the community. The community was able to be heard and provide input into the decisions he and his team made. His community

had a voice. Feedback from his board, staff, and community included him having strong communication, not wavering from decisions made, and collaborating with all stakeholders.

Superintendent Veronica

Veronica was the superintendent of a 5A district for 10 years and in education for over 30 years. Her experience was in elementary, middle school, high school, and human resources departments. She also served as an assistant superintendent. Like a couple of the other participants, she shared her story with my superintendency class at Texas State University. Veronica mentioned how she was inspired by her professors after hearing about their experiences in administration. She was able to use the experiences they shared to help in determining the path she needed to take to pursue her goals.

Before and during the pandemic, Veronica's district experienced the death of three beloved students:

You know just those kinds of tragedies, you know, those are hard. They're never easy. We've been through it before, very different than a pandemic for sure because it feels like more of a snapshot in time and you don't want to ever forget those moments, but you addressed it and then it's behind you. It's like it happened and we've addressed it, but then this pandemic seems to be never ending.

As Veronica reflected on the tragedies experienced previously as well as leading her district through a pandemic, one idea she noticed was that "I think pre-pandemic, we take for granted, you know, what I think certainly what we thought was hard before, seems very pales in comparison to what hard really can be."

Veronica gained a plethora of knowledge and experience in the different roles she pursued while in education. The 2021–2022 school year was her last year as a superintendent. After serving her district for a decade, she said the relationships she built

and her leadership will be missed. Veronica retired and will now transition into the next chapter of her life.

Superintendent Greg

There are probably only a few superintendents who can say they lead the district they grew up in, and Greg is one of those few. Greg graduated from his district, and after completing college he became a teacher. He served in various roles, including teacher, athletic director, and dean of students, and worked in both private and public schools. All of his experience prepared him to lead the 3A district that he now has worked in for a little over 20 years, with more than 10 of those years serving as the superintendent. This is the only district he has ever served. This upcoming school year he will be tied in years of service with the longest serving tenured previous district superintendent.

Greg proved his worth as an administrator. When the superintendent position became available, the board of trustees knew Greg would be the best fit for the job, and he has made efforts to show he is loyal and committed to the district. The lifespan of a superintendent does not typically last that long, but Greg enjoys leading his community. He serves a 3A district that is steadily growing: “We’re growing about 10% a year. We’re going to get 250 houses.” A bond was approved a couple of years before the pandemic began:

We built our schools before COVID hit. And so that we were fortunate cuz we had just passed the bond and we had already built our schools. So when COVID hit, I had a brand new high school and a brand new elementary. We had bigger schools and more space.

Although Greg faced crises while leading his district due to natural disasters and the pandemic, he has been faithful to his district for over 10 years. Greg plans to continue as the superintendent of the town he grew up in for a couple more years before retiring.

Superintendent William

William reached out to me via email offering his time for an interview and I am very grateful. His email to me was in response to outreach from my professor, Dr. Aidman, who reached out to several superintendents on my behalf. William had served as a high school teacher and coach as well as high school and district administrator. William was encouraged to become a superintendent by his dad, who was also a superintendent. He was not sold on the idea until after he asked for advice from another superintendent, because he truly enjoyed coaching. William remembered the advice given: “You either want to be a leader of kids or you want to be leader of leaders of kids.” At that moment, he realized he wanted to work with adults and lead leaders. He soon began to shift toward becoming an administrator.

At the onset of the pandemic, William was the superintendent of a 3A district. He was then recruited by a search firm for a 6A district, which he began leading in 2021. One crisis he experienced was a school threat that tremendously affected attendance. He witnessed then the effects a crisis can have on a campus and district. William is a leader who collaborates, leans on others, and understands the importance of delegating. During the pandemic, he was vulnerable and did not mind asking for help: “The ones that were trying to do it all and micromanage are the ones that just crumbled. You don’t know it all. You don’t have all the answers.” William understands that allowing others to lead provides them the opportunity to build their leadership skills. He trusts the members of his team to get the job done.

Superintendent Rose

Rose is in her first superintendency at a 2A district. She was a teacher, an administrator for over 20 years, and also worked in a central office. Before becoming a superintendent, Rose began working toward a PhD. At the time, she considered going into academia as her next step, but then, the unexpected happened. Rose was approached by a former boss to become the superintendent of her small district. This former boss told Rose she was a good fit for the district, and it would be a great next step in her career. Rose listened and applied for the opening. She soon became the superintendent and then shortly after, graduated with a PhD. When Rose came to visit one of my superintendency classes and told my classmates and I about being approached to lead a district while she was still a doctoral student, I knew then I wanted to learn more about her path to superintendency, as I was in a similar position and hoped to follow a similar trajectory.

Rose had not really experienced a prior crisis as did some of the other participants. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her team of four collaborated and used the information provided from the daily commissioner calls to make decisions. Rose's leadership produced positive outcomes and results even in the midst of a pandemic:

I'm at the point to where we're starting to see things, you know, real change and you see the impact on the kids, you know, where kids are being successful in academics, in athletics, and FFA, everything they're doing, our kids are excelling. We're celebrating left and right. I love it. I knew this could happen.

Rose was the last superintendent I interviewed, and I look forward to staying in touch and watching how she leads her district in the future.

Themes

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: the unforeseen, emotional state, team alignment, and comparing pre-pandemic and pandemic leadership. I decided to list the four themes in this order based on the sequence of what participants experienced. First, the unexpectedness of COVID-19 brought about many unforeseen challenges and changes for superintendents. Then, everyone's emotional state was affected by all of the abrupt changes created by the pandemic. For superintendents to navigate through the pandemic, they had to make decisions with their teams and have team alignment in order to have alignment within the district. Last, superintendents had to pull from their pre-pandemic experiences and move forward in leading during a pandemic. After interviewing all 10 superintendents, I transcribed the interview recordings and printed the transcriptions. As I analyzed the transcriptions, I noticed the presence of my own biases related to my personal experience of being an administrator during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I noticed during the first interview my eagerness to add to John's thoughts. After that first interview, I tried to be mindful during each subsequent interview not to add to or lead the conversation in a direction that mirrored my experience or thoughts, but rather to let the interviewee lead.

As I continued my analysis, I found significant themes around repeated words and phrases. While highlighting the significant words and phrases, I began to notice meaning units that stood out from these words and phrases. Once grouped together, meaning units were formed and, from there, themes were created. I explore each of these in turn below. I have added an additional section at the end, as the mass shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde happened in the midst of my interviews and naturally the participants

began to make connections between that event and their larger work regarding COVID-19 and school safety. Participants' thoughts and feelings regarding how they responded to Uvalde are included in that section, followed by a summary of the larger findings presented throughout this chapter.

Overarching Theme 1: The Unforeseen

The meaning units included in this theme were technology, safety protocol, and COVID-19 influenced new normal (which serve as subheadings throughout this section). Many unexpected events and situations occurred in schools due to COVID-19. During the interviews, the leaders reflected on action steps that were needed immediately after the onset of the pandemic. The data for this theme primarily came from participants' responses to the following interview questions:

- How did you and your leadership team regularly communicate and come to a common understanding of the action steps everyone would implement during the crisis?
- What operating mechanisms were used?
- During the crisis experienced, what were the key steps included in your action plan as a district leader?

Technology. Once the effects of the pandemic reached Central Texas, overnight school leaders began preparing to provide instruction asynchronously. Superintendents went into crisis mode and reacted to the sudden changes immediately by creating plans, such as providing students with hotspots for internet access and electronic devices. Some districts were more advanced with regard to the fact that they had previously implemented policies that gave all students (or in some cases, only secondary students) a

district-provided device, whereas others provided students with worksheet packets to work on at home.

Now was the time when all students had to transition to learning from home virtually. Jamal remembered feeling prepared during this transition: “We were prepared from an infrastructure perspective.” Earlier during his tenure, Jamal noticed secondary students riding on the school bus for an extended period of time while traveling to athletic events. He wanted students to have the tools they needed to do their schoolwork while riding on the bus:

See, the reason we wanted every kid to have a hotspot was for that purpose. Every bus had a hotspot on it because we had kids who were traveling 45 miles, 45 minutes on the bus every day. So, we were thinking along those lines, which set us up for success when the pandemic hit. So, I felt like we were prepared from that perspective. Where we were not prepared, was capacity in our teachers.

William’s district was also prepared for the most part and able to experience a smooth transition of all students having to learn from home:

We had enough laptops or Chromebooks actually that anybody, anybody that wanted one could come get one. And so, we did a pass out campaign. We ordered some hotspots. We jumped on it pretty quick, and we were able to get some, so anybody that needed one, we gave them that accessibility.

Similar to Jamal and William, Joe’s district was ahead of the game when it came to the use of technology:

Well, honestly, I felt really prepared in the sense from the instruction standpoint. We had gone one-to-one sixth through 12th 2 years before the pandemic. So all of our kids already had devices. We were moving that year to go one-to-one with elementary. So we had already began the purchase of the equipment. We had a learning management system 2 years before the pandemic. So I was pretty confident that, you know, we had systems. Now, wasn’t confident that we had trained our teachers how to do that from home.

Meetings moved to solely being held with Google Meet, Zoom, or a similar platform because mandates were set and no one in Texas was allowed to return to

campus. As William thought about the circumstances back in March of 2020, he remembered feeling as if his district was prepared because of their Google initiative. As he mentioned,

One of the things that we had done, we were very lucky that we had done a Google Certification initiative. So we had begun the entire year on training our teachers to use Google Docs, Google Sheets, and really moving things towards Google Classroom as much as possible. So when it hit that transition was just real. It was like, it was like we had, we got a whole lot of kudos from our community, that you guys almost predicted this you're prepared for that. So classrooms over the Spring Break period and kind of the next week set it up, we were ready. We were ready for that. We were unprepared on trying to continue to build relationships with kids.

Safety Protocol. Safety in schools has always been a priority, but COVID-19 forced district leaders to rethink their safety protocol once school shutdowns ceased.

Maria shared her thoughts as follows:

I took the lead with the safety plan. The goal was safety in a global sense, but it was also a goal for safety around social, emotional need. The direction that the state would give and the Texas Education Agency sometimes differed from the direction of our county office and the department of health and safety. So we were constantly having to find some middle ground with those pieces. We provided devices. We provided hotspots. We hired additional counselors to keep in contact with the kids, especially the high-needs kids. So, I think I'm really proud of the team for the slices of the work that everybody embraced. They filled in. So I think our overall goal was safety.

Daniel similarly led by focusing on immediate needs, in his case health and safety:

“Safety was first and foremost, right? We got to keep everybody healthy.”

As mentioned by the participants, the TEA provided guidelines to all districts. District leaders used those guidelines as well as information from their county health department, the Texas Commission on Health and Human Services, and the CDC to make decisions that were best for their district. John said,

So we used the guidelines from TEA and then you know I had a weekly call with the commissioner of ed, all the superintendents did. So we had the safety component which while we were shut down, nobody was in the building anyway

so that wasn't problematic. But then when we started doing a hybrid model after we were cleared to come back, we had all the social distancing. We had foggers and the chemicals. And we had to make sure that everything was sanitized properly. We had to make sure that we had masks in place at every campus and in the department, we had to have new protocol for who would be allowed to visit campus and who would not. And then of course we had the learning plan and then we had to market all that through our communications office. So I think those are the key steps that we had to consider moving forward.

John continued to list the steps taken by his district:

We drafted letters with all the different safety plans. We had a COVID button on our website that basically would identify everything. We made YouTube videos so that people could actually see the type of equipment and chemicals and practices that we would have. We tried to detail everything and give them all the information that we had. We had to be transparent as possible.

One major component of everyone's safety plan was information regarding when and how long to quarantine if someone were to test positive or come in close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19. Even with superintendents taking additional steps to provide transparency of their district safety protocol, they faced the challenge of having district members as well as community members not following the safety protocol. Rose said,

It was hard. It was very, very hard. And you know sometimes having to convince a community member or board member that everything was fine and you know you've just heard all these different things of all these different people who had it and are not quarantining. And it became like at one point I said okay guys we need to stop. We are not the quarantine police. We're going to follow our policy. And if we have knowledge that someone's not following our policy, we just document that. We tell them what needs to be done. And in some cases, we had to tell some parents, they cannot come, they cannot school here. And there's still some that are questioning because they think we overreacted with the virus. They think that this whole quarantine thing was just ridiculous. And I didn't respond to that. I didn't react to that because for me it was like, we're not talking about this, TEA's telling us this and it is what we have to do. So it was very difficult.

COVID-19 Influenced New Normal. The urgency of creating a safety protocol (as well as making sure it was being followed by all stakeholders) was just the beginning of a plethora of circumstances superintendents would have to face during the COVID-19

pandemic. Little did they know that mandates, guidelines for asynchronous versus synchronous learning, and politics around masking and vaccines would all become hotly contested areas of debate in their districts. These unexpected circumstances initiated the idea that COVID-19 influenced a new normal. Daniel shared the following:

It's interesting. So when COVID first started, you know, Central Texas wasn't really affected by it so right. So when you think of your experience we're like, alright, you know, we're watching COVID on the news, but it really doesn't affect us. Well, then they shut us down and you know, there was a lot of lack of understanding of why right? So you know but you go along with it because it's new and you know it's the right thing to do. But I was blown away that the first spring when we were shut down, because everyone mobilized. Whether it was to get a device in every student's hand, whether it was to get a meal. You just think of the amount of meals you prepped. And then, we started to have those teacher parades so that kids could see their teacher and vice versa.

There were so many new ways of learning and living day to day that had to be made because of the pandemic. Daniel went on to say,

So if you remember that year, so that was the Fall of 2020, most districts were starting remote. Some districts were doing like a blended. And so, that's what we did. We gave parents a choice and said, Hey, if you're not comfortable coming to school, you want remote, we're going to have a remote platform for you. If you want to come in person, you know, you're going to have that option, too. Keep in mind, we were all running blind. We were all running blind because I mean, we knew what the experts said, but we really didn't know. And then people started arguing over what's right and what's wrong.

Around this time frame, gears shifted as some allowances that had been made in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19 disappeared with time. John shared that,

All of sudden, the politicians jumped on that and everybody was giving grace until they decided that they didn't want to anymore. We started off and everybody was saying how great teachers were because they were able to move from in person to virtual overnight and parents got to see and meet virtually these teachers. And they got to see how good people they were and so from there formed a bond and everything was great until it wasn't. That was about a year later and then public education has been vilified ever since.

Daniel's comments were similar: "You know, COVID wore on people's patience. So then the next year comes around and we get into the 'we're not wearing masks.'"

Veronica also remembered how opinions quickly changed with regard to education:

When we shut down schools in 2020, I think people realized the importance of schools and the impact we have on kids and families, and people started celebrating our teachers and our administrators and recognized. It was just like this finally, in all my years of education, I hadn't really felt that love that we did in 2020 when we had to shut our schools. Well even in 2020, 2021, when we had options for how to deliver instruction and families had choices, you could stay at home or come to school, we had to set up these different mechanisms or ways for families to determine how they were gonna access school. And we created the two pathways, the two options. And again, a lot of praise, a lot of support from parents and community for how we handled that. Well, 2021, 2022, it turned on a dime.

Greg also shared some of the same sentiments:

Common sense had gone out the window. It's not our job to be political. And so that's where it's so funny, is COVID became a political issue and it shouldn't have been, it's a medical issue. There was that political nastiness all around it. People get like Facebook warriors when they get on Facebook because they're behind a keyboard and they think, oh, I can say whatever the hell I want to say. But you really can't and you shouldn't.

Joe shared similar sentiments:

This was really the first time that as a superintendent, I think we all knew we were gonna be 50% right and 50% wrong. In some communities 20% right and 80% wrong depending on how conservative that community is. I just accepted that anything I said was gonna be critiqued by 50 % of the community.

Superintendents did the best they could with the information and resources they had. Despite not knowing if they were making the right decision or not, they continued to do what they felt was best (and was needed) for their students and community. Veronica put it this way:

When a crisis happens, who does the legislator pass the work on to? Us, and it's been par for the course. Once upon a time education was meant for teaching and learning. Well, we became the child nutrition experts. We became the medical experts. We take care of their physical needs, you know, counseling, or mental health. We become the wraparound services. So if you think about what's next—school safety. You would think it starts in the home. It really has become, now,

the role of the school to fill that gap. So it was just, it's just been one more thing for us to step in the gap and to lead the effort.

After school shutdowns, virtual learning, safety protocols, and quarantine, vaccines became available for certain age groups. But, most of the students the superintendents served did not fall within this age group. As Veronica recalled,

August 2020, the governor had an executive order that mandated masks and he used his authority under the Texas Disaster Act to do that. Because of COVID and the rising of COVID a year later, we're dealing with the Delta [variant]. Everybody's excited because the vaccines are here and now we're gonna move forward, and we think COVID should be at a minimum or gone—well, that didn't happen because in July, COVID started to increase, and then August happened and we started to see, it was worse than it was the year before. And the governor had in place an executive order that did the exact opposite. Banning mass mandates. When the year before, he did the same thing because of the crisis. So it was like, how can two years be so different? And yet he, you know, leaves it up to the parents. Well, the problem was not everybody had the same access, particularly kids under the age of 12 for the vaccine. The mask mandate was more popular than it wasn't. But the ones that came out in full force were those that were against it.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, school district leaders had to constantly make changes due to the pandemic constantly evolving as new variants of the disease arose, new data were constantly being discovered, and vaccines slowly became available for more and more people. As Sally put it,

We were surprised. It felt like every time we had a plan together, that changed the plan. And it was difficult to lead because the individuals who depend upon you to have the plan, get frustrated when you come back and say, okay, we gotta change the plan. So I would say, that was probably the hardest thing to deal with. And then, of course the emotions that go with it and the people being afraid, the political differences that came about through the whole experience, the polarization of individuals who agree or disagree with masks or agree or disagree with coming to school or agree or disagree with online learning. There were masses of individuals who were disagreeing with procedures and policies. And basically, putting their foot down like, you can't make me do this. And trying to find the patience to walk through. Okay, how do we answer this? How do we do this? I don't think as a community of educators we had seen so much of that. So finding patience, instead of just getting mad, and saying, look, I told you to do this, this is what we're saying. The health department told us we had to do this. The commissioner said we have to do this. Whatever the directive was given, that we

were passing on or what we believed in as individuals, whether we, or individuals who believed in a vaccine or we were believed we really needed to wear masks or we really didn't need to be coming back. You know, there were individuals like, I'm not bringing my kids back. All of those things were emotional. So you had to stay patient and work through conversations that were difficult.

As John noted, it felt at times as though there was no way to satisfy the different stakeholders involved: "No matter what we did, we weren't gonna make either extreme happy. So we tried to focus on what we could control and what we thought was going to be best for kids and it really paid off."

COVID-19 triggered a variety of effects on schooling. It put more pressure on educators to think outside of the box and to immediately adjust their teaching style without the proper training. In Texas, the substitute teacher shortage, combined with a wave of educators leaving the profession, made staffing more difficult. COVID-19 has also sparked the conversation on how schooling needs to be more innovative. William mentioned some of these effects on schooling during his interview:

So a lot of lessons learned and a lot of realization that this has really shined the light on. You're not going to make everybody happy. I think for me, that's what we really settled on, because it's just been so contentious for either it's a hoax, to it's going to kill everybody. Then, you've got all the stuff in the middle on there. So I think the biggest experience has been tough. It's been difficult and it's been a challenge on morale, and it's really challenged the whole route of public education. So I'm sure you've kind of watched a bunch of superintendents have left the job. Teachers are leaving the job. It's been a unique kind of flashback, because when the pandemic hit during that Spring Break time and everybody went home, all of a sudden, we were heroes across the nation, because parents were having to educate. And now we kind of get in trouble because we're not doing enough or we're behind or we got this learning lag or learning loss, whichever way anybody wants to say it and what are we going to do? It's just put so much pressure on the system that we've got right now. Give us some grace. We're really good in public education about doing the same thing over and over year after year. And that one thing has taught us to adapt and adjust like okay, well this didn't work. We gotta shift gears right now. And that is what spring boarded into a lot of things we're doing right now, that has opened up the ability to kind of put down traditions and old ways of thinking that has helped out a whole lot. It's just growth.

Another outcome due to the pandemic was the unforeseen effect on mental health.

Jamal stated,

I don't know that we were really prepared for the mental health needs of our community . . . We saw mental health challenges from people not interacting with each other every day, from students being isolated in their homes to students not being able to engage in whatever hooks them to school. Be it baseball, softball, cheer, whatever. We were also dealing with the mental health of our staff, then the stress of trying to figure out how to engage kids every day, how to keep them in for daily attendance, which you know you weren't going to get funding if you didn't get the daily attendance. All those pieces. But then, both students and adults were dealing with the loss of family members. I don't know that we even said the word mental health prior to COVID. We weren't ready.

Daniel shared similar experiences, both those he had personally and what he heard from his staff:

As a teacher, how hard is it when, 22 kids in my class, three are out for 2 weeks with COVID and then another three are out. Then another three are out and then I'm out? So it was all hands on deck and I'm really proud of my staff for stepping up. But that wore on everybody too, right. When you're covering every day and in education, we like consistency, and that January early February was anything but consistent. And so you got to do a really good job of taking care of your staff probably more than ever before. We always talk about student mental health student needs, but our staff had more real needs than they've ever had before. So doing things to take care of your staff was critical during COVID.

John was able to hear from his student panel the effects COVID-19 was having on some students:

I have a superintendent student superintendent advisory panel, and kids that I've known for 4 years that have been on my panel were telling me kids that have never had any mental health problems are having mental health problems because they didn't get to engage with their peers or with their teacher. I mean, even though they logged in on Zoom and if they were one of 25, like in a high school class, they may not even get to say anything. Or they may not, they may not be recognized. So that's true. I think they really missed out on that and, and I think that's why it's so important that we have in-person learning. For us right now, this is very helpful. We don't have to travel and it fits in our time sequence. It doesn't work for a kid that's still developing and that needs that social interaction.

Overarching Theme 2: Emotional State

As I analyzed my data, the second overarching theme that arose was the degree to which participants talked about their feelings. These emotions were triggered by the uncertainties these leaders faced at the onset of the pandemic. These uncertainties were a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was unlike any other crisis my participants had experienced in years past. With these emotions, participating leaders expressed the different thoughts they began to have while facing the COVID-19 crisis. Ultimately, the lack of experience for what they were about to face was a concern. This was a crisis no one in our lifetime had experienced before. Participating superintendents said their main priority was to keep their students, families of their students, district employees, and all stakeholders in mind during decision making—the goal was to keep their students and district employees safe.

In this overarching theme, the meaning units I noted consisted of emotions, faith, and support. These meaning units serve as organizing subheadings throughout this section.

Emotions. During the middle of March in 2020, superintendents in Central Texas were told students would not return to campus. In the interviews, I asked the superintendents to list three to five of their initial thoughts when they realized their district was going to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Jamal’s initial thought was “fear of failure.” He went on to say,

We were facing a time period that we had never experienced ever before. Right? And, I believe, and I knew, that we were going to get through this. I didn’t know how long it was going to take, but we’re going to get through it. But, there was no script. There was no right answer and no matter how many conversations we had as superintendents, every community was different.

Similar to Jamal, Vanessa tried to maintain a positive outlook regarding this new experience:

So the experience has been, I would say, earth-shattering. I don't know any other word. I mean, it just, I think it shook us all to our core, but it also gave us a sense of what we're capable of in the midst of a crisis. And, I think that's the biggest lesson, and I think it taught us and certainly in terms of my leadership, how to be enormously flexible, like there were, we were constantly changing course. I think it defined a lot of us and our leadership.

Despite superintendents experiencing an abrupt change in what we considered a normal school year, my participants tried to remain optimistic. John saw COVID-19 as an opportunity for growth with regard to our schooling system: "I thought this was a real opportunity to come up with some great solutions right now. And we know that we're not going to be able to continue with the status quo." Daniel also recognized this event as an opportunity to "reinvent ourselves as public education." He went on to say, while keeping in mind all of the crisis he had experienced in the past, "you just transition into crisis mode and you get through it. The problem with this crisis is it never ended."

Even though this crisis was initially received with hope while the superintendents also tried to remain calm, as the superintendents began to elaborate on their initial thoughts, feelings then shifted to questions. Questions such as, "Was staff ready?" "What is the impact going to be?" "What's going to happen?" I appreciated Rose's honesty. Her initial thought was, "Oh fuck!" We both laughed after her comment. Her first comment was then followed by a plethora of questions: "How are we going to do this? Where do I even start? How are we gonna have all these kids in the building? How is my community going to deal with this? How do I take care of me?" All sorts of questions began to arise for these leaders just like they did with Rose, and they all knew they had to come up with a plan in a short amount of time. But they realized leading their district pre-COVID-19

was not going to be the same as leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. Joe stated, “I will say this: leading pre-COVID was completely different than during COVID in the sense for me, this was the first time ever that decisions I made potentially could kill children and staff members.”

As can be seen in these responses, there was a lot of anxiety and fear when COVID first hit. Joe stated:

We didn't know what we were dealing with as educators and administrators. We knew we didn't have vaccines or any treatment at the time for this. This was the first time that I was like man, am I potentially putting a staff member at risk of dying? How as a leader am I gonna accept that?

Faith. Through it all, it was interesting to note that religious faith, along with professional and personal support, helped the participating superintendents lead their districts through this laborious time. When asked to describe their professional and personal support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic and how those support systems were helpful or needed, Jamal shared how supportive his wife was, his superintendent group of peers and friends, and also how prayer helped him get through this difficult time. What was interesting that he shared included, “We had members of our team who would facilitate optional opportunities for our staff to pray together. Those moments were also important for holding a team together at a time where it was very stressful.” Greg acknowledged that he personally believed that God looked after him and his district. John shared with me that he is also a faith-based person. In this way, religious faith emerged as a theme within the data, a source of personal and emotional resilience for a number of participants.

Support. Another trend was having family members who were educators and could relate to participants' experiences. Greg, John, and Joe all have a spouse who is or was an educator. So they were all lucky enough to have someone at home who could relate to what they were dealing with. With regard to his wife, Greg stated, "My support system is my family. It's an advantage having another educator at the house because she gets it." John mentioned,

I've got the best personal support around. She keeps me grounded and because we were both doing the same things exactly, I could bounce all those ideas off her and vice versa. So I think, having her and then being able to exercise and have ways to get rid of stress and relieve stress was huge for me.

Joe shared,

My wife was a former educator. She has 30 years as an educator and so she's not afraid to challenge me. She's even more vocal than I am. So, I think me running things by her about things we discussed allowed her to give me feedback from a parent perspective in a way, she's like, well, you know, she could just honestly tell me, like, "that's not gonna work, Joe. You need to think about this, like not all families have access to this." And so, you know, it was support. I think conflict is a form of support.

All participants noted feeling supported by family members, colleagues, board members, or all of the above. All participants were in a group with other superintendents that met regularly, whether in person or virtually. Some stayed in communication with each other via the GroupMe app. Participants found these superintendent groups to be beneficial because they could bounce ideas off of each other, share resources so they did not have to reinvent the wheel, and constantly have the support they needed as a reminder that they were not alone. Maria reflected on how helpful the 250 female superintendents on GroupMe were:

Early on in the crisis, we had the Trello board for the superintendents. It really helped. People had sample letters, sample communications, sample forms for everything under the sun. So it's just a wealth of resources so that you didn't have to reinvent the wheel.

William had a similar experience receiving support from a group of superintendents:

That was a really big one for us that we just bounced ideas off each other all the time. And what helped with these four districts that came together was that, Hey does anybody have a protocol sheet for what to do when 10% of your kids get COVID? Yeah, I got it. Okay, send it to us. And all of a sudden, we went from one school district working on this to four, working on it collectively together.

Sally expressed how being a member of two different professional support groups was extremely helpful to her:

The other superintendents and having two separate with two different perspectives coming to the table with me. So having one group that was that countywide health kind of group and another one, the other two 4As having some of the similar 4A kind of problems, because I was a 4A in that county group and having the other similar size, similar communities to work with was beneficial in looking at how to address things because I looked to those groups a lot and those conversations were extremely important.

Overarching Theme 3: Team Alignment

This theme arose from repeated comments made by the participants regarding the role their central office and districtwide teams played in helping them make the right decisions during the pandemic. Some of those teams consisted of their immediate executive leadership team, administrative team, board of trustees, and teams of educators and community members. Some teams were more involved than others, but all participants had more than one team helping them make decisions during this crisis.

This theme also includes the characteristics of those teams and what they along with the superintendents needed to provide to their community. I organized this section in the same way as the two preceding sections, using the meaning units I found as subheadings: role of a unified team and the importance of planning.

Role of a Unified Team. Two words used by the participants to describe their teams were trust and unified. Rose provided details with regard to having trust within the team:

We take skills from one situation into another situation and we implement systems and protocols that we've already used elsewhere. We just make it work. Having that trust as a team and that idea of we're all in this together and we're gonna do this. It's all, all of this is all of us. . . . I expected my leaders to come prepared. I expected them to be problem solvers, solution focused. So we, our team became stronger because of it. The trust also increased because you're vulnerable.

Maria expressed the trust that she had for her team:

I had the utmost confidence in our cabinet. That includes, I know I can trust every single member of the executive team and we as an executive team know we can trust our directors. And most importantly, we know we can trust our principals. If we can be cognizant and if we can be strategic about the direction and resources that we give, they're gonna execute, you know? I think that that's one of the things, while it was really unknown territory, I knew we had the right people in place to take care of our kids. I really did.

Not only did Veronica trust her team, she felt strongly that she had the right people by her side. With all of the decisions that needed to be made in a timely manner, it was imperative for all district leaders to have a solid team. In her words, she said:

What did prepare us was just having a strong team to move the work. We'd have daily executive cabinet level meetings. And, and I wanna say like in the early days we were having daily meetings with our principals, too, just to make sure we were all communicating the same thing. Everyone was on the same page. We then went to weekly updates with principals. In fact, that just became a standard that the principals appreciated. We did weekly Zooms once a week, just to have a check-in, how are things, even beyond COVID this year. So things that we weren't necessarily prepared for were some of the rollout of how we're going to do instruction. But I think what prepared us, where we were prepared, was having the right people on staff to move that work forward. To come up with the ideas and then move that, move those ideas forward.

Sally discussed the importance of showing leadership:

Getting the administrative team as a unified group so that we all were able to show leadership in all departments and campuses because we needed to talk things through. We needed to respond to changes that were occurring on a regular basis.

During the interview, after Rose talked about trust and the characteristics of her team, she emphasized the importance of empathizing with her team: "I have built a great team and

we have a great organizational structure now and you know, things every year are better and better because you get to plan and learn from your mistakes.”

The Importance of Planning. Once participants built a sense of empathy and a team mindset with their teams, they pivoted to focusing on planning. Rose stated:

So I tried to keep my opinions out and you know, we were very driven on the tasks. What do we have to do by when? And that’s what we did and whenever there was a misstep, do we need to add something to our plan? So it was a constant, you know, refinish of our back to school plan, our return to learning plan. That first year the focus really was on the health and safety of everybody. We weren’t as concerned or as focused on academics because I felt like I couldn’t be. People were stressed out. Their husbands lost their job or their husband was quarantined and they didn’t have any sick days left and so now their checks were short. There was so many issues that had nothing to do with education that really impacted our work. So as a leader, I felt like I needed to empathize and I needed to see what could I do as a leader to empathize and understand where they’re coming from and still continue with the work. So through the year, that was the goal, literally. To get through the year and to get through it in a safe way. Well, after that we said, okay, we can do this. We’re gonna hit it hard. We’re gonna really focus on instruction and student achievement. We know, we made a lot of gains. It goes back to whatever you focus on gets done, and so that’s exactly what happened. So we’ve made those gains and I feel like we’re getting back to the business of instruction and student learning.

Once school shutdowns began, teams met virtually. Maria said, “So during that time, when we were dealing with the crisis, the executive team met weekly.” Veronica recalled clearly her team’s actions after the pandemic began. They put in long hours to ensure they were fully prepared:

You know, it wasn’t like we could just all go to the office and be around each other. Every day we had meetings and then we would divide and conquer. Who’s doing what and how are we communicating with principals, what needs to be done? We’d literally develop rollout plans for each of the things that we were doing. So if it was planning for our return to learn plan, we were dividing and conquering. One person was handling the virtual education training portion. One was responsible for all of the safety protocols, developing the safety protocols with the team. So they would have their own teams that they put together to develop what would become our return to learn plan. When we’d come back, we’d review it together until we were ready to roll it communicate it out to our families. But it was daily, even on weekends, I have to say, like, there were times when we’d just say, okay, we have to shut it down. We’ve gotta take a moment

because what we found is we were working. I'd get up, I'd get on, I'd be in my robe and start at 6 in the morning, and then I'd throw on this outfit and then work with my staff. And then you don't stop. Right. You don't take breaks. It was like, we need a lunch break, we need a mental break, but that was hard, to shut it down because we felt like there was just so much to be done.

Greg shared similar experiences about how his smaller district team planned together:

Because we're small, it's called a safety and security committee. That is made up of admin team, outside agencies, whether it be me or the police department or whoever. What we did is we took a version of that safety and security team, which was really our admin team, and that was our crisis team. And so that's, that's how we utilized it. And again, I go back to the incident command system and when you're dealing with safety. And so we treated it as a safety incident, in an emergency incident. So we used that whole plan where I was the incident commander, and then I have different officers underneath me that handled their jobs.

All participants had standing meetings with their teams. Not only did they meet with teams regarding academics and safety, but also regarding feeding their community.

As Sally stated,

We had regular meetings and then individual meetings as we went, but that included everybody. The big one included maintenance, that included cafeteria because you know, we were trying to get food out to people and how do we address making sure that everyone in our community was getting food? How do we address technology and everyone was hearing how each of the departments were working together.

Meetings were also held with teachers. Jamal and William shared details about how their teachers were involved in decision making. In Jamal's words:

I organized a design team of teachers. It was 25 teachers. These teachers met with me for 6 days of the summer. We tackled two, really what I call three, three big things. I think that helped me to win over our teachers in a time where they were feeling stressed out. Number one, we dealt with conversations around the health crisis. Alright, here it is. Here's what we have. Here's the situation? How do we do this? If anyone is going to come up with good ideas, you all are the ones who are going to help us come up with the ideas on how to move forward.

For William, this intentional inclusion of his teachers in these meetings yielded really positive results:

When we were able to come back together, we started forming committees to get teachers involved in this because we did not want the decision as administrators. We had to get our teachers involved on what's going on. So we started to meet with our teaching staff and in certain committees. This is the safety and protocols committee. This is the curriculum instruction committee over here. Then, we would meet and we'd kind of bring those two committees together and share with each other.

Several participants felt the difficulty of keeping these meetings intentional and focused when agendas and best practices kept changing. In Jamal's words:

We had a fluid agenda. We had standing items but then we also had items that came up as a result of my weekly meeting with the commissioner. So when, when COVID, and even until now, the commissioner still facilitates meetings with superintendents from across the state, but at the onset of the pandemic, these meetings were happening on a regular basis every Thursday. So every week, the information from TEA was changing. We'd get updated documents, updated plan of action. And so those meetings were centered around, all right here? What do we need to change based on what we know from the TEA call? And then the other meetings were internal operational items. So that's how we communicated.

With all of the changes and uncertainties, districts had to maintain regular communication with all stakeholders. As Daniel shared:

I'd get on Zoom once a week with the entire staff. So the entire district. I basically gave them a district faculty meeting. Hey, here's what's going on. Here's what we're dealing with. I tried to keep it to 15 minutes. It would always be much longer than that. And then anybody in my entire staff could type in a question and I would answer it. And so, like if you wanted to stay for the question and answer, you could. I didn't want anybody to be in the dark. I didn't want anybody to be surprised so they know their systems, also to communicate and get your questions answered as a staff member, too.

Joe similarly began having a regular weekly meeting with his stakeholders. In his words:

I started Zooming with the district. So we would have a weekly Zoom with all district personnel. Everybody, we would invite all 1,200 and typically we'd have about 1,000 attending. Had 12 meetings and mainly it was just to be able to ask questions. We recorded them and they could ask questions in the chat, our cabinet members could respond in the chat so everybody could see it. We could print the transcript and then we would send that to all teachers. We could answer on the spot and everybody could see it. So we were pretty transparent with that board meetings were by Zoom. We met with principals weekly on Zoom.

After setting up regular communication with his staff, Daniel then set up something similar with community members: “I brought the community in, we collaborated, took their input, listened to them.”

Overall, participating superintendents shared that they found they needed to regularly schedule time to listen, communicate, and be mindful of having people in the position that was right for them. As Sally shared, “Listen to your people, whether it be your executive team, your district leadership, or just your employees, your bus drivers and your custodians and everybody else who depends on you.” For Sally, like the other participants mentioned above, this was best enacted through regular weekly meetings:

Key steps would be those weekly meetings. First thing. That way everybody knew what had to be done for the coming time. It allowed us the opportunity to plan, even if the plan was changed. It gave everybody an opportunity to come to the table with concerns, questions, you know, I hate to say it because I don’t wanna seem like I’m saying it over and over again, but communication was key. You had to make sure everybody was on the same page and aligned. I’m a really big believer in respecting others’ opinions, don’t necessarily have to agree with it. But do not expect everyone to agree with you all the time, but instead work together through it. Listen.

For William, it was not just about listening, but also putting people in the right positions:

Also, being able to find the right lanes for people. I know you’re doing curriculum instruction but I kind of need you to, you’re really good and strong and got some savvy to you in curriculum instruction. There’s a time to tell them what to do and a time to ask for feedback.

From this experience, John’s biggest takeaway was to try to get over his own competitive streak and focus on working together as a team for the good of kids. In his words:

I think this really taught us all that this is bigger than us. It’s best for all kids, for our state, our nation, our communities, to share. So I was glad that we could put aside all of our competitive differences cause you know, I’m, like one of the most competitive people in the world, but at the same time, if we’re doing something I don’t mind sharing it with others. I think that was something that I walked away

feeling pretty good about. That we were all in it together and we could all draw from each other's collective wisdom.

Overarching Theme 4: Comparing Pre-Pandemic and Pandemic Leadership

My participants spent a lot of time in our interviews considering how their notions of best practices in leadership had changed from pre-pandemic times to their current leadership styles in the midst of COVID.

For Jamal, the biggest change in his thinking from pre-pandemic times was a sense of the stakes involved and his fear of failure given the life-or-death stakes of the pandemic. In his words:

That fear of failure was constantly on my mind and matter of fact, it was a stress factor for me because I knew I had to, we had to be successful for our students. If not, we were going to have many years and years of academic challenges as a result.

Rose made similar connections, as she felt a steep learning curve regarding how to lead amidst COVID-19. For her, the biggest difference was having to learn so much regarding public health and healthcare:

Vastly different just because you're managing your community. You're also having to manage a virus. We were never in the business of healthcare and quarantining and making policy around health. That's not something that we were trained for at all. There was so many unknowns. My fear is not, am I going to get it? My fear is who is going to get it in my family here at school and will I be able to make decision fast enough to stop it?

For Daniel, his solution was to bring in healthcare workers onto his decision-making teams: "We were calling our parents who were doctors and nurses and healthcare workers, hospital administrator to help make those decisions." Greg suddenly found he had to prepare and have on hand medical materials he had never considered before, and had to train his custodial team on how to use them:

I bought surgical grade HVC lights for every campus. And so to this day, our custodians, they'll clean a room and then they'll bring the light. That's an HVC

light on wheels and what they do at hospitals is they wheel that into the emergency operating room and turn it on and walk out and in 7 minutes the room is completely sterile.

For Joe, this melding of the educational and medical fields, turning schools into frontline medical facilities, was a serious point of frustration:

How in the world did we get to the point where the school is the center, the district is center for everything COVID related? We hosted drive-through COVID testing sites with Texas Department of Emergency Management. At our schools, we did drive-throughs. The first 6 months we did everything. And so there was a point where I would tell my board, we're not everybody. We're not society's solution. We're designed to teach kids how to read and write and, you know, do math. We're not designed to be crisis centers.

For others, the primary concerns were not medical, but instructional. For John, one of the biggest changes was the need to pivot to an all-virtual learning environment:

We went from in-person teaching to all virtual. We had to tweak our learning management system. We had to train teachers on how to use it and offer best practices through virtual education. And then, when the numbers started to get low again and coming back in person, we had to train them again of what it looked like to teach in person before we shut down. It's kind of been one extreme to the other and back again.

For Veronica, one of the biggest changes and challenges was the number of sources of information she had to balance:

From one day to the next, whether it was information coming from the state or information coming from the feds, information coming from our health authority, it was just a constant push pull tug. The most challenging of times certainly in my career. We've undergone challenges before, and we navigate those, but this was different.

For William and Maria, the main concerns and changes that came to mind for them about the pre-pandemic to pandemic switch were related to politics and policy. For William, "It opened the door for politics to get into education. It was animal that I don't think anybody had really prepared for." In Maria's words, the focus was on keeping school finance afloat:

So obviously finance is about making sure we get money where it needs to go and human resource in human resources. It was the constant needs of the people. How are we gonna take care of people when they need to be absent and does this apply if they have children? Anytime we were gonna send somebody home, if we send somebody home from the district daycare, we had to think about, okay, if you're gonna send them, if you're gonna close down this entire grade level, if you're gonna close down the 2-year-old classroom, how many teachers are there? Because you know, those teachers can't leave a 2-year-old at home by themselves. So you close down the daycare. So it was this huge domino effect of how it was gonna affect the campuses then how it was gonna affect the substitutes. I don't know how we survived.

For Sally, the way she made it through the change between pre-pandemic and pandemic leadership was to have a support system with whom she could be vulnerable and trade stories:

She reached out on occasion to check on me. Mom, have you stopped to think about this? But she herself was in a middle of a nightmare. I remember the day she called and she's like, it's not supposed to be like this. And I was like what? I was with two doctors, we were walking the hall and one of them just stopped and started crying. And she said, I'd never seen a doctor respond like that. She's like, what are you doing? You can't do that. You know they're depending upon you and he said, I didn't come in here to make a decision on who gets to live and who doesn't. This was in the thick of the, before the vaccine. We were able to trade stories.

Throughout all this, whether it was related to medical preparations, instructional changes, or policies and politics, participants in this study said they felt pulled in multiple directions. As Veronica stated, "We can't make everybody happy. So at the end of the day, what's grounding you in your decision making? Well, at the end of the day, it's the health and safety of our staff and students, period." Participants felt they had to make some difficult decisions throughout the crisis. Although they had support systems in place and teams to help guide their decision making, ultimately, the superintendents were solely held responsible for their district. As Rose mentioned,

It was very stressful. I really had a lot of anxiety about it initially because we didn't know a lot about it. I just kept seeing the news with all the body bags in

New York and getting ready to open the school year. It's like, it's all on me. It all rests on me. All these decisions rest on me.

The two primary factors the participants felt helped them get through leading in pandemic times were their own leadership characteristics and experience, and their ability to set and work toward larger goals. I talk about each of these meaning units in turn.

Leadership Characteristics and Experience. When discussing leadership characteristics and skills with the participants, some of the words that were often repeated included perseverance, visible, transparent, vulnerable, calm, flexible, honest, role model, collaborative, empathetic, and trustworthy. Jamal reflected on his preparation before every district Zoom meeting that included all district employees:

One of the skills that I used was just maintaining a sense of calmness during the storm. The entire organization was watching to see. I would spend an hour before every meeting getting comfortable with whatever the latest news was so that I could communicate with confidence, with clarity, with calmness because I had to be confident in what I was sharing.

John similarly prioritized calm:

I think you have to control of your emotions. You have to have emotional intelligence because people are constantly going to say things. They attack your integrity and your character. And so you just have to tune all of that out and not make decisions based on those emotions. Just use the data that you have, make decisions based on what you're hearing and what you're seeing.

John also prioritized the need to think about others' emotions in such a highly charged and emotional time: "The other thing is compassion. To be empathetic and have compassion for your staff because we're all focused on kids. Taking care of your staff during this time was crucial." Rose similarly stated,

I would say the leadership skill that I probably used the most was definitely communication. I had to communicate with everybody early and often. So personal characteristics and leadership skills is maintaining calmness, maintaining control, and order in a way that restores trust in you, in your office, in your school district. With communication was transparency.

Veronica had similar thoughts:

I think being 100% transparent, the good, the bad, the ugly, wherever we were, I wanted to be honest about that. Transparent, honest communication. I think communication during that time was critical and it was communicating with all stakeholders.

Additional leadership characteristics and skills that participants prioritized were listening and reflection. In Maria's words,

The ability to listen and the ability to reflect and that's not as easy as it sounds. As a leader, I'm always solving problems for people. People always want an answer or a solution. They want direction. And so what ends up happening is as I'm listening to people, I'm listening to respond. Just listening to process and not necessarily to jump into action.

Joe shared the following about one experience sitting with teachers and just listening:

For the teachers, we didn't for the staff, we didn't have an agenda. It really was for me to sit and listen and for them to have the opportunity to ask questions that were on their mind, for me to just talk about what happened in the past week, what's going on in the next week, what the data said. And, but it was really more just listening and giving them the opportunity to ask the questions with everybody so that everybody would see the same answer.

Sally shared similar thoughts: "The ability to listen. The ability to pull groups of individuals together, work through problems. That helped just to show that you're not perfect and you're trying to figure it out, too."

For Daniel, the basic skills needed for leadership pre- and post-COVID were pretty similar:

You just work hard, you do a good job. A lot of that has to do with the people that you surround yourself with and the opportunities given. So you know, a leader, whether its a principal or superintendent, you're just one piece of the puzzle. The leadership skills are no different than every day before COVID. After COVID you just have to use those same skills differently. So, you know, you think of a boat out in the gulf and smooth sailing, you don't need to be by the wheel. Anybody can hold the wheel, right? But when it gets rough, you gotta take the wheel and you gotta make those decisions quicker. So, that's the thing, too, decision making. I mean, because people are counting on decisions. A lot of times they just want one they don't care what the decision is. They just want it. So you've got your team and you're like, Hey, I need you to do this, this, this, and I

need it done by this time. I mean, lots of people like that, because they have a test, they know exactly what to do now. so I think during COVID more people looked at you for specific answers than they had in the past. Prepared is just your experience and your training. So in many ways I felt prepared because if you break it down, if you take the name COVID off of it, it's still a task with a to-do-list and you need your team to come together.

Veronica similarly saw parallels to her leadership style before and after COVID:

Life happens and things are going to happen that challenge your core, your moral compass, your what you believe in your heart of hearts to be right or wrong. And I think the most important thing to remember is why we do this job in the first place. I think when that's your focus, when you're centered on that, your purpose, your why, it makes the decision making much easier, even when it's not popular. So I think in times of crisis who you are as a leader will show in how you make decisions, how timely you are with those decisions and communicating why you made those decisions. Some people need the why behind those decisions, whether they like it or not. Right. Sometimes it's easier to accept it. And for some, maybe it doesn't matter, but in the end, I think the why matters and really defines you as a leader.

Setting and Keeping Goals. In addition to focusing on the key characteristics they saw as necessary to lead during COVID, many participants highlighted the importance of setting and keeping goals. All the superintendents interviewed had a goal/goals in mind that helped them lead through this unique time in their career. Those goals helped to keep them focused during an unpredictable time. For John, his goal was as follows:

Remain calm and not let the political extremists take you off of your path or off your course to educate kids. We're going to control what we could control and focus on how to best educate kids and not get in that battle of the politics that was occurring.

Joe's goal was similarly to remain student centered: "Maintaining focus on students. My north star was always students. Doing what's best for students. You also want to do what's best for teachers, but students are number one."

For Jamal, the way to stay focused on students was to continue to use data-driven decision making:

If I'm trying to make the right decision for kids, I need to know that I'm using the right data to make that decision. So, that was a struggle at times because we were getting information from so many different avenues, oftentimes conflicting with each other, but once I settled in on the right data and I made decisions based on children, then it was fine.

But realistically, with all of the constant changes in schooling and policies brought on from COVID-19, Rose put all these smaller goals into perspective: "That was the goal literally. To get through the year and to get through it in a safe way."

Unexpected Crisis: Uvalde

On May 24, 2022, a school shooting occurred in Uvalde, Texas, at Robb Elementary School, 2 years after school shutdowns began in Texas due to the pandemic. The lives of two teachers and 19 students were taken by one male shooter. During the investigations of the school shooting, the following information was discovered: "The shooter entered the school through a door that was closed but not locked" (Langmaid et al., 2022, para. 2). For the participating superintendents, this crisis added even more stress and concern to an already COVID-stressed environment, as yet another urgent and potentially fatal danger was brought front of mind for Texas educators and parents. Maria recalled her feelings toward this unexpected crisis:

I talk to my father faithfully every Sunday. Every Sunday at 5 o'clock dad and I connect, and I talk with my mother too, I don't wanna leave her out, but dad is definitely my personal support system. I can tell him anything. We cried with the Uvalde situation. I'll cry with him about situations with students. I mean, that's the part that's hard for me as a superintendent. So when I hear about a student being wronged or something not going right for a family, that just doesn't sit well with me. Dad is just that person I can talk to and he will always bring it back to something in the Bible. Something that he read on his weekly reading.

This topic was on the minds of some of the participants in the study. As mentioned before in participants' comments, safety was a top priority for these 10 superintendents in their schools. Daniel expressed how safety was always on his mind:

So people don't understand. We worry about safety every day. Right. You know, we worry about a million things involved in safety that aren't school shooters, but we also worry about school shooters every day. So now the public's worried about it. So the perceptions out there, what are you doing? What are you gonna do different? How are you gonna make our kids safe? So you know, a lot of decisions will be focused on that in my opinion, this summer, more than COVID now.

The school shooting in Uvalde was another crisis that prompted these superintendents to re-evaluate their safety protocol related to the security of their buildings. With the pressure to make changes to make schools safer before the start of the new school year in Fall of 2022, this topic took precedence over the COVID-19 effects on schooling during the Summer of 2022, when many of the interviews for this study took place.

Sally provided details of some of her thoughts and actions after the Uvalde school shooting:

Right now we're preparing for bringing kids back to school after the Uvalde situation. There's a lot of discussion about it on TV and the news stations. My own little granddaughter, normal kid, she has said, how do I know I'm safe? And I thought, how many of us are not really thinking that the kids are hearing this and the kids are gonna be afraid when they come back? I know that after that day I walked every campus and walked into every teacher's classroom to check on them. But I can tell you we have procedures in place, but what I also saw, even after that, some procedures weren't being followed. You know, like not every door was locked. I started making my list because it was too raw right at that moment. But you know, my conversations as we come back with the administrators is okay, what are we doing? These are the procedures we have. We have some things now we're evaluating because we've done some construction. So we have a secure vestibule that people have to come through. So we'll review those, like how do we get them in our building? What do we need to do to double check? Is this someone we want in our building or not? Anyway, all of those kinds of things. But, we can't forget about the feelings of those kids and the teachers. So I don't know because you know, like at that moment there were kids who were still not aware because it happened on a Tuesday. We were outta school on Thursday. I mean, they didn't really understand, like my own granddaughter. She didn't really understand. The gravity of it wasn't there. Right. But then it's summer and I mean every day there's something on the TV. This morning they were discussing the legislation of what do we do? And what was the role of the police and what they did do and they didn't do. And what was the role of the classroom, the teachers? I hate it that some blame is being put on schools. It was just a horrible situation and all of us can learn from it but pointing fingers is not

going to make it better. I mean, let's look at what we can do better. That's my philosophy, honestly, Alexis, let's not dwell on what we did wrong. Let's dwell on how do we make it better? Ultimately, it's a situation that has and will affect every school district and it kind of sucks because we're just now trying to get over COVID, and now we have one more thing and we have to figure out.

Clearly, the pressure to improve school safety post-Uvalde has only contributed to the heightened stress and focus on school safety post-COVID in the eyes of the superintendents in this study. Uvalde is a reminder of the fact that crisis can occur at any time with no warning.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I highlighted all the challenges shared by my participants and how they felt they dealt with the COVID-19 crisis with the help of their teams and support systems. The start of the pandemic brought about many unforeseen situations, but these leaders faced their challenges head on. Whether they felt prepared or unprepared, they used previous experience, previously developed leadership skills, and the teams and support systems they had previously formed to help guide their decision making through COVID-19 while keeping safety a priority.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to hear the lived experience of leading a Texas school district during the COVID-19 pandemic from a sample of 10 superintendents. As a researcher and a school leader myself, I wanted to know how these superintendents were able to process and lead their districts through a level of crisis none of us had ever experienced before. In my framing of crisis, I drew on the work of Smith and Riley (2012): “Most contemporary writers regard a crisis as an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation” (p. 58). This definition aptly fits how my participants described their experiences reacting and responding as leaders to COVID-19.

In Chapter IV, I gathered my data into four larger themes: the unforeseen, emotional state, team alignment, and comparing pre-pandemic and pandemic leadership. The analysis of this data that resulted in these themes adds to the growing (but yet small) amount of research published on how leaders lead their organizations through a crisis (and more specifically, through the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic). Also, as I mentioned in Chapter IV, I documented how these same leaders, in the wake of responding to COVID-19, had to respond to public concerns regarding school safety in the wake of the Uvalde school shooting. Though this was not originally part of my research focus, the data I collected and present here regarding these superintendents’ responses to that tragedy also represent a new contribution to the literature.

Summary of Findings

Though I explored the findings in greater detail in Chapter IV, here I present a brief summary of the responses I found to my three research questions organized by question.

Research Question 1

What has been the experience of participating superintendents while leading their district during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As explored more fully in Chapter IV, the experiences of these 10 superintendents were intense to the point of almost feeling overwhelming. As Daniel noted, “As a leader you run at full speed and you’re trying to take care of everybody.” The 10 participants shared how they felt they had to work nonstop to make decisions with regard to schooling for their districts. They had a mixture of emotions and unanswered questions. They had to keep in mind how the additional pressure of leading a district through the unknowns of COVID-19 affected their own mental health, as well as that of staff and students. They all shared that they coped with this stress by relying on both professional and personal support systems. They experienced constant changes and mandates that affected their decisions but with the help of their teams, they were able to lead their districts through the first 2 years of the pandemic. Overall, they shared that what oriented their leadership was a sense of having to provide direction in a context of uncertainty, as no one knew when COVID-19 would cease to present a threat and concern to their schools and school systems. As John stated,

When you deal with a hurricane, you may be without power for 6 weeks and you may lose some of your buildings and you have to relocate kids to churches or to other places to continue to educate them, but you can build back and you know

what that timeline looks like. But with COVID, it's been the gift that just keeps on giving.

Research Question 2

In what ways did these superintendents feel prepared or unprepared to confront the COVID-19 pandemic?

Overall, Rose summed up the 10 participants' feelings regarding their preparedness: "I felt totally unprepared. This was something that we never had to think about in life or certainly not in education." The COVID-19 pandemic became a crisis no superintendent had experienced before. None of my participants felt they really knew if they were making the right decisions or not. There were no books to read and no one to provide advice. They had to do the best they could with decision making and work with their teams and other superintendents to make critical decisions that would affect their entire organizations. Based on the data collected, participants were not prepared for schools being shut down, the fear associated with COVID-19, or the debates over masking, vaccines, the role of parent choice, and virtual learning versus in-person learning. Back in the Spring of 2020, Central Texas superintendents were not prepared for the type of crisis they experienced, but they quickly shifted from the typical way of schooling to all-virtual learning districtwide. They had to make a plan regardless of their inexperience with this type of crisis.

That said, though all 10 superintendents felt unprepared for the scope of this public health crisis, according to my data there were experiences that helped some of my participants feel some preparedness to address the logistics of COVID-19. Largely speaking, this was due to the instructional infrastructure many districts already had in place for virtual learning. Most of the districts represented in this study, especially at the

secondary level, had Chromebooks or laptops for every student. They were also using Google Classroom or some type of virtual platform that they could carry over into the start of the pandemic. However, although this infrastructure was in place, teachers had not been trained properly on how to shift from teaching in person to only virtual, much less on the challenge that came later of teaching virtually and in person simultaneously.

Participants discussed how they relied on their teams to aid in decision making. By having teams in place with individuals they could trust, participants felt more comfortable in making decisions they were unsure about. Teams played a major role in each district successfully navigating schooling during a pandemic.

Participants' previous experience as a leader and previous experience dealing with a crisis were seen as beneficial. Participants were able to pull from their past experiences to help them maneuver through this unfamiliar event. Some participants had years of experience leading a district and some also had experience leading through crises such as natural disasters and student deaths that had affected the entire community. All of the experience previously gained contributed to the way the participants led their districts during the pandemic.

Research Question 3

What leadership skills and personal characteristics do participants feel are important for a leader to have in order to be effective in decision making during a crisis?

As explored at length in Chapter IV, participants noted the following as important characteristics for leading in a time of crisis: perseverance, being visible, transparent, vulnerable, calm, flexible, honest, a role model, collaborative, reflective, empathetic, and trustworthy. All participants also expressed the importance of having a goal or focus to

help keep them grounded and on the right track in their decision making. As Daniel stated:

I remember being so frustrated at the continual changes in information the state gave us. Hey you got to do this. All right, we got it. No, now you got to do this. Now you got to do this. Now you got to do this. But you know, I think, all of the superintendents, we're prior to COVID through COVID and now, I think they're better superintendents. And, I think we all look at the world a little bit different, but it all goes down to kids and really paying attention to the services we provide for students.

Daniel knew that despite the changes that occurred on a regular basis, he would be okay so long as he maintained his focus on his students.

Participants also noted the need to remain in regular communication with stakeholders. This skill is what helped with team alignment, district alignment, and community alignment. As Daniel noted,

The ability to communicate. The ability to mobilize quickly is needed the importance of plans knowing those plans and practicing those plans and the importance of knowing that there is an entire community that'll help you with whatever crisis you may have. That's the biggest takeaway is we're not in this alone. You've got to use other people. You've got to communicate.

Implications and Connections to Theory

To aid in preparedness before and during a crisis, I draw on Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model and Smith and Riley's (2012) cyclical model of crisis management strategy to make connections with my findings and explore implications for other leaders who find themselves leading in a time of crisis.

First, drawing on Bolman and Deal (2017), what they called the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames are all pertinent to my participants' responses and how they acted in a time of crisis. With regard to the structural frame, participants discussed having people they could trust on their teams and making sure everyone was working toward the same goal. As Bolman and Deal stated, "Effective teams typically

have a clear purpose, measurable goals, the right mix of expertise, a common commitment to working relationships, collective accountability and manageable size” (p. 112). Participating superintendents also highlighted the need for team alignment during the pandemic. The crisis experience was so massive the participating superintendents had to rely on subordinates and people in place in order to reach the goals set for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This fits well into how Bolman and Deal described well-structured organizations: “Organizations divide work by creating a variety of specialized roles, functions, and units. They must then use both vertical and horizontal procedures to mesh the many elements together. If structure is overlooked, an organization often misdirects energy and resources” (p. 69).

Participants also highlighted the need to have the right people in the right place when hiring. Having structures in place, including the efficient placement of personnel, is a key part of being prepared for crises like COVID-19: “Reorganizing or restructuring is a powerful but high-risk approach to improvement” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 72). Within the structural frame of the four frames, superintendents should not have a top-down approach, but instead facilitate teams that are self-directed. After reflecting, based on all that has been learned while experiencing leading a district for the past 2 and a half years, now is the time for superintendents to review their organizational framework and to make adjustments to ensure they are prepared in the future. Though all my participants described relying heavily on their teams in place, it is crucial to maintain those well-functioning teams so they can respond nimbly to potential future crises. As Bolman and Deal (2017) stated, “Leaders must recognize when the rules of the game change and

redesign the structure accordingly” (p. 111). The pandemic created change along with a need for new rules and new structures.

Second, Bolman and Deal’s (2017) human resource frame is a useful way to understand both the findings of this study and apply them forward to future leaders. The human resource frame focuses on the people in the organization. Superintendents must lead the way in focusing on human capacity and investing in people within the organization, as participants mentioned doing in their responses in Chapter IV. As Bolman and Deal stated, “The right set of task roles helps get work done and makes optimal use of each member’s resources” (p. 170). Superintendent William shared how his previous crisis team was not the right team to work on this new crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic:

We talked about that crisis team. We didn’t really know if that crisis team was ready for this crisis. You know, they’re kind of ready for something else that involves discipline or safety and security or whatnot. This was a whole other animal.

As noted in William’s response, the changing circumstances of COVID-19 led to a need for changes in personnel. It would have been easier to keep his current crisis team in place, but he chose to adjust the team for this crisis to best address the needs of his district.

Third, when participating superintendents considered what Bolman and Deal (2017) called the political frame, they mentioned having to remain focused on their goals and vision and have an agenda to help guide their work. “A vision without a strategy remains an illusion” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 205). This frame is useful for helping those in the superintendency to recognize that not everyone within their organizations will always be on the same page, and that is okay—some degree of conflict is okay.

“Conflict is normal and inevitable. It’s a natural byproduct of collective life” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 196). During decision making, some of the participants and their teams did not see eye to eye, but because of the trust and relationships they had previously established, they were able to discuss the issue at hand and reach a decision they could all accept.

Fourth and finally, within Bolman and Deal’s (2017) symbolic frame, “meaning, belief, and faith are [the] central concerns” (p. 236). More specifically, “An organization’s culture is revealed and communicated through its symbols” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 242). Within the organizational context of districts in Texas, superintendents like those who participated in this study must intentionally work to build the culture within their districts:

Culture establishes the rules of engagement after leadership leaves the room; it explains how things are really done around here. Culture carries its guidance to the farthest corners of the organization to places you may never go and people you may never meet. (Frei & Morriss, 2020, p. 165)

In the spirit of this frame, Superintendent Jamal used his district’s football stadium as a symbol of hope. “Symbols stimulate energy in moments of triumph and offer solace in times of tribulations” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 240). It was of importance to him to remind students, staff, and the community to keep the faith and that they would pull through this crisis together:

We started the light campaign. Every single Friday night, we turned the lights on at the football stadium, and in a small town that meant a lot because you can see the lights from all over. We encouraged our community. We released a video every Friday at noon about being the light and to let your light so shine. It was planting those seeds of; we have to still be the light even in this period of darkness. And so we encouraged the community to come drive by the stadium and see the lights. So we were communicating what was happening as it relates to learning, but we were also trying to communicate positivity across the community. I was very much aware of where my community was and my job as superintendent is to serve the community.

“Some of the most important signals of what founders and leaders care about are sent during meetings and in other activities” (Schein, 2010, p. 238). “Instilling hope in their communities was vital during this crisis phenomenon, thus enabling a sense of pride in the overall culture of the organization” (Gonzalez, 2022, p. 118). Jamal’s symbol of hope is a powerful example of how superintendents can use symbols to motivate and inspire those with whom they work in their organizations.

Smith and Riley’s (2012) model also provided insights for the interpretation of the data and the application to future leaders. As Smith and Riley stated, and as demonstrated within my data, a leader’s communication and proactivity are crucial:

In the context of a crisis, however, school leadership must also be about providing certainty, engendering hope, engaging a rallying point for effective and efficient effort (both during and after the crisis), and ensuring open and credible communication to and for all affected members of the school community. (p. 67)

Participants regularly reiterated the importance of communication to all stakeholders throughout their interviews. “Leaders do not have a choice about whether or not to communicate. They only have a choice about how much to manage what they communicate” (Schein, 2010, p. 257). Participants saw communication as a key to their success.

These two theoretical frameworks share one important aspect relative to this project—the symbolic frame, which includes culture, and the strategies in the cyclical model intertwine. “Crisis are especially significant in culture creation and transmission because the heightened emotional involvement during such periods increases the intensity of learning” (Schein, 2010, p. 243). The COVID-19 crisis is an experience participants can reflect and learn from. If organizations work toward multi-frame thinking as suggested by Bolman and Deal (2017), organizational democracy will help promote a

positive culture during crises. Employees within the district will be able to provide feedback, help in the decision making, reflect, and learn from the crisis as one.

Recommendations for Future Research

There has been limited research on the role of superintendents post-COVID, in large part because of the time lag involved in academic publication and the recency of this public health crisis. To my knowledge, only a few studies have begun to address this topic. This branch of the literature is new, but must continue growing, as the likelihood of future public health concerns is probable and the lessons learned during COVID-19 might prove useful to superintendents and other school leaders of the future.

Based on the data collected in this study, one of the key supports participants leaned on was their superintendent collaborative groups formed after the pandemic began. I recommend that these support groups continue, as they were a crucial form of support for my participants. Participants expressed how helpful they found these groups, whether it was heterogenous groups with superintendents of different size districts or smaller, more homogeneous groups with superintendents collaborating who were in districts of similar size and characteristics. According to Daniel, prior to the pandemic, “Nobody shared with surrounding districts. It was like a big competition. I mean, that was everybody’s mindset.” Now that mindsets have shifted, this collaboration among districts will likely prove useful in response to challenges in the future and should continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked conversations regarding schooling in the United States. As mentioned earlier in my literature review, school leaders should use this opportunity to move away from the status quo and adjust schooling to meet the needs

of all students. With all of the adjustments made since school shutdowns began, we can begin addressing structural systems flaws exposed during the pandemic, such as developing better communications systems for reaching hard-to-reach students and providing diverse academic supports for students who might do better online than in person (and vice versa).

Generally speaking, during COVID-19, we as educators realized how much can be accomplished if we work collaboratively toward a common goal. We have to move forward in one direction and create the vision needed to provide equity in education. Crises will continue to arise. As Gainey (2009) stated in a publication that came out pre-COVID-19, “Educational institutions, particularly K–12 public schools, are affected by a broad range of crises. Because these schools serve local communities and their youngest, most vulnerable citizens, they are an important focus for further crisis management research” (p. 268). I hope the results of my study can inspire future research on crisis management in schools, as we will need it in the crises to come.

Conclusion

I pray that we never face a crisis such as this again. COVID-19 created dilemmas we as educators had never experienced in our lifetimes. Participants frequently talked about new unknowns and uncertainties arising in their day-to-day experiences as they led through COVID-19. In this study, 10 superintendents shared their experienced leading a public-school district in Texas during the Spring of 2020 until the end of the 2020–2021 school year. As I reflect on my story as well, leading during this time was not an easy task. The effects of COVID-19 still linger today. From this process, I learned that as an educator, my goal was not any different than that of the superintendents. Students were a

priority. I realized no one can nor should lead alone during a crisis. You must be intentional about placing people around you who you can trust before a crisis occurs. Everyone was affected by the COVID-19 crisis in some way, mentally or emotionally, and remembering to be mindful of your emotional state is necessary to be an effective leader. Unfortunately, one of the side effects of COVID-19 has been teacher and administrator shortages, including superintendent shortages, as educators chose retirement or a change in profession over the continued stress of educator life post-COVID-19. Thankfully, of the 10 superintendents interviewed for this study, only one has left the superintendency.

There is a gap in the literature regarding how school leaders make sense of their circumstances and lead in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study represents an initial contribution to that literature, and I hope the results will be beneficial for superintendents who find themselves in the unenviable role of leading during future crises.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL/PHONE SCRIPT

Email Script

Hello,

My name is Alexis Campbell and I am a graduate student at Texas State University. I am conducting a research study titled District Superintendents' Experiences During the COVID-19 Crisis. This study will collect data on the lived experience of superintendents leading a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in so doing will provide data that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them while leading through future crises. I am asking you to be a part of this study because you meet the predetermined criterion which include: 1. leading a district as a public school superintendent in Texas during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, 2. serving a public school district ranging from 2A to 6A. The interview will take about 60-90 minutes to complete. If you are interested in participating, please let me know when you are available to discuss scheduling a time that works best for you.

Sincerely,

Alexis Campbell

This project 8384 was approved by the Texas State IRB on June 13, 2022. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

Phone Script

“Hello, my name is Alexis Campbell and I am a graduate student at Texas State University. I am conducting a research study titled District Superintendents' Experiences During the COVID-19 Crisis. This study will collect data on the lived experience of superintendents leading a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in so doing will provide data that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them while leading through future crises. I am asking you to be a part of this study because you meet the predetermined criterion which include: 1. leading a district as a public school superintendent in Texas during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, 2. serving a public school district ranging from 2A to 6A. The interview will take about 60-90 minutes to complete. Are you are interested in participating in this study? If so, I can schedule you for an interview on _____. Do you have any questions? If needed, I can be reached at 713-398-1749 or alexis.campbell@txstate.edu.”

Thank you for your help; I look forward to our conversation.

(If not interested, I will end the call.)

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Dissertation Title: District Superintendents' Experiences During the COVID-19 Crisis

Dissertation Purpose: This study will collect data on the lived experience of superintendents leading a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in so doing will provide data that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them while leading through future crises.

Principal Investigator: Alexis Campbell

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rolf Straubhaar

Date:

Place:

Start Time:

End Time:

Participant Pseudonym:

Interview Type: Semi-structured interview

Sample for interview: "Thank you for your participation in this study. Qualitative interviewing gives the participant the opportunity to share their story, how they felt, and what they were thinking when the interview topic occurred. This study will help me as the researcher, gain a holistic view of participants' lived experience. Due to my personal experience of leading a campus through the COVID-19 pandemic as a principal, this topic became of interest to me. I'd like to remind you that to protect the privacy of all interview participants, all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms. The interview will last about 60 minutes. I will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately. Do you have any questions for us before we begin?"

Interview Questions

1. What led you as an educator to pursue administration, first at the principal and then superintendent level? Tell me a bit about your personal history as an administrator up to this point.
2. What has been your experience while leading your district during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How has your experience during COVID-19 differed from your pre-COVID experience as a superintendent?
3. List three to five of your initial thoughts when you realized your district was going to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. In what ways did you feel prepared or unprepared to confront the COVID-19 pandemic?

5. What leadership skills did you use during this uncertain time and why? Elaborate.
6. What area of your roles and responsibilities was particularly challenging while dealing with a crisis? Did you feel prepared beforehand?
7. What leadership skills and personal characteristics do you feel are important for a leader to have in order to be effective in decision making during a crisis?
8. How did you and your leadership team regularly communicate and come to a common understanding of the action steps everyone would implement during this crisis? What operating mechanisms were used?
9. During the crisis experienced, what were the key steps included in your action plan as a district leader?
10. How was alignment and a common goal established and ensured among the superintendent to cabinet members, as well as principals to teachers?
11. Most districts have a crisis team? How is this beneficial?
12. Describe your professional and personal support system during this COVID-19 pandemic. In what ways were your support systems helpful or needed?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience as a superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Thank you for your time and participation. If you think of anything after our interview that you would like to share, please contact me on my cell at 7133981749 or via email at alexis.campbell@huttoisd.net. You have helped my growth as a researcher.

The time is now:

(Turn off recorder)

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Principal Investigator: Alexis Campbell

Faculty Advisor: Rolf Straubhaar

Email: alexis.campbell@txstate.edu

Email: straubhaar@txstate.edu

Phone: 7133981749

Phone: 5122456055

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

My name is Alexis Campbell and I am a graduate student at Texas State University. I am conducting a research study titled District Superintendents' Experiences During the COVID-19 Crisis. This study will collect data on the lived experience of superintendents leading a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in so doing will provide data that can be used by other superintendents to help prepare them while leading through future crises. I am asking you to be a part of this study because you meet the predetermined criterion which include: 1. leading a district as a public school superintendent in Texas during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, 2. serving a public school district ranging from 2A to 6A. This form will tell you a little bit about the study so you can decide if you want to be in the study or not.

PROCEDURES

1. If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

A thirteen question 60-90 minute semi-structured audio or video recorded interview. The researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

Risks associated with participating in this qualitative study are unlikely but I will keep in mind the fact that COVID-19 has impacted everyone differently. Some of the questions may cause participants to relive a sensitive time in their life or participants could feel uncomfortable answering some the questions. This study is voluntary and participants will have the opportunity to take a break during their interview, skip a question that makes them uncomfortable, or withdraw participation at any time.

Interview Questions

1. What led you as an educator to pursue administration, first at the principal and then superintendent level? Tell me a bit about your personal history as an administrator up to this point.
2. What has been your experience while leading your district during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 1. How has your experience during COVID-19 differed from your pre-COVID experience as a superintendent?
3. List three to five of your initial thoughts when you realized your district was going to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. In what ways did you feel prepared or unprepared to confront the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. What leadership skills did you use during this uncertain time and why? Elaborate.
6. What area of your roles and responsibilities was particularly challenging while dealing with a crisis? Did you feel prepared beforehand?
7. What leadership skills and personal characteristics do you feel are important for a leader to have in order to be effective in decision making during a crisis?
8. How did you and your leadership team regularly communicate and come to a common understanding of the action steps everyone would implement during this crisis? What operating mechanisms were used?
9. During the crisis experienced, what were the key steps included in your action plan as a district leader?
10. How was alignment and a common goal established and ensured among the superintendent to cabinet members, as well as principals to teachers?
11. Most districts have a crisis team? How is this beneficial?
12. Describe your professional and personal support system during this COVID-19 pandemic. In what ways were your support systems helpful or needed?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience as a superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Counseling Services

Pflugerville Counseling Center

15901 Central Commerce Drive, Ste. 505 Pflugerville, TX 78660 866-495-1886
<https://www.pflugervillecounselingcenter.com/>

Lifeline Family Enrichment Counseling Services

821 Grand Avenue Parkway, Suite 103 Pflugerville, Texas 78660 512-779-3539
<https://www.lifelinefamilyenrichment.com/>

New Life Counseling Center

3000 Joe DiMaggio Blvd. Suites #88-89 Round Rock, Texas 78665 512-238-1700
<https://www.newlifecounselingcenter.com/>

The Austin Center for Grief and Loss

2413 Greenlawn Pkwy Austin, TX 78757 512-472-7878 <https://www.austingrief.org/>

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, public school superintendents have experienced a phenomenon, first-hand, that will be researched. Interviewing all participants will be the best way to collect data in order to gain an in-depth understanding of each superintendent's lived experience during the Covid-19 crisis. Despite the limitations that will be faced, the research and data collected will add to the gap in literature related to school superintendents leading during crises.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Pseudonyms will be used instead of your name. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Faculty Advisor, Rolf Straubhaar: 5122456055 or straubhaar@txstate.edu.

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on June 13, 2022. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants’ rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgoibert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Study Participant	Signature of Study Participant	Date
_____	_____	
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent		

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