ABSTRACT

SHULER, WILLIAM HAL. Superintendent Succession in a Rural School District: A Historical Case Study. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli and Dr. Kevin P. Brady.)

This historical case study examined superintendent succession in a rural school district over the past five decades. The study addressed the “what, how, and why” of superintendent succession, successor origin, and rural school districts. Areas of specific interest were the hiring of an insider or an outsider in a rural school district. The researcher looked back fifty years into one rural school system to discover what impact this successor (insider or outsider) had on this rural school district and what knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district. Community members, school district staff, school board members, and the past superintendents were individually interviewed. Responses were coded to establish trends and commonalities among these people. Findings indicate that rural school districts hire an insider when they desire stability and hire outsiders when they are looking for a change. In each time in history, this rural school district hired what they believed they needed at that particular time. Also, the findings indicate the knowledge, skills, and traits needed by these rural school leaders are: people skills, moral leadership, creating a vision or plan, understanding school politics, and having a strong work ethic.
Superintendent Succession in a Rural School District: An Historical Case Study

By

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BIOGRAPHY

I was born November 12, 1958 to William Shaw Shuler and Bunnie Brogdon Shuler in Sumter, South Carolina. I grew up in Sumter, a community 30 miles east of Columbia. After graduating from Sumter High School in 1976, I attended Appalachian State University and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1981. In 1983 I completed my Master of Arts in Education from The Citadel in Charleston South Carolina and began a coaching career. During my coaching and teaching journey, I became interested in school administration and returned to graduate school. In the summer of 2007 I began work on my Education Doctorate at North Carolina State University and graduated in the spring of 2016.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The succession or transitioning of school leaders is a certainty in all school systems. Succession is a constant in today’s school systems regardless if it is planned or a surprise to the entire community. Whether the vacancy is due to retirement, promotion, transfer, dismissal, or unexpected circumstance, those with a vested interest in the school are quick to wonder if the new school leader will have the necessary qualities to ensure success. Considered the key leadership position in any school system, the concern for the job of school superintendent is warranted (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). When the superintendent walks out the door, is there a plan in place for succession?

According to Hargreaves (2005), succession is a part of all organizations and that the failure to properly consider it is problematic. The literature provided mostly by Gouldner (1954) states that the process of succession will cause disruption to all organizations; however, the degree to which way succession impacts superintendent effectiveness is inconclusive. Within educational organizations, Hargreaves (2005) states “one of the most significant events in the life of a school system is a change in its leadership” (p. 163). Hargreaves’ research states that the school district suffers when plans for succession are not in place. Without considerable thought and careful planning, superintendent succession can cause the operation of schools to falter and, over time, can cause a drop in achievement (Hargraves, 2005). According to Chance and Capps (1992), school districts face an increasingly difficult challenge: to effectively sustain educational improvement efforts without highly qualified leaders in a modern educational culture that is focused on student achievement and adequate yearly progress (p. 121). This lack of leadership
causes the organization to flounder, and in a school district, ultimately, everyone is affected. According to Riddick (2009), succession planning strategies have been utilized in the business world for years and the education realm is beginning to recognize their value (p.1).

For the purpose of this study, succession is defined as the movement of personnel from one position to another. Succession involves the process in which an individual moves into a new role that was not held by that individual. In most instances, succession in superintendent leadership positions occurs as an upward movement within the hierarchical career structure of the organization. However, superintendents can succeed into another superintendent job by moving laterally to another school system. In whatever the situation involving leadership change, superintendent succession is a significant event in the growth and development of any school district.

SUPERINTENDENT SUCCESSION DYNAMICS WITHIN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

All organizations must eventually cope with succession in leadership. It is well established in the literature that administrative succession is a universal issue for any organization, and that the process of succession will cause disruption to the organization to one degree or another. But a more unstable, unpredictable, leadership position than that of the succession of a rural school superintendent would be hard to find. Succession in a rural community causes unrest. In the majority of rural communities, the largest employer is the local school district; therefore, when the position of school superintendent becomes vacant, rumors spread. Students, parents, teachers, central office staff, school board members, and community
members all want to know the scoop and voice their opinions of who this important leader should be.

Many smaller school districts, especially those located in rural areas, have been historically unable to retain superintendents long-term. High superintendent turnover can have negative impacts on these districts. Rural superintendents, for example, rarely enjoy the stability of tenure that would seemingly reflect the importance of the position (Chance & Capps, 1992). There are many theories as to why rural superintendents leave their positions on a much more regular basis compared to non-rural school districts, and researchers point to a myriad of reasons for superintendent turnover in rural districts, including: upward mobility (leaving for more prestigious positions), desired increase in pay, school board conflict, lack of finances, and personal issues (Dlugosh, 1994; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; McKay & Grady, 1994; Yee & Cuban, 1996). In the 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency, published by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and in the Characteristics of American School Superintendents the most commonly occurring reasons for superintendent turnover in districts with a student population of 300 – 2,999 were upward mobility and conflict with current school board members (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

Superintendents in rural public school districts arguably hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation (Sharp, Malone, & Walter, 2001). Superintendents are the educational leaders and the main link between their respective districts, school boards and communities (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). This impact on rural life in a small community must be considered when employing a new superintendent. Reasons for superintendent succession in rural America are many with the major contributions including school board and community relations. Of the
problems that contribute to voluntary and involuntary succession, friction between the superintendent and board members is one of the most cited reasons. According to Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) in the American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial study, the relationships between superintendents and school boards have far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of school districts’ educational programs. Also, the existing literature suggests that the problem is more prevalent in smaller rural districts (Parker, 1996).

The rural superintendent has much to deal with concerning the concept of local control, community relations, and politics. Rural communities are often highly involved in education which fosters a more nurturing environment for students but also can pose many hurdles for their superintendents. As the main link between the community and its schools, rural superintendents often find themselves trapped by community leaders with competing expectations. Rural communities are a tight knit group of people who have invested their lives in the school system in which they live; therefore, the feeling of ownership can play havoc with the superintendent. The clamor for school reform, a sharp focus on accountability, and an urgent imperative for blending managerial and progressive leadership, have made the superintendent an enticing target for criticism. With the many expectations and high stakes accountability, superintendent succession occurs often in these rural districts.

**INSIDER/OUTSIDER ORIGINS IN SUPERINTENDENT SUCCESSION**

One aspect embedded in the complexity of superintendent succession in a rural school district is insider/outsider origin. In other words, who will succeed the superintendent who has moved on? When superintendent succession occurs, the school board is left with two options:
Do we hire from within our own district, or do we seek a candidate from another school system? According to Carlson (1961), this person who has worked and remained in this one school system is called the insider. He has been promoted from within and usually completes his career in the one home school system (p. 211). Carlson continues (1961) by stating that the other person hired does not wait and only work in his home school, but seeks a superintendency wherever it is to be found. He is called the outsider. His or her career is always spread over two or more districts and, ordinarily, his or her career does not stop with one superintendency (p. 211).

Carlson (1961) produced the first and only substantial research in the area of superintendent succession with regard to insiders and outsiders. He referred to superintendents hired from inside as “placebound” superintendents and to superintendents hired from outside the district as “careerbound” superintendents. He found that school boards look to replace a superintendent with an insider if they want to keep things static. The insider is seen as having a stabilizing effect on the district. In contrast, the school board looks for an outsider when they want to create change.

Research has contributed to the pros and cons of the inside vs outside hire. According to Matthews (2002), an inside or outside hire is simply based on the need of the school board at the time of the hire. Also, Kowalski wrote in the AASA’s 2010 Study of the American School Superintendency that twice as many rural superintendents were less likely to be promoted internally. Reasons for this include the effect of school board and community relations on a rural superintendent which can cause the board to desire a fresh new face in this leadership role.
However, research by Mayo (2003), also gives us a glimpse into the effect that today’s world of high stakes testing and accountability has on a rural superintendent and contradicts that of Kowalski. Due to the fact that school boards have set the bar so high in search of this miracle worker, the outside hire has trouble measuring up. Therefore some school boards are leaning towards hiring the familiar faces of insiders.

Whatever the case, rural school boards are left with the task of hiring the perfect leader for their community and school district. Each rural community has a vested interest in the hiring of this CEO and in many cases is personally involved. What impact does hiring an insider or an outsider have on a rural school community and what knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district are the questions I am seeking to answer.

**STABILITY AND THE SUPERINTENDENCY**

Most successful organizations require effective leadership. A school district is no different. Since early years in the 19th century, superintendents has been the leaders of public school districts. Many authors consider the contemporary superintendent to be a key figure in the process of school improvement, yet today’s superintendency is fraught with conflict, politics, and stress, as modern superintendents deal with forces and incidents that are far more complex and demanding than those of their predecessors (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 2011). As a major contributor to the stress of the position, the demands for reform of the educational system have never been greater; unlike the superintendent of the 19th century, today’s school leader is also held accountable for achieving specific academic results (Shibles, Rallis, & Deck, 2001).
According to a study conducted by Metzger (1997), “The superintendency is the least stable and secure position in education” (p. 44), information that is quite disconcerting to the person considering a career in educational leadership, not to mention the public school boards, whose job it is to select good superintendents and enable them to develop and fulfill long term goals and plans for their school districts. The consequences of having unstable leadership in a school district are numerous and varied. In a study of involuntary superintendent turnover, Metzger concluded that such turnover often leads to general turmoil in the district. Metzger cites a number of reasons for the turmoil, such as: the perception by staff that superintendent turnover indicates a lack of direction and stability at the top of the school district; the financial costs of replacing a superintendent are high (which often includes legal involvement); and the staff begin to adopt a “circle the wagon” mentality that ultimately resists reform and risk-taking in favor of the status quo (p. 22).

The resignation or dismissal of a previous superintendent and the hiring of a new superintendent is the most visible, overt sign of change in a rural school district. After all, the superintendent is the CEO of the district. These rural communities are a tight knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, and or employees. Everyone has an opinion and does not mind voicing it to anyone who will listen. Therefore, a lot of anxiety accompanies the succession of one superintendent to another in rural communities as community leaders, teachers, and administrators alike wonder if new leadership means totally starting over. Because superintendents come and go, long-term employees tend to become cynical when a pattern of changing directions accompanies each new superintendent.
The superintendent succession process in rural communities may be further complicated if conventional wisdom regarding the future of the superintendency proves true. Some people believe that many current rural superintendents will be retiring in the next several years without an adequate pool of aspiring, future superintendents available to fill the gap. A study of current rural superintendents in the year 2010 indicated that many superintendents are worried about where the next generation of superintendents will come from, citing “high turnover” as a major barrier to attracting new talent. Of those surveyed, 92% expressed concern that “high turnover in the superintendency means a serious crisis in keeping strong leaders in the position” (Kowalski, 2011) (p. 6).

While the pool of future candidates is a concern in all rural school districts, the difficulty of finding a new superintendent is even greater. Unfortunately, the superintendent search in most districts is a relatively long process, usually lasting several months in the best-case scenarios. It is a process that is open to the public, which simply means that there will always be a group of stakeholders who feel disenfranchised because their candidate was not hired. Due to the close knit communities in rural school districts and their interest in school district decisions, inherent in the process are the seeds of controversy. The length of the process, the involvement of consultants hired to assist in the search for a new superintendent, the expense and time invested in the interviewing process, and the public nature of it all tends to make even the smoothest succession fraught with landmines. Nevertheless, superintendent succession is a process that rural school districts must contend with from time to time.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research on educational leadership is plentiful; however, the literature on the succession of school leaders is sparse. Theories and ideas about leadership – preparation and development of school leaders, management aspects of school administration, community relations, and recognizing cultural issues – abound on the shelves of school superintendents’ and principals’ book cases and occupy the courses of study in university preparation programs. Much literature exists concerning rural school district leaders and the many situations and occurrences that happen due to their rural nature. All of this literature is important; however, while there is growing concern over the superintendent workforce trends, there is little to no literature on how school systems experience the succession of rural school superintendents.

There is a large body of literature surrounding the topic of succession of leaders as experienced by organizations (Albion & Gutke, 2010; Bolton & Rory, 2004; Garman & Glawe, 2004; Karaevli & Hall, 2003; Pynes, 2004; Rothwell, 2005); yet there has been sparse literature to date produced on the process of succession as experienced by rural k-12 public school systems in the United States (Bengtson, 2010). As mentioned previously, Hargreaves (2005) states “one of the most significant events in the life of a school is a change in its leadership. Yet few things in education succeed less than leadership succession” (p. 163). If evidence exist that a change in leadership can improve or diminish a school’s success, then shouldn’t school system leaders concern themselves with learning how they might influence the succession of their school leaders? Succession of school leaders can no longer be a haphazard occurrence; it must be anticipated and a process put in place for controlling the inevitable occurrence.
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. To begin, superintendent succession and successor origin must be researched. The top educational leader leaves a school district and moves to another district or job, he or she retires, or a previous superintendent is fired. Who is then ready to succeed into this important role? The question on everyone’s mind is, “Will it be an insider or an outsider?” Hiring from the inside rewards or honors those who have worked their way up the educational ladder and feels as if he deserves a chance to lead in the district in which he has spent his entire career. Hiring from the outside involves change and a new way of doing things. Therefore, rural school boards are faced with an important school decision that will have a lasting effect on their communities, not only the duration of the superintendents’ contract but for many years to come. With the frequency of this job change, why aren’t school boards and communities more prepared to make the best decision for their community and their schools?

Another major issue when employing a new superintendent in a county in rural America is the impact of being a school district located in a small rural community. When people think of small towns, they often conjure Rockwell-like pictures of country fairs, baseball games, community dances, and programs at the little red schoolhouse. While the red, one-room schoolhouse has become the relic of a by-gone age, the local school is still an important community focal point in a small town. Even today, it is not unusual for people to come from miles around to attend school programs and athletic events. Such functions often serve as the
only social gatherings in these areas. These communities are a tight-knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, or employees. What part does a close-knit rural community play in the succession of a superintendent?

My research will look into superintendent succession in a rural school district and the many superintendent successions experienced in that district in the past fifty years. My hope is to research successor origin to determine whether it has been more advantageous to hire an insider or an outsider as a superintendent in these school districts during this time period. In doing so, identify what type of superintendent (insider vs. outsider) has on a rural school community and what knowledge, skills, and traits does a successful superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. My goal is to provide valuable information for these rural communities and school systems to use when selecting a superintendent successor.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The succession of school superintendents has not been studied in the context of the nature of the experience of those who succeed and those who manage the succession process. With the emerging understanding of the effect of school leadership on student achievement, coupled with the high-stakes accountability that every school system faces, a need to address the nature of succession in school systems so system leaders can plan for successful leadership transitions in their schools. School boards are left with the difficult job of choosing a miracle worker from the inside or outside and in many cases not prepared for such a task.
In a rural school district the task of choosing the superintendent is magnified. In these communities where the school district is the largest employer, the succession of the superintendent is major news. According to Lamkin (2006) and Alborano (2002), many rural school districts are unable to provide the stable leadership that is often desired, and perhaps required for lasting education improvement. These districts lack the consistent leadership that is vital for leading a district through the numerous challenges facing education today. This study is significant in that it could provide information to rural districts to help those school boards and community leaders when having to decide on a new leader.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Several conceptions of definitions exist when discussing superintendent succession in a rural school district. The following terms are used throughout this study, and are defined below:

1. **Succession** – the movement of personnel from one position to another.

2. **Superintendent Succession** – superintendent succession occurs when an incumbent superintendent vacates his or her office, regardless of reason, and a new superintendent is hired.

3. **Insider Superintendent** – An insider superintendent is a superintendent who was already an employee of the district in some capacity prior to being hired by the same district for the position of superintendent.

4. **Outsider Superintendent** – An outsider superintendent is a superintendent who was hired by a district to become their superintendent and who was an employee of another district immediately before being hired.
(5.) Rural – a residential category of areas outside an urbanized part of open country, or in communities of less than 2500 inhabitants, or areas in which the population density is less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile (nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/).

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Superintendent succession is an event that every district must address eventually. This periodic change in leadership can be a good opportunity for a district to build upon current success or address areas that need improvement. The purpose of this study is to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district.

Chapter One provided an introduction and background of the study, a subjectivity statement, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and a brief definition of terms.

Chapter Two provides a thorough review of the pertinent literature. The review of literature includes historical perspective and contemporary issues surrounding: (a) the public school superintendent in the United States, (b) rural school districts, (c) rural school superintendents; and (d) rural superintendent succession. Consideration is also given to factors contributing to rural superintendent succession, and succession in education and other organizations. Finally, Chapter Two concludes with the phenomenon of successor origin and the recent literature on the hiring of insiders and/or outsiders. Chapter Three describes the methods and design of the study. Research questions are identified and procedures for site selection, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis are specified. Chapter Three concludes with the limitations of the
study and a brief summary. Chapter Four presents the findings from the study in both narrative and numerical form. Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings as compared to existing research, implications for research, implications for practice, and conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five concludes with a summary of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This historical case study seeks to research a small rural school district over the past five decades to determine what impact the type of superintendent successor (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community. During that same time period, the study will also attempt to identify what specific knowledge, skills, and traits a superintendent successor would need in a rural school district.

The impact of rural life in a small community must be considered when employing a new superintendent within a rural county. The majority of the residents of these communities were born and raised there and have special and unique ties and allegiances to the schools in the area. Most families are related in some way and, therefore, know what is going on in the school system and, more importantly, care deeply about the decisions made. It is in one particular school district that the researcher will look into superintendent succession. Succession asks the question of who will be the new employee to fill the job of superintendent in our school district? In these rural school districts and small towns, the largest employer is often the public school district. The communities are small with the residents tied to community loyalties and patriotism to each other’s hometown and school.
Alsbury and Shaw (2005) state that there are various problems with social justice in small communities due to school politics. Everyone seems to have a voice and opinion on the major political topics and, most certainly, on who should fill the job of the superintendent. Should the school board hire an outsider? Someone with a good reputation as a leader but someone who has no ties to the community. Or should the school board hire an insider? Someone who has worked their way up the educational ladder and has been a part of the community and school system for many years. My research will be in a small rural school district that has hired from within their school system four times and from outside their school system four times in the past five decades. From the research data, my goal is to answer the two research questions:

1. What impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs. outsider) have on a rural school community?
2. What specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district?

This review of literature begins with a brief profile of the American superintendent, followed by a history of rural education, literature on rural school districts, rural school communities, and the roles and responsibilities of rural school superintendents. The Deerfield County School system is introduced, superintendent tenure, superintendent turnover, and discussed are the factors contributing to superintendent turnover in a rural school district. It continues on with succession theory in organizations and education, the impact of successor origin in superintendent succession, and the many factors and characteristics of superintendent succession. The research concludes with the effects of superintendent succession and succession origin in rural school districts and communities.
THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY

Public education in America is constantly changing and evolving. The most recent legislation of No Child Left Behind in 2002 began another wave of innovation and standards based reform in which school administrators were called on to work their magic. In the American School Superintendent (2010), Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson state that:

Now, more than ever the work portfolio of America’s school superintendents is increasingly diverse: they are responsible for student progress and achievement while balancing the diversification of their student and staff populations, the explosion of technology and the digital divide, an expanded set of expectations and involvement from the federal level, the media, and board and community relations, all in the context of an increasingly globalized education system. (p. 2)

Superintendents may hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation (Sharp, Malone, and Walter, 2001). Paul Houston (2001), executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, states that the “job of the Superintendent is impossible, the expectations are inappropriate, the training is inadequate, and the pipeline is inverted” (p. 428). Houston also cites a number of trends that have made district leadership so difficult: “changing demographics and growing diversity, a fragmenting culture, deregulation in the form of vouchers and charter schools, decentralization of power, and increased accountability with no additional authority” (p. 428).
Superintendents are the educational leaders, and they are often the main link between their districts and the community (Alborano, 2002; Glass et al., 2000; Sharp et al., 2001; Tyrack & Hansot, 1982). Role expectations for superintendents have evolved over the past century and a half, incrementally becoming more demanding and complex (Brunner et al., 2002; Kowalski, 2005). Research stated previously that superintendents hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation. If that is true, what about the superintendent’s job in a rural school district? Does rural make a difference? This next section explains the history of rural education, rural school districts and the roles and responsibilities of the rural school superintendent.

**HISTORY OF RURAL EDUCATION**

Rural education was impacted by reform throughout the 20th Century. Perhaps no reform has had as significant an effect on rural schools and communities as school consolidation which has resulted in declining student enrollments. According to Bard, Gardner, & Wieland (2006), as early as the mid 1800’s, consolidation of schools was thought to provide students a more thorough education by eliminating small schools in favor of large ones. Legislation providing free public transportation was passed by the state of Massachusetts in 1869, paving the way for consolidation of rural schools. Also, the rise of industry in urban areas in the late nineteenth century contributed to the school consolidation movement. Research by Kay, Hargood, & Russell (1982) states that early school reformers and policy makers felt that an industrialized society required all schools to look alike, and began to advocate more of an urban, centralized model of education. Larger schools were seen as more economical and efficient. As a result of this thinking, urban and larger schools were adopted as the best model and from this context rural schools were judged deficient. Many studies resulted out of this school of thought but none
more important than the work of Conant. In 1959, Conant determined that in order to offer the best possible college preparatory curriculum, a high school should have at least 100 students in its graduating class. Conant believed that one of the biggest problems in education was the small high school, and that the elimination of small high schools would result in increased cost-effectiveness and greater curricular offerings. Many believe that this research and Conant’s subsequent book The American High School Today, contributed much to the move toward school consolidation. (Mayberry, 1992; Walberg, 1992).

McLaughlin, Huberman, and Hawkins (1997) found that in the seven years leading up to 1993, there was a decrease in 700 school districts (100 per year) in the nation. Rural districts felt the repercussions of school consolidation most severely with 415 small rural districts finding their student population folded into an adjacent district during the same seven-year period (McLaughlin et al., 1997).

In addition to school consolidation, a trend toward declining enrollments has also had an effect on rural school districts. Johnson and Strange (2005) noted that in 2000/01, 31% of the nation’s children attended schools in communities of fewer than 25,000 people, and 21% attended school in communities with fewer than 2,500. These authors noted that just two years later, the numbers had been reduced to 27% and 19%, respectively (p. 1). Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012) in the Why Rural Matters 2012 report, point out that this decline in enrollment these years later is substantial and has resulted in both a decrease in the number of rural school children as well as an increase in the number of students attending non-rural schools, thereby, producing a general trend of students moving away from rural schools and toward urban and suburban areas.
While school consolidation was done to improve education and save money (Stern, 1994), the results are sporatic. Regardless of the trends to reduce school size, small rural schools still exist and are a vital part of our education system. The next section explains what constitutes a rural school district.

**RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein (2012) in association with the Rural School and Community Trust and MCREL (2012), states that in the United States 56% of all school districts are considered rural with 32% of those rural school districts being public schools. McRel (2012) data also states that 19 to 25% of all students in the United States attend rural schools. Therefore, rural schools comprise an important piece of the pie in our nation’s public schools (nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/). The number of rural schools is contingent on the definition used to define rural areas and schools; however, the definition of rural is ambiguous, since its meaning tends to vary with the perspective of the defining individual (Wallin & Sackney, 2003).

McLaughlin, Huberman, and Hawkins (1997) noted that in 1993/94, nearly half of the regular public school districts in the U.S. were rural, and about 8,000 of the nation’s 84,000 public schools were classified as both small and rural. Depending on the definition of rural used in research (several definitions will be highlighted in this section), one study published by MCREL suggested the number of students who attend rural schools in the U.S. ranges between 1.1 and 11.6 million (Arnold et al., 2004). Another paper published by MCREL (Arnold, 2004) found that about 7.2 million students attended school in a rural community with a population of 2,500 or less in 2001. More recent research by Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012) and MCREL (2012) states that there are 11,251,481 students who are considered rural. In that
number are 7,757 rural school districts, 31,026 rural schools, and 858,000 students. With those numbers, Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012) state that 56% of the school districts in the United States are rural with 32% of those being public schools.

Despite variability among definitions of rural schools across the nation, research suggests commonalities exist across rural areas in the United States. For example, Wallin and Sackney (2003) suggest that similarities exist among rural areas, such as higher unemployment, higher poverty, isolation of individuals, and lower education levels of the rural populace. Stephens and Turner (1988) supported a finding by Nachtigal and Haas (1988) that rural communities often fall into, or transition between, two categories: (a) rural communities that are poor with little opportunity, or (b) rural communities that are strongly grounded in agriculture often accompanied by a solid family life and more resources. Regardless of whether the community is poor or not, Stephens and Turner (1988) suggested that rural communities have a “different value system” (p. 7).

**RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

Rural environments contribute to student achievement through a high level of community involvement (Jacobson & Conway, 1990). Increased community involvement in rural schools is common since rural areas often depend on their schools to be a focus of community life (Jacobson & Conway, 1990; Stern, 1994). These communities are a tight-knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, or employees. According to Lamkin (2006), in most cases, the school system in these communities is the largest employer. However, Stern (1994) noted that rural communities are finding it increasingly difficult to be involved in their schools due to perennial problems that their districts
face. Isolation, low population density, limited fiscal resources, easier access to the wider world, and a graying population, are reasons why some community members are less in tune with their schools (Stern, 1994).

Additionally, residents of school communities often bear a greater burden of the cost of education (Stern, 1994). In many rural school districts, there is a lack of administrative support due to the lack of money to hire a sizable administrative team. The superintendent is forced to wear many hats that include all facets of school administration (Lamkin, 2006). In these cases, the community picks up the slack where there is a need in order for their children to get the best education available. Therefore, rural schools often face difficulty trying to meet the demands of evolving state and federal reform agendas, while trying to be sensitive to the fiscal capacity of the rural taxpayers. Stern (1994) mentioned further that teachers and school leaders are generally younger, less educated, and paid less than their non-rural counterparts. A perceived lack of skilled professional educators, accompanied by a high tax burden for education, causes upheaval in some communities, leading to high poverty and population loss (Stern, 1994). Rural residents who leave their communities usually do not represent a random sample; rather, there has been a dramatic decrease of professionals and skilled laborers in rural areas (Capper, 1993).

Conversely, research in small schools (which included a large majority of rural schools) showed that small school size can reduce the influence of poverty (Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000). The resource limitations of rural schools can be compensated for by the supportive nature often found in smaller communities and their generally smaller schools (Stern, 1994). Many rural schools feature low student-teacher ratios, cooperative learning opportunities,
individualized instruction, strong relationships and ties to the community, and high levels of staff commitment (DeYoung, 1987).

Because of the community nurturance and involvement inherent in rural areas, a close-knit climate usually occurs naturally (Jacobson & Conway, 1990). However, a close-knit community may pose inherent hurdles for rural superintendents. Rural communities tend to promote a sense of cultural reproduction often resistant to new ideas and change in education; likewise, smaller factions of rural communities tend to disagree with how things are being run in their school district (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Rural factions that may not agree on educational policy include neighborhoods, businesses, school board members, administrators, teachers, elected officials, and religious leaders; each of these factions may have their own expectations for the school superintendent (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). What is the job a rural school superintendent?

RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

One can easily envision the many political dealings a big urban city superintendent must tackle throughout his or her administration. Big city politics, the possibility of unions, and a large financial budget spell out a very tumultuous job for any leader. In comparison, what kind of leadership styles, political problems, and expectations are involved with a small town rural superintendent?

The evolution of the position of rural superintendent is very similar to that of the city superintendent. However, the first rural superintendents were generally county superintendents who were hired to oversee the duties of several schools (Knezevich, 1984; Kowalski, 2005).
Knezevich (1984) noted that it is likely that rural, county superintendents held positions that were endowed with more power; the author based this thesis on a written job description of a 19th century county superintendent: “(the superintendent is mandated)…by all means in his power to promote sound education, elevate the character and qualifications of teachers, improve means of instruction, and advance the interests of schools committed to his charge” (pp. 8-9).

The job of superintendent, rural or urban, is a highly complex position that is full of politics and conflict (Blumberg and Blumberg, 1985; Chalker, 2002). According to Sharp, Malone, and Walter (2001), the rural superintendent does not need to be an expert in one area, but rather somewhat of a generalist. Most rural superintendents hold a wide range of responsibilities and organizational expectations. Although certain characteristics and problems are associated with the position, rural superintendents find themselves in a unique working environment. These leaders must be the jacks of all trades and be more than adequate in all areas of educational leadership.

Lamkin (2006) states that the traditional image of the rural superintendent is one of the leaders of the school district, which is typically the community’s largest employer. These small town leaders embrace this sometimes overwhelming responsibility and are often seen as pillars of ethics, leadership, and morality in the community. The traditional image of the rural superintendent is that of a person with many hats. Unlike the superintendents from large urban districts, many rural superintendents may be asked to perform duties such as teaching, coaching, or driving a bus. It is not unheard of to see a rural superintendent help out where needed. In essence, Jenkins (2007) states that the superintendent in this rural situation is the one person that the entire district and everyone in the town looks to for guidance and leadership. These
superintendents have lengthy tenures in their positions, usually staying in the same job until retirement. This type of work commitment is all a part of the job description for these types of leaders. According to Houston (2007), although certain characteristics and problems are associated with the position, rural superintendents find themselves saturated with unique circumstances and experiences due to the size and location of their districts.

Starratt (2004) states that, “superintendents function in an environment of nearly continuous turbulence challenged by concerns and pressures that compete for their attention and resolution” (p. 29). While a small county might seem like a place where less turbulence may occur, the rural superintendent is the sole decision-maker in the district; therefore, he or she must always take complete ownership of any problem that arises. Barker (1985) states these obstacles include isolation, limited resources, and community resistance to change. According to Bryant and Grady (1989), the simple reality for rural school districts at the start of the 21st century is that it is difficult to attract, reward, and retain school leaders. While becoming a superintendent in a rural town may seem less stressful than the big urban areas, smart educators realize that is certainly not the case.

Expectations of rural superintendents are similar to those of urban and suburban district leaders, yet the expectations from various factions are exceptionally high for rural superintendents (Sharp et al., 2001). These rural leaders must be special individuals. Today’s rural administrators need to be able to communicate well with staff, teachers, students, parents, and community members. In a survey of rural school board presidents, respondents listed desirable traits of rural superintendents that included honesty, integrity, good moral character, and good personality (Kennedy & Barker, 1987). In other words, rural superintendents must be
special leaders, and in some cases, miracle workers in order to face the many obstacles that may come their way. This next section will cover superintendent tenure, superintendent turnover, rural superintendent turnover, and the factors contributing to superintendent turnover.

SUPERINTENDENT TENURE – TIME ON THE JOB

In order to gain a broad understanding concerning rural superintendent succession, superintendent tenure must be addressed. In defining superintendent tenure, I am speaking of the time this leader is in office. Or in other words, the length of time he or she holds the title of superintendent of schools. While the research shows the ranges of average length of tenure of a superintendent in the same district are between 2.5 years (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padillo, & Ghosh, 2002) and 6.43 years (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000), there are many superintendents who remain on the job for more than 12 years. Although 21% of the superintendents maintained the position between 14 and 15 years (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), the greater percentage, 79% averaged only two to six years. However, Glass and Franceshini (2007) discuss the fact that it must be noted the approximate average length of tenure in any given school district is five years. Research does conclude that the length of tenure is contradictory and limited, but the average length of tenure has not changed significantly since the 1970’s (Natkin, Cooper, Fusarelli, Alborano, Padillo, & Ghosh, 2002).

According to Williams and Hatch (2012), the position of the school superintendent was one with a short tenure and therefore much turnover for many school districts (p.36). This increase in the turnover of superintendents has resulted in school systems operating in a state of “flux or status quo” and has ultimately raised the price tag for many school districts. (p.38).
For this reason, the study of length of tenure for school superintendents is one of interest to school boards and communities. It has been estimated that in order for a school district to experience successful reform, a minimum of five years of consistency is necessary (Fullan & Hargreaves 1992; Wallace 1996). Although the research varies in the tenure status, none appears to be enough time for a superintendent to make a systemic change within an organization and to develop a trusting relationship with stakeholders while creating a successful culture, one that results in increased student achievement. According to Williams & Hatch (2012), the underlying implication is that superintendents with short tenures cannot bring about sustainable and successful change to school districts.

**SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER**

Short superintendent tenures backed by the research above indicates high superintendent turnover and more superintendent successions. Does this create turmoil? Metzger’s study (1997) on superintendent turnover included interviews with 39 superintendents, from both large and small districts in California, including over 28% minority superintendents and over 10% female superintendents. Metzger (1997) found that the most common impacts resulting from superintendent turnover included the adoption of an attitude among staff members to maintain the status quo and resist change efforts, and that turnover usually came with an additional financial burden on school districts. Likewise, suggesting that superintendent turnover impacts school district success, one finding in a recent study by Waters and Marzano (2007) found that superintendent turnover is positively correlated with student achievement, with positive effects manifesting themselves as early as two years into a superintendent’s tenure. Whatever the
condition, superintendent turnover or succession happens and will continue to happen in all school districts.

There are several factors that lead to turnover in the superintendency in the United States. Significant reasons for involuntary superintendent turnover cited by Metzger (1997) included disagreement with board members and their political agendas, and personnel issues in which the superintendent often felt undermined by the school board. Metzger (1997) listed other contributing turnover factors as: (a) financial problems in the district, (b) union related problems and collective bargaining issues, (c) racial or ethnic issues that often cause board conflict, and (d) student achievement concerns (p. 3).

In one study, 90 out of 100 urban superintendents interviewed stated that one of the reasons for big-city turnover is the lack of “legitimate power held in the position to hire and fire employees, reconfigure struggling schools, and make curriculum changes” (Buchanan, 2004, p. 36). Sixty percent of interviewed superintendents in the study reported that politics and interaction with school board members contribute substantially to urban superintendent turnover (Buchanan, 2004).

**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER**

According to Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000), since the average length of tenure for a superintendent in any given school district is five years, there must be tenable reasons why superintendents move on in rapid succession. Research by Natkin et al. (2002) suggested superintendent turnover is not related to student enrollment or district demographic settings, rather, turnover is more likely to have been influenced by contextual variables than by the job
itself. In an effort to better understand the context of small rural school districts, one must first consider factors that contribute to superintendent turnover across all districts. While some factors may contribute to superintendent turnover, in general, the factors researched here are closely associated with rural school districts.

**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO RURAL SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER**

The school district, as in most rural settings, is the county’s largest employer. Therefore, the school superintendent is a very important figure in the county. In most situations, the superintendent (if an insider) will personally know many of the district’s teachers and school board members. This raises the level of difficulty in the job. Starratt (2004) states that, “superintendent’s function in an environment of nearly continuous turbulence challenged by concerns and pressures that compete for their attention and resolution” (p. 29). According to Alsbury (2003), when community dissatisfaction and frustration occurs, school board and district leadership turnover may rise. While a rural school district might seem like a place where less pressure and turbulence may occur, the rural school superintendent is the main decision-maker in the district; therefore, he or she must always take complete ownership of any problem that arises. While becoming a superintendent in a rural town may seem less stressful than the big urban areas, smart educators realize that is certainly not the case. Several factors contribute to superintendent turnover in rural school districts that are prevalent in most school districts. Additional emphasis will be placed on the factors that are more closely related with turnover in rural school districts.
LOW PAY

Perhaps the most significant reason rural school administrators leave their positions voluntarily is based on relatively low pay (Chapman, 1997; Dlugosh, 1994; Glass et al., 2000; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Parker, 1996). In the most recent national survey of salaries and wages in public schools, Harwell & LeBeau (2010) state that the discrepancy in pay between rural and non-rural superintendents is illustrated in two ways. First, the ERS study pointed out differences in pay by classification, showing that, in the 2005/06 school year, large urban school district superintendents had a mean salary of over $172,000, suburban superintendents nearly $150,000, small-town superintendents $108,000, and rural superintendents at $91,618. Second, the ERS pointed out the differences in pay by district size, showing that superintendents in schools with 25,000 or more pupils averaged nearly $185,000, superintendent in districts with 10,000 – 24,000 students averaged over $152,000, districts with 2,500 – 9,999 students enrolled paid their superintendents an average of over $133,000, while superintendents in districts of 300 – 2,499 received an average annual compensation of $103,388.

Professional salaries in rural districts are low by any standard (Jacobson & Conway, 1990), leaving rural superintendents with few options for an increase in personal earnings without moving to a larger, better paying district. In one poll of superintendents, 90% of respondents confirmed that better pay and benefits are a strong incentive to change jobs (IEL, 2001).
LACK OF CAREER SATISFACTION

Superintendents often leave their positions to accept a superintendency in a larger, more prestigious school district (Glass et al., Kowalski, 2005; Yee & Cuban, 1996). While usually associated with an increase in pay, upward mobility is the term that suggests a move to a prominent position in a larger school district is predicated on the need for increased personal fulfillment and gain. Recent studies have found that turnover in rural districts is often associated with low salary, low status, and unchallenging job expectations – conditions that frequently lead a practitioner to change employers but not exit the position (Kowalski, 2005). Routinely, individuals accept a rural superintendency expecting to gain experience and expertise in preparation for a job in a larger community or district (Dlugosh, 1994). In one study, when superintendents were asked why they left their last position, nearly 40% said that they were moving to a larger district (Glass et al., 2000).

JOB-RELATED STRESS

Many superintendents feel their jobs are complex and difficult due to a significant number of issues and problems that cause stress (Glass et al., 2000). Although stress is natural in any leadership position, over 50% of the respondents in the 2000 study (Glass et al., 2000) felt that stress in the superintendency is very great or considerable. In one study, nearly 7% of respondents completing a survey included an additional note on stressful working conditions as a factor that helped form a decision to move to a different district (Dlugosh, 1994). Stress in the superintendency often originates from the pressures of various segments of the district and community, each having its own expectations of the superintendent (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).
Stress in school districts has been exacerbated by the continuing demands for new programs, and by the state and federal mandates that often come with no provision for funding (Brunner & Bjork, 2001; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Stephens & Turner, 1988). These often unpredictable demands, combined with factors mentioned earlier, such as increased involvement and pressure from the community, school board micromanagement, and the expectation for achieving at specific levels, academically, often leave the superintendent questioning his or her decision to remain in the position. Other stress contributors include the isolation that often is associated with rural school districts, and faulty board politics.

**ISOLATION**

Superintendents are often alone and lonely in their positions, as technically they are supervisors for all district staff members (Chapman, 1997; Dlugosh, 1994). Many rural superintendents find themselves isolated from larger metropolitan areas and job-alike colleagues. Small size, sparse population, and isolation problems have always been part of the basic nature and work environment of the rural superintendent (Stephens & Turner, 1988).

**ISSUES WITH CURRENT SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

Pivotal to the success of any school district is a positive, professional relationship between school boards and their superintendents. School boards are legally extensions of state government, and they have a legislative responsibility to set policy and to ensure the state laws and regulations are followed. As top-level administrators, superintendents make policy recommendations, ensure policy enforcement, and provide leadership and management necessary for the day-to-day operation of districts and schools. Clearly, school boards and
superintendents have dissimilar legitimate roles; however, the line separating policy
development and administration is often unobserved (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, &
Ellerson, 2011).

Of the problems that contribute to voluntary and involuntary succession, friction between
the superintendent and board members is one of the most cited reasons. According to the 2010
American School Superintendent Decennial Study, the relationships between superintendents
and school boards have far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the
quality of school districts’ educational programs. Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and
Ellerson, (2011) state that “poor relationships can cause many problems that weaken district
stability and morale, increase conflict over district instructional goals and objectives, impede
collaborative visioning and long-range planning, and ultimately, generate institutional
instability” (p. 5).

Inasmuch as a poor relationship between the superintendent and school board members
contributes to superintendent turnover across districts of all sizes, literature suggests that the
problem is more prevalent in smaller, rural districts (Parker, 1996). The 2000 Study of the
American Superintendency (Glass et al., 2000) stated that, nationally, 14.6% of superintendents
left their positions due to conflict with the school board; however, the percentage was lower in
larger districts (10.2%), and substantially higher in the smallest school districts (24.8% in
districts with 300 or fewer students) (p. 69).
COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND POLITICS

The concept of local control for public schools in this country, a value rooted in liberty, establishes the right of citizens to pursue their interests through direct involvement with school boards and superintendents. According to Kowalski (2010), civic engagement can be productive or destructive, and superintendents do not always perceive community involvement as an asset for them, personally. As an example, individuals can support or challenge a superintendent’s agenda or even the superintendent’s job security. The 2010 American School Superintendent Decennial Study states that superintendents in rural communities were less likely to view community involvement as a major asset.

Superintendents often feel pressures exerted from various segments of the community (Ornstein & Levine, 2003); whereas Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011), in the American School Superintendent: Decennial Study, found that rural environments are often highly involved in education, thereby, fostering a more nurturing environment for students, and the authors also suggested that rural communities can pose inherent hurdles for superintendents. As the main link between the community and its schools, superintendents find themselves trapped by community leaders and factions within a rural community with competing expectations. These communities are a tight-knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, or employees. For rural superintendents, it is a doubled-edged sword. On one hand, community involvement is a gift from which schools profit and students prosper. On the other hand, the community involvement causes friction and many problems for these school leaders.
Many factors contribute to rural superintendent turnover. Low pay, lack of prestige, stress, isolation, school board relations, and community relations all play a role in the job of a rural superintendent. With turnover in the position comes succession or a change in leadership. What is succession, and what effect does it have on organizations and in educational settings?

**SUCCESSION IN ORGANIZATIONS**

When leaders are replaced in organizations, a change or succession takes place. These changes center around the new personnel and leadership style of the successor, re-defined work and social patterns, establishment of new networks of communication within the school and with the environment, and the opening of members’ minds to new possibilities. (Child & Kieser, 1981). Hargreaves (2005) states that “failure to care for leadership succession is sometimes a result of manipulation or self-centeredness; but, more often, it is oversight, neglect, or the pressures of crisis management that are to blame” (p. 163).

Gouldner (1954) was one of the first to analyze the effects of succession on organizations. In his study of a gypsum plant experiencing management turnover, Gouldner found that succession was immediately followed by staff conflict and lowered employee morale among company personnel. Similarly, Grusky (1960) conducted a review of previous succession research and reached the conclusion that succession was indeed a disruptive event for any organization. Grusky asserted that succession is disruptive to organizations “because it sets the conditions for the development of new policies, disturbs the traditional norms of the organization, and promotes changes in the formal and informal relationships among members of the system” (p. 105).
While it is now universally accepted that administrative succession causes disruption to one degree or another, the literature is not at all conclusive on the extent to which succession impacts organizational effectiveness. Research over the past 50 years has varied. It states that administrative succession impacts organizational effectiveness either positively or negatively (Brown, 1982, Gouldner, 1954, Grusky, 1960; Gamson & Scotch, 1964, Yukl, 1998). As Eitzen and Yetman (1972) note, “there are three possible consequences of a change in key leadership roles: the effectiveness of an organization may increase, decrease, or remain relatively the same” (p. 110). Indeed, all three of these possibilities have emerged as theories asserted in the organizational leadership literature (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985).

According to Brown (1982), the first theory of succession suggests that administrative change will have a positive effect on organizational performance. This is sometimes referred to as the “common sense” theory. Brown (1982) states that “conventional wisdom holds that changing leaders will improve organizational performance” (p. 1). Interestingly enough, very little succession research has promoted this view.

The second theory of succession suggests that administrative succession creates so much instability that organizational effectiveness suffers (see Gouldner, 1954; Grusky, 1960). For example, organizational effectiveness is adversely affected, at least in the short term, because new policies are developed, traditional norms of the organization are disturbed, and changes in the formal and informal relationships among members of the organization are created (Grusky, 1960). This theory certainly has its critics. Brown (1982) concluded that “the hypothesized links between succession, instability, and decreased effectiveness seems empirically thin and theoretically conservative in its attitude toward change” (p. 2). However, several studies since
have supported Gouldner’s original assertion that succession causes disruption, which negatively impacts organizational performance, at least in the short-term (see Allen, Panian, & Loty, 1979; Eitzen & Yetman, 1972).

The final theory of succession suggests that there is no causation between administrative succession and organizational effectiveness (see Gamson & Scotch, 1964; Brown, 1982). Gamson and Scotch (1964) studied the succession patterns of field managers for professional baseball teams and concluded that succession plays no causal role in organizational effectiveness. This theory has been referred to as the “scapegoating” view of succession, because Gamson and Scotch asserted that succession should be viewed as a scapegoating ritual performed during “transitory performance slides” (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985). In other words, Gamson and Scotch believed that the manager had very little to do with team performance.

This theory has had its critics as well. Grusky (1964) replicated the Gamson and Scotch study and came to entirely different conclusions when he disaggregated the data according to insider/outsider status of the successor. Grusky suggested that the Gamson and Scotch study ignored the variable of successor type because it assumed that the manager essentially has no effect on team performance. Relevant to the research being proposed, Grusky argued that “an important factor affecting degree of disruption is whether or not the successor is recruited from within the present staff or from outside the organization” (pp. 73-74). When Grusky analyzed the data accordingly, he found that seven of the nine teams showing improvement involved replacements by inside managers and eight of eight of those showing deterioration involved replacements by outside managers. According to Grusky, “the most pronounced findings of the entire study were revealed when inside and outside successors were compared” (p. 75).
Yukl (1998) suggests that succession will have relatively little impact on organizational performance unless the skills of the successor differ significantly from the leader being replaced. “If the successor is more skilled, performance is likely to improve; whereas, if the successor is less skilled, performance is likely to decline” (p. 414). Yukl acknowledges that succession research is still very limited and the results inconclusive at this point. Succession research indicates that top-level leadership “can have a substantial effect on organization performance, but succession studies do not explain how a leader actually influences performance, nor do they identify the conditions that determine how much influence a particular leader will have” (p. 414).

More recent research differs in some ways. Tichy and Bennis (2007) emphasized the importance of having a strong leader at the head of an organization to ensure sustained success. “CEO succession in any type of organization – from political, to not-for-profit, to business or military – is the key determinant of organizational performance (p. 108). Also, in an article written for the Harvard Business Review, Conger and Fulmer (2003) defined succession management as “combining succession planning and leadership development in a comprehensive process for finding and grooming future leaders at all levels of your organization” (p. 1). The authors added that nothing could be more vital to a company’s health than the choice and cultivation of its future leaders.

More recent research tells us nothing different. According to Mintzberg (2004), the best business organizations have a developmental approach to leadership. Those companies that develop their own leaders focus on core purposes and values while remaining open to change and opportunities (Schickel, 2002). Therefore, according to Fink and Brayman (2006), in the public sector, and particularly in education leadership, succession appears “to be more
serendipitous”; or, in other words, the effect of succession on organizations is merely left open to chance.

To summarize, the organization literature is inconclusive regarding the impact succession type has on organizational performance. Three theories have emerged: (a) common sense theory – administrative succession produces increased organizational performance; (b) Gouldner’s (1964) and Grusky’s (1960) theories that administrative succession produces a decrease in organizational performance; and (c) scapegoating theory - Gamson and Scotch’s (1964) assertion that administrative succession has no effect on organizational performance and is just a scapegoat for poor organizational performance to begin with.

It is well established in the literature that administrative succession is a universal issue for any formal organization, and the process of succession will cause disruption to the organization to one degree or another. However, the degree to which way succession impacts effectiveness is inconclusive. Perhaps, Wood (1987) summarized it best by the following statement:

Succession has been shown to affect organizations but to varying degrees and in different ways. Some organizations experience disruption with leader succession while others use the change to improve. Succession does not appear to show a pattern in how it affects organizations. As a result, it is difficult to predict the effect, intensity or kind of change that may result. Consequently, more research is needed to more thoroughly understand this variable and the effect it has on organizations.(p. 24)
LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The passing of the baton from a familiar leader to a new, unknown leader is a significant event in any organization. Fear of the unknown and apprehension of impending change affects everyone involved with the organization. Stakeholders question if replacing the past superintendent will bring positive changes, negative changes, or if there will be any change at all. These questions are explored in this section of the literature review.

The effect of succession on educational organizations is also inconclusive, but according to Fink and Brayman (2006), research does show that, in education, few things succeed less than leadership. Hart (1993) states that when leadership in school districts change, the working consensus “among members of work groups, their superiors, and environments is altered” (p. 4). Superintendent succession is not just a temporary episodic problem in individual school systems, but a pervasive crisis in the system. Hargreaves (2005) states that “one of the most significant events in the life of a school system is a change in its leadership” (p. 163). Superintendents set plans and programs in motion involving the entire district, and then he or she leaves for another job, retires, or possibly even gets fired. All organizations, including school districts, are often left to manage the day to day operations without a leader.

Research indicates or shows that when school leaders change, there is a disconnect. In many schools, teachers see their leaders come and go like revolving doors and quickly learn how to resist and ignore their leaders efforts. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), the result is that school improvement becomes like a set of bobbing corks with many schools rising under one set of leaders, only to sink under the next. The cumulative result is that a school’s efforts to sustain “deep learning” experiences for all its students are severely limited (p. 164). The school
district, then, suffers when plans for succession are not in place. According to Riddick (2009), little has been written about the topic of succession planning in education. In fact, very few school districts have “come close to having all the components of a well-designed management development system” (Tucker & Codding, 2002, p.22). The lack of leadership and direction causes the organization to flounder and, therefore, decrease in productivity. Ultimately, student achievement is affected which affects our greatest resource – our children. When students’ ability to learn is affected, community leaders have the right to ask questions concerning succession.

Furthermore, Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) stated that the approximate average length of tenure for a superintendent in any given school district is five years. Research by Geisel (2002) clearly states that this frequent turnover causes disruption which negatively impacts organizational performance.

According to Kowalski (2010), only about half (51%) of superintendents today said that they planned to still be a superintendent in 2015 – a finding suggesting the probability of substantial turnover in the next few years. With this rapid exodus of superintendents, school district leaders need to develop a sense of urgency about developing a plan for succession. The potential for an impending shallow candidate pool for superintendent vacancies is likely.

SUCCESSOR ORIGIN

In order to answer the research questions of what impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) have on a rural school district and what knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in rural school district, successor origin must be researched.
In any corporation or government agency with an appointed head, the departure of the current chief executive officer leaves basically two possibilities – either an internal successor or an external successor can be named. The same two choices face a school board in the replacement of its superintendent. When school board members embark on the often arduous search for a new superintendent, they generally agree they want the best person for the job. But, the question immediately becomes more complex: What do you mean by “the best person”, and where can that person be found? Many boards seek not only a skillful and charming leader, but also a person who can project for the school system a certain public image – perpetuate a good one or counteract a bad one. According to Sendor (1981), a matter of image can come down to deciding whether to choose a candidate from inside the system-or outside.

There is much research when considering the origin of a new superintendent after a succession. Their insider or outsider origin can have important positive or negative effects, depending on particular organizational and group contingencies (Wyler & Conrad, 1984). Internal succession has been found to contribute to organizational stability; whereas, external succession has been found to foster change (Carlson, 1961; Sendor, 1981). Stability and change, however, are not mutually exclusive, and in a complex organization such as a public school district, a board may want to achieve both stability and change. For example, the board may be highly pleased with the current fiscal management of the district and want stability in that dimension but be eager to update an antiquated curriculum. Therefore, the dilemma continues. What does the literature say about insiders and outsiders?
SUPERINTENDENT SUCCESSION: EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH REGARDING INSIDERS VERSUS OUTSIDERS

Carlson (1961) produced the first substantial research in the area of superintendent succession with regard to insiders and outsiders. Carlson believed that insiders and outsiders assigned different value to career and place. As a result, Carlson referred to superintendents hired from the inside a district as “placebound” superintendents and to superintendents hired from outside the district as “careerbound” superintendents. Carlson reasoned that insiders put place of employment above career as superintendent. They usually complete their careers in one district. Their loyalty to the district means more than pursuing the office of superintendent at any cost. By contrast, the outsider puts career above place. The outsider will go wherever the opportunity exists, will often get paid more, and will hold several superintendencies during the course of his or her career.

Carlson’s (1961) study included a nine-month study of four different school systems with new superintendents, interviews with twenty additional superintendents, and raw data collected for two published studies dealing with superintendents. Carlson’s research revolved around three different areas: conditions of employment, the administrative responses of successors, and the tenure and succession patterns of insiders and outsiders. With regard to conditions of employment, Carlson found that school boards look to replace a superintendent with an insider if they want to keep things as they are. The insider is seen as having a stabilizing effect on the district. By contrast, the board looks for an outsider when they want to create change. “School boards expect a creative performance from outsiders and are happy with stabilizing performance from insiders” (p. 214). As Sendor (1981) explains, “choose an insider if you-and the public-like
the way the schools are run and if you want stability” (p. 30). However, “choose an outsider if the system needs a shake-up” (Sendor, p. 30).

With regard to the administrative responses of successors, Carlson (1961) found that insiders tend to command lower salaries than outsiders because of the very nature of being placebound versus careerbound. “The outsider is in a position to bargain and win; the insider is not interested in bargaining and would probably lose if he did” (Carlson, p. 214).

With regard to tenure and succession patterns, Carlson (1961) disaggregated the length of tenure and origin data for 792 superintendents and found that insiders spent an average of ten years in the superintendency and outsiders spent an average of eight years in one superintendency. These numbers underscore how dated Carlson’s research is since the average length of all superintendents is currently around five years. (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner 2000). Unfortunately, the most recent national studies have not disaggregated their data by successor origin. Carlson also found that the least frequent pattern of superintendent succession is from insider to insider.

Carlson (1961) saw the insider-to-insider succession pattern as a detrimental pattern in most situations because of the tendency of insider superintendents to practice job perpetuation rather than being innovative agents of change. One could only begin to address this assertion in a meaningful way by correlating successor type to organizational performance as measured by the number of new initiatives implemented. Unfortunately, there is no education research, apparently, making such a correlation. Of the education research that does address successor type, most of it is focused on the personal, leadership, and attitudinal differences between outsiders and insiders (Crane, 1989; Gerardi, 1983), the conditions of employment (Clark,
Farmer & Welch, 2010), or the studies focus on building principals rather than superintendents (Ganz & Hoy, 1977; Wood, 1987).

Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) recognized the need to conduct research regarding the correlation between superintendent origin and district performance. “Even if the impacts are modest, leader succession produces a naturally occurring set of events that provides excellent opportunities for researchers to assess administrator effects on school performance” (p. 87).

While Miskel and Cosgrove did not conduct their own study, they did review the succession literature and developed fourteen rather provocative hypotheses based on the research. Of the fourteen hypotheses, the following four bear directly on organizational performance: (a) administrators chosen from outside the school or district produce more change and instability in schools than those selected from inside; (b) superintendent successions have greater educational effects than principal successions; (c) a curvilinear relationship exists between the length of administrator tenure and school effectiveness; and (4d) administrative successions have differential effects on school performance criteria. While it was not the purpose of this study to test the Miskel and Cosgrove hypothesis directly, their report underscores the need for further research in this area and is very noteworthy.

What knowledge, skills, and traits does a superintendent successor need in a rural school district. According to Matthews (2003), candidates for the superintendency find benefits and downsides to either insider or outsider status. Matthews states that there is no question that superintendents’ jobs are more stressful than ever before and that school boards are under increasing pressure to find someone who will make sure the district schools look good under new
statewide accountability plans that rely heavily on standardized testing. That means, the experts say, that every board is looking for a miracle worker.

To begin, who is this miracle worker from the outside? According to Matthews (2002), outsiders foster change and have been characterized as innovators. Therefore, choosing an outside candidate would be someone who is new to the district. He or she does not know the inner workings of this district and is very unfamiliar with the system. Therefore, when the school system needs a change or shake-up, an outsider is the best fit. According to Chung, Rogers, Lubatkin, and Owers (1987), an outsider may lack important information in situations of high conflict. That is an impossible job description, of course, but it is often easier for a board to convince themselves that such great talent might be found in a stranger than an assistant superintendent whom they already know. According to Diane Neal, member of Freeport, Ill. School Board, “external candidates are more willing to listen to the priorities the board wants to set; whereas, internal candidates may be either more inclined to continue running things as they have always been or less able to motivate other staff to consider new approaches.” Charles Ecker, superintendent of the Carroll County, Md. School District, states that outsiders are also more likely to be on the list of potential candidates maintained by the search firms hired by the board. He also states that the very nature of an outside candidate makes them better equipped to impress a search committee because they are going to have much more experience than inside candidates in dealing with search committees.

Also, common problem areas for new superintendents are many. Being unfamiliar with the community they have become a part of can be a major problem. Especially for rural superintendents, Orr (2002) noted, “learning the district and community, its values, priorities,
history and resources, and problems” should be a priority (p. 17). Often, an individual accepts
the job of superintendent in a new community with which he or she is unfamiliar. Having an
understanding of the environment, values, and traditions of the community will help the rural
superintendent make informed decisions.

An additional challenge for leaders hired from outside an organization is the process of
organization socialization. Each school district has operational procedures and a culture that are
unique to that organization. According to Gildea’s dissertation (2012), the outside rural leader is
inducted into the culture of the school district by means of socialization tactics, stages, contexts,
and outcomes. This induction is a process that outside superintendents must learn daily as the
new leader of the district and community.

Who are the “insiders”? According to Roger and Safer (1990), an insider is considered a
candidate who has worked in the school district for a number of years working his or her way up
to the top, advancing each step of the way. Matthews (2002) states that an insider usually has a
good reputation among the school board and educational community in the district and feels as if
they are due the chance to be the district leader. Sendor (1981) states that a school board should
hire an insider if their best candidate is in the district and if the community, as a whole likes the
way the schools are being managed. Therefore, according to Matthews (2002), hire an insider if
you desire a leader who is not going to make major changes or one who is not going to make
major waves. These leaders are characterized as adaptors and have the ability to maintain peace
in unstable situations. Also, Matthews (2002) states that districts should choose an insider if the
school board wants to pay him or her less money.
Historically, boards satisfied with the status quo have tended to give preference to internal candidates. This practice decreases the chance of disruption caused by leadership transition (Geisel, 2002) and improves overall employee morale (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Hargreaves (2009) noted the possible benefit of promoting a leader from within the organization:

We may have it wrong in education in assuming that fresh blood at the top is a level of school improvement. While this may apply to schools that are failing, it may need an insider to take a good school to greatness because it builds on what they inherit rather than striving toward a different vision against the inclinations and preferences of the staff. An insider may have a better grasp of the school’s weaknesses and is thus able to face the facts brutally and so do something about them. (p. 11)

What knowledge, skills, and traits are districts looking for if hiring today? The most recent data in AASA’s 2010 Decennial Study of the American School Superintendency (2011) states that twice as many superintendents were less likely to be promoted internally (66.2 % outside and 33.8% inside). In fact, superintendents in small rural districts were less likely to have been promoted internally than peers in the other categories. Why? Factors mentioned earlier, such as school board relations, low pay, stress, and isolation are all reasons for an increase of outside hires. Some past research is worth mentioning here concerning insiders and outsiders.

According to Matthews (2002), veterans of superintendent searches say there is something in the dynamics of the new emphasis on student test scores that may be pushing the external versus internal debate in new directions. Several superintendents and headhunters say
they think there is a renewed interest in insiders for no other reason than that such a high percentage of outsiders fail to measure up to the high expectations of their first days on the job. School boards find themselves feeling like lonely people who have had too many failed opportunities. Therefore, old familiar faces at their district headquarters, assistant superintendents they have known for years, begin to look more attractive. In the world of No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation with test scores and teacher accountability, this inside hire seems likely. Also, the research by Matthews (2002), labeling insiders as adaptors and having the ability to maintain peace in unstable situations, is a plus in today’s education world of high pressure and high stakes testing.

In summary, the education literature is slim with any meaningful research linking successor origin to organization performance. Carlson (1961) produced the first significant work in the field of education regarding successor type. While most of his research addressed the conditions of employment and perceptions of the successor, Carlson did conclude that insiders have longer tenures than outsiders. Carlson, however, did not necessarily view this as a positive thing for insiders because he viewed insiders as being more interested in job perpetuation than being educational leaders. While other educational researchers have studied successor type in various contexts, Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) have been the only ones to suggest specific ways to study the effects of successor origin on organizational performance. Therefore, according to research, take your pick concerning successor origin. Each school district has a different set of knowledge, skills, and traits needed in both insiders and outsiders.
CONCLUSION

Metzger (1997) states that the job or the superintendent is one of the least stable jobs in education. These men and women are the top educational leaders and are often the main link between their districts and community. For this reason, superintendent succession affects the entire school district and community and causes many changes and reforms.

The impact of rural life in a small community must be seriously considered when employing a new superintendent in a rural school district. In these rural communities, the residents are very loyal to their hometown. The largest employer in these rural towns is often the school system. As a result, residents of these rural communities often have an opinion and voice when it comes to the decisions made about school issues. While becoming a superintendent in a rural town may seem less stressful than the big urban areas, smart educators realize that is certainly not the case. Stressors embedded in a rural superintendency make it a very demanding job. In addition to leading school systems, these superintendents are often the most visible school officials in any community. Before the superintendent is able to apply individual skills to the position, he or she must first learn to survive in a very difficult, highly politicized, conflict-laden job (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Without the support systems found in larger school districts, rural superintendents find themselves wearing multiple hats. Due to budget constraints, rural school leaders often have less help with administrative tasks (Lamkin, 2003), and often fulfill the roles of business manager, personnel director, staff development coordinator, and other positions while, at the same time, striving to maintain effective communication with their communities and school boards (Sharp, Sharp & Walter, 1997). Relatively low pay, lack of prestige, stress, isolation, problems with school board relations, community relations, and small-
town politics all play a part in the life of a rural school superintendent and play a role in succession in these rural areas.

Succession’s impact on an organization is somewhat void in the literature. Three theories have emerged: (a) common sense theory – administrative succession produces increased organizational performance; (b) Gouldner’s (1964) and Grusky’s (1960) theories that administrative succession produces a decrease in organizational performance; and (c) scapegoating theory- Gamson and Scotch’s (1964) assertion that administrative succession has no effect on organizational performance and is just a scapegoat for poor organizational performance to begin with. The literature states that succession will cause disruption to the organization to one degree or the other. However, the degree to which way succession impacts effectiveness in organizations is inconclusive.

Succession in education research is also inconclusive. Hargreaves (2005) states that “one of the most significant events in the life of a school system is a change in its leadership” (p. 163). Research does state that when school leaders change, there is a disconnect. Frequent turnover in the superintendent position is of concern. According to Geisel (2002), frequent turnover causes disruption which negatively impacts performance. According to Riddick (2009), although little has been written about succession planning in education, ”there are a variety of approaches a district can take in tackling this issue” (p. 29). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) believe, “Effective succession means having a plan and making plans to create the positive and coordinated flows of leadership, across many years and numerous people, that will secure improvement over time” (p. 92). With superintendent turnover increasing rapidly, school district leaders must work to develop such a plan for succession.
Although this literature review has been concerned with specific factors that lead to superintendent succession in two rural school districts, one of the researchers underlining purposes is to focus in detail on what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in a rural North Carolina school district. In defining these superintendent successor attributes, it is noteworthy to discuss successor origin. Carlson (1961) was the first to research successor origin relative to organization performance. While most of his research addressed the conditions of employment and perceptions of the successor, Carlson did conclude that insiders have longer tenures than outsiders. Carlson, however, did not necessarily view this as a positive thing for insiders because he viewed insiders as being more interested in job perpetuation than being educational leaders. Matthews (2002) also followed with research on the insider/outsider debate in education and found benefits and disadvantages to either status. He stated that outsiders bring change to a school district and can be thought of as innovators. Matthews (2002) also states that insiders are those with outstanding reputations within the educational community in which they live. He stated that “insiders” are characterized as adaptors and have the ability to maintain peace in unstable situations. Who are rural districts hiring today? The AASA Decennial Study (2011) states that twice as many rural superintendents were less likely to be promoted internally. However, prior research reveals that some rural school boards are leaning towards inside candidates due to the high expectations of student test scores (Matthews, 2002). The familiarity of an inside candidate is the selling point. School boards know what they are getting with the inside hire, which gives the school district the knowledge of where the weaknesses of the inside leader lie. In other words, the school board knows the insider’s strengths and weaknesses. An inside candidate should bring no surprises to the table. The expectations of test scores are so high, the familiar face has begun to look more
attractive. In our world in which test scores and accountability have become so important to the educational leader, an internal hire seems likely. Whatever the case, the rural superintendent successor has a difficult job ahead.

Presently, there is a research void in the area of and study of superintendent succession. The purpose of this qualitative research design was to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district. Becoming the school district leader involves many attributes and a keen sense of the people’s needs living in that district. Of interest will be which leadership attributes will be best suited for successors in rural school communities. This exploratory research hopes to unravel a key to helping similar rural school districts deal with the issue of superintendent succession and finding that particular leader.
CHAPTER 3

METHODODOLOGY

This chapter includes information relating to the methodology and research design of the study. After presenting the methods of the study, information is introduced specific to the research design, including site selection, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and safeguards against research bias. This chapter concludes with the limitations of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative research design was to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. The top educational leader leaves a school district and moves to another district or job, he or she retires, or a previous superintendent is fired. Who then is ready to succeed into this important role?

The method of research selected for this study was a historical case study. In Liane Brouillette’s book, “A Geology of School Reform, the author looked at a school district over a period of four decades through the eyes of students, teachers, and administrators. Each time period was “shaped by widely differing historical circumstances and philosophical perspectives” (p.7). Looking through the lens of Brouillette, I modeled my study after her research.

Looking into one school district over a period of five decades, I sought to answer the two research questions above, and in doing so, also gained an historical perspective into the Deerfield County School district at that time in history. In these past five decades, the Deerwood School
District has been led by eight different school superintendents who were hired in the midst of many different educational changes going on in our country during that time period. Each leader played a different role in leading the Deerwood County School District to where it is today. For this research, interviews from community members, school board members, staff, and former superintendents were taken. Themes were gathered from the data. Data also included school district documents, newspapers, historical archives, and many publications. In looking back into the history of the Deerfield County School district, the researcher has gained a perspective on the many changes and reforms that happens in education over time.

**QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

In this study, I answered the questions of what impact did the type of superintendent (insider or outsider) have on this rural community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. Confusion begins for not only the employees of the district but also for many interested parties in their community. With change comes the great unknown which is followed by major anxiety and stress. Those involved include past and present prominent community members, school board members, staff members, and parents. All possessing an opinion, these community members are in search of the latest news. Thoughts and rumors abound concerning who will succeed the superintendent. Will the district hire an insider or will they go with an outsider? This school district is located in a small community where community loyalties are strong not only to their town, but also to their school. Most are lifetime residents who have a vested interest in the major decisions of the school district. Yin (2008) stated, when trying to answer these “how” and “why” questions, case studies have a distinct advantage (p. 9).
In case study research, one seeks greater understanding of the case – attempting to appreciate the uniqueness, complexity, and interaction of the case, and how it is rooted within its context (Stake, 2005). Merriam (1998) stated that case study research is characterized as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system” (p. 12), and that case study research design allows a complex phenomenon to be studied systematically. Context or environment is a key factor when studying the phenomenon of superintendent succession specific to rural school districts. Each community is tied to the school system through hometown loyalties. Everyone seems to have a voice on school politics and especially when considering the hiring of the school superintendent.

In addition to particularistic and heuristic, Merriam (2009) defined a type of case study that is descriptive. The end result of a descriptive case study is a rich or “thick” description of the phenomenon under study, meaning that the description will provide a complete description of the incident under investigation (p. 43). For example, in this study the research has looked into the past fifty years in a rural school district to identify superintendent succession and successor origin as it has happened over and over again. The overall history of the school district and its community has brought about a rich description of what school life and its community is about. It has also studied present and former teachers, administrators, school board members, and community leaders in regards to school system performance and community perception during a succession. This case study was descriptive in nature, i.e., it sought to explain the complexities of the situation and the many characteristics that might be causal to the problem.

Case study research design is well suited for situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variable from their context (Yin, 2008). For example, in this study the rural
community was tied to its school district. Loyalties are drawn in the sand and generations of families have been raised in the district. Everyone feels as if they have a say in the school system especially when it comes to the hiring of the school superintendent. Also, multiple case sampling provided robustness to the findings of the research. By looking at one school district, one can gain a deeper understanding into a single-case finding, thereby answering the questions how, where, and perhaps even why a phenomenon exists (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

According to Hatch (2002) there are many kinds of qualitative research (p.20). Each qualitative study has its own unique character that develops and often changes as studies are implemented. Hatch (2002) also stated that this research is hard to understand and describe because of its “complexity and dynamic nature”. (p.20) The word qualitative implies an “emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Qualitative methods provided both detail and depth (Patton, 1980). Qualitative research also means different things in many different settings. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000), “qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (p.3). This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Denzin & Lincoln (2000) go on to state:

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and
problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand (p.3).

Qualitative data consist of descriptions of situations, people, events, interactions, and observed behaviors, and often they include direct quotations from people about certain experiences, thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. Since this study examined the perceptions of individual participants working in a rural school district and living in a rural community, a qualitative research method was much more appropriate than any other design. According to Patton (1980), “the qualitative evaluator seeks to capture what people have to say in their own words…in order to find out what people’s lives, experiences, and interactions mean to them” (p. 22). Miles and Huberman (1994) added that qualitative data is a source of well-grounded accounts that provide rich descriptions within identifiable local contexts providing a “strong handle on what real life is like” (p.10). Qualitative studies also are more effective in presenting multiple perspectives and experiences (Dezin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative data allows the researcher to gain knowledge about a subject through verbal narrative, rather than through the manipulation of numbers.

The primary goal of this study was to tell the story of superintendent succession in a rural school district over the last fifty years. The study explored, from the perspectives of community members, board members, staff members and past and present superintendents, the impact that superintendent succession (insider vs outsider) had on a rural school community and what traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district.
In order to learn about superintendent succession and successor origin in these communities, I believe it was important to get to know the people and or culture of the area. In these rural school districts and small towns, the largest employer is the school system. The communities are small with the residents tied to community loyalties and patriotism to each other’s hometown and school. Alsbury & Shaw (2005) stated that there are various problems with social justice in small communities due to school politics. Everyone seems to have a voice and opinion on the major political topics and most certainly on who should fill the job of the superintendent. When there is a change or successor needed in the superintendent position many people are affected. It is my hope to describe in detail through qualitative research these superintendent successions and by doing so paint a vivid picture in writing of a rural community’s values and traditions. Merriam (1998) and Patton (1980) summed it up well:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means to the participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting. (p.1)
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The two leading research questions explored in this qualitative study addressed the following:

1. What impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs. outsider) have on a rural school community?

2. What specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district?

SITE SELECTION

The study conducted was a historical case study to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community. Looking back five decades in this rural school district, the research also sought to determine what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district.

The site selected for this research into superintendent succession in a rural school district is the Deerwood County School System in North Carolina. Serving a rural population spread over an area of approximately 480 square miles, Deerwood County School System is an example of a typical rural school district. It has sixteen schools with similar demographics in each. The school district is spread wide over a large rural area. Deerwood schools consist of eight elementary schools, four middle schools, one High School, one Early College, and one alternative High school. Deerwood County consists of three small cities/communities located in the sandhills region of the state. The school district has approximately 8008 students and is located approximately 100 miles east of a major metropolitan city and just 75 miles west of another rather large suburban city. These small communities are isolated and a significant
portion of the working population may drive 20 to 30 miles to work and to visit appropriate healthcare facilities. Many of the people who live and work there have grown up in the community, and there are multiple generations of Deerwood County graduates in each family. The school district, as in most rural settings, is Deerwood counties’ largest employer. Due to this fact, the superintendent of the school district is a very important figure in the county. In many situations, the superintendent will have taught many of the district’s teachers and school board members. This makes the job of rural school superintendents even more difficult and challenging.

In the last fifty years, the Deerwood School District has been led by eight different school superintendents who were hired in the midst of many different educational changes going on in our country during that time period. Each leader played a different role in leading the Deerwood County School District to where it is today. This study of Deerfield County Schools is similar to Brouillette (1996) in *A Geology of School Reform*. He states that “over the last century the role schools play in U.S. society has changed radically” (p.6). With strong influences from many curriculums, the Deerwood County School District has swung back and forth with many educational changes that have often reflected struggles taking place at the national level. Whatever the reform or role the school system has played, these school leaders along with the school system and its community, have risen to the many challenges over the past five decades.

The site selected for the study were chosen due to various reasons. To begin, the school district was selected for this research because of its close proximity to the researcher. Deerfield County School District in Deerfield County, North Carolina is the rural county in which I am presently employed in and have called home for the past twenty five years. Having been a
teacher, coach, athletic director, and now school administrator, in this community and school
district, I was provided with the unique opportunity to know who to interview concerning past
and present successions. In a rural community, having full access to all the right people is
important when searching for past and present school information. Knowing many of the past
and present superintendents, school board members, teachers, and staff, afforded me the ability
to provide a rich, robust, and detailed account of the many superintendent successions.

Secondly, Deerfield County was selected because of its strong community involvement with
the Deerfield County School System. Deerfield is located in a rural community where the school
district is the largest employer. Therefore, each family seems to have at least one or more family
members hired by the school district in some capacity. And the majority of families in the
Deerfield community went to school in Deerfield and now reside in their hometown. Therefore
they each believe and feel as if they have a vested interest in all major school decisions. This
speaks well to the strong allegiances these communities have developed to their school and their
town.

Also, the Deerfield County School District was selected because of its rural characteristics.
Despite acknowledging the challenges inherent in the lack of one clear definition of rural used in
research, the NCES or National Center for Education Statistics defined “rural” as a residential
category of places “outside an urbanized area in open country, or in communities with less than
2,500 inhabitants or where the population density is less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile”
(nces.ed.gov 2013). For the researchers’ purposes, the Deerfield County School District met the
rural criteria of population density.
As of 2015, population demographics for Deerfield County was: 46,564 people, 12,582 families residing in the county, and a population density of 98 people per square mile. Deerfield County is also composed of a land area of 480 square miles. It possesses a fairly large population that is spread out over a large area.

In conclusion, Deerfield County was selected for this research because of its close proximity to the researcher, its active community involvement, and its characteristics of population density. According to data from the Deerfield County Data Manager in the October 2015 Principal’s Monthly Report, Deerfield County’s demographics are listed below in Table 1. With a very high percentage of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch and the average household income of $31,944, Deerfield provided very rich data when researched.

Table 1.0: Demographics of The Deerfield County School System

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<th>Fall 2015 Data</th>
<th>Deerfield County School District</th>
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<td>Number of students</td>
<td>8008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi Racial</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian/Pacific</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>72.90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Data from the Deerfield County October 2015 Principal’s Report)
PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The purpose of this qualitative research design was to identify what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) had on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. To address this purpose in the Deerfield County School District, perceived characteristics contributing to superintendent succession and successor origin were collected from past and present community members, school board members, staff members and superintendents over the last fifty years. Confidentiality was addressed and submitted in the IRB at North Carolina State University. Upon IRB approval, all subjects were presented with an informed consent form prior to gathering any information. In order to ensure that participants felt comfortable participating in the study, participants were assured of complete anonymity. They were assigned numbers and were referred to by pseudonyms in the write up of the study in Chapter Four. Furthermore, the names of the schools and school system were changed in order to protect confidentiality.

Since this study was examining these perceived characteristics from many participants in the school district and community, purposeful sampling was used. The researcher accessed these particular groups of people from the Deerfield County school system and community. The researcher tried to capture the how’s and why’s and under what conditions each past superintendent accepted their job and or was let go from their job. According to Edmonson & Irby (2008), “purposeful sampling is best used with small numbers of individuals or groups which helps the reader understand human perceptions, problems, needs, behaviors and contexts, which is the main justification for a qualitative audience”(p.93). This next section states how the
participants from each participant group was selected for this study, concluding with a summary of participants.

Community Members

This study included responses from several community members in the Deerfield County School District. The process for determining which community members were selected was one that sought input from multiple perspectives. They included past and present (a) members of the clergy, (b) prominent business owners, (c) prominent political figures in the county, (d) parents who have children in the district currently, (e) parents who had children in the district when there was a succession, and (f) community members who are actively involved in school volunteer efforts (PTO). By interviewing several individuals in positions of community power and community members who meet the criteria above, responses from twelve community members from the school district and county were included in this study.

School Board Members

This study explored the impact that the type of superintendent has had in the Deerfield County School System. The perspective of past and present school board members is critical in addressing the purpose of this study. Therefore, board member participant selection included interviews with at least one school board member from each school board over the last fifty years in this rural school district. Responses from ten past and present school board members were included in this study.
Staff Members

This study also included responses from school district staff members from the Deerfield School District. To determine which staff member was included, the district office staff was asked to supply the names of at least one staff member in each of the following categories: (a) certified teachers and certified retired teachers who have experienced superintendent succession in the sample district sometime during their teaching careers, (b) building level principals and or retired building principals who have experienced superintendent succession in the sample school district, (c) district secretaries or administrative assistants and or retired district secretaries or administrative assistants who had experienced superintendent succession. Ten participants from each sample district were included in this study.

Superintendents

It was critical to this research that responses from past superintendents in the Deerfield School District be included in the data. By looking into the past fifty years, my goal was to interview as many past and present superintendents available regarding their succession and hear their stories. The number of superintendents interviewed was seven. There had been eight previous superintendents but one of them was deceased. Table 1 provides a summary of participants from all participant groups.
Table 2.0 Summary of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group - Per sample school district (go back Fifty years)</th>
<th>Participants (where possible and appropriate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community members (past and present)</td>
<td>People who meet at least one of the criteria below:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Member of the clergy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prominent Business owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prominent Political figure/ Mayor, City manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- and or city council members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Current parents who have children in the sample district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Former parents of children in the sample district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Community members who are actively involved in schools PTO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Members (past and present)</td>
<td>Board Chairperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Board member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Members (past and present)</td>
<td>Certified teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building level principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District secretaries and or administrative assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents (past and present)</td>
<td>Current superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past superintendents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(superintendent successors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DATA COLLECTION

This section contains information on how the data was collected in this study.

*Interviews*

In keeping with Yin’s (2008) suggested approach for data collection in case study research, the interview was the main instrument for data collection. After contacting the Deerfield County School District and determining appropriateness of the individual participants, a total of forty individuals was selected for inclusion in this study.
As suggested by Dilley (2004), the primary way a researcher can investigate an organization, institution, or process is through the experiences of the individual people.

According to DeMarrais (2004), an interview is defined as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study”. (p.55) According to Patton (1980), qualitative data consists of quotations from people and descriptions of events, activities, interactions, and situations in order to gain insight into a phenomenon by understanding the points of view of those involved. To gain input from key participants in a case study, interviewing is a technique that allows the researcher to get close to the people and situation being studied and to understand the details and depth in order to richly describe the case. Merriam (2009) stated “that interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 88).

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not necessarily to test hypotheses or answer questions; rather, interviewing is a way of “understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Dilley, 2004, p.3) Interviewing, as a basic mode of inquiry, allows for the interviewee to give the details of an experience. By providing a set of interview questions, interviewing is a process of providing a framework for reflection, selecting details of an experience, and making sense of the details within a given context (Dilley, 2004). Therefore all data collection was collected by face-to-face interviews and phone calls, seeking a rich and detailed description of superintendent succession and successor origin in one rural school district and its communities.
DATA ANALYSIS

This section contains information on how the data collected from interviews and documents was used to inform the study.

Wolcott (2009) contended that analysis “follows standard procedures for observing, measuring, and communicating with others about the nature of what is there, the reality of the everyday world as we experience it” (p.88). According to Marshall and Rossman (2010), “real research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally nonlinear” (p.21). Bogden & Biklen (1998) also stated that through a process of analyzing, coding, and sorting the data, the researcher establishes common themes from multiple data sources.

Interview Analysis

During interviews, field notes were taken regarding participants’ responses to the questions posed. Interviews were tape recorded and then the audiotapes were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. The researcher then listened to all responses to verify accuracy of the transcription. Reading the initial transcriptions also allowed the researcher to begin preliminary analyses and to gain a sense of emerging themes and concepts. A predetermined set of codes was used to assist in developing patterns in the Deerfield School District and the many past superintendents.

Document Analysis

Several documents were analyzed as a part of this study. Board minutes, including board member and superintendent comments, and motions made by board members were analyzed in addition to information gained in interviews. Similarly, when considering community member
perceptions, the perception of the local media was also considered. These documents were transcribed, reviewed, and coded similar to the interview data. From this data, themes were developed to enable the researcher to answer the research questions.

**SAFEGUARDS AGAINST RESEARCH BIAS - SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT**

When studying and researching any topic, the researcher’s upbringing or background becomes a part of the study. Guarding against these biases takes a conscious effort. The researcher will uncover any bias with a subjectivity statement that enables the reader to see and hopefully understand this research from the writers’ viewpoint.

Born in the late 1950’s, I have had the opportunity to see a tremendous amount of change in our country and in the way we live. Integration, women’s liberation, many kinds of new social freedoms, and advancing technology have all played a role and made a major impact on my life. But more importantly, being raised in a Christian home has set the standard for order in my life.

The decisions I make daily are also influenced by my parents’ view of education. My ancestors knew the importance of education. Both grandparents on both sides (mom and dad) are college graduates as well as both of my parents. In this Christian home, gaining a college degree was not optional, but expected. It was never a thought of when are you going to college but where are you going to college. From this ingrained belief came the trait of hard work. I was taught that going to college showed perseverance and determination and those traits would help get me through this life. Living with these types of beliefs gave my siblings and me the confidence that we could do anything we desired to do in this world if we were determined and
worked hard. If you put in the time and effort, anything was possible. "You reap what you sow" was the motto. Therefore, I learned at an early age that to reach the goals I desired in my life required not only hard work, but much drive and determination.

As a researcher, by background is also influence by my upbringing. I am a social constructivist that believes in a well-structured order and multiple realities. I also believe that there are many ways to obtain the desired results. It all depends on the choices we make and the amount of time and work placed on reaching one’s desired goals. In other words, you are in control of your life and therefore are responsible for your actions.

In researching superintendent succession, I felt like I was on both sides of the fence. My beliefs of hard work and reaping what you sow tended to cause me to side with the succession of an inside hire. To give someone the chance to be the leader of the school district where he or she has been employed many years and has climbed the ladder year by year to get into a position of leadership, pulls at my heart strings. I am living in that scenario presently. I also can side with the succession of an outside hire. Our former superintendent was an outsider who did a wonderful job. Because of his ability to make decisions with no biases, the district benefited greatly and grew tremendously under his guidance. I also believe in leaders who know the value of hard work and don’t mind putting in the time and effort to get the job done.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

To begin, the whole notion of reliability in qualitative research is problematic. That is, studying people and human behavior is not the same as studying inanimate matter. Human behavior is never static. Day after day, human interaction is not the same. In the same way,
people’s understanding of the world around them changes daily. According to Merriam (2009) (n of 1), “the scientific notion of reliability assumes that repeated measures of a phenomenon (with the same results) establishes the truth of the results. However, measurements and observations can be repeatedly wrong, especially where human beings are involved” (p.3). Brouillette (1996), in A Geology of School Reform, stated that achieving a working consensus among all who have a stake in the success of our public schools will require the collaboration of individuals with widely varying viewpoints (p. 240). I believe that meshing these different viewpoints together in a truthful way has led to a more robust study. With interviews from the various sets of school leaders and people in the Deerfield County school community, I received some very detailed and rich information concerning superintendent succession and successor origin. Since there are many perspectives, many beliefs, and many possible interpretations, there is no benchmark by which one can take repeated measures and establish reliability. Therefore, my hope was to gain a rich and vital interpretation of the phenomenon of superintendent succession and its impact on a rural community regardless of its true reliability.

This study was limited to the opinions and perspectives of the present and former superintendents, school board members, district staff, parents, and community leaders who participated in the study. All of these people were involved with the school system in some capacity in either the past or present time. When speaking to individuals who have worked or are working at the present, the responses sometimes portrayed a variety of beliefs and personal feelings rather than the actual truth. In addition, all participant responses were also limited by their comfort level and familiarity with the researcher. By working in the Deerfield District for many years, I have personally known the majority of the participants. Therefore, conversations from my interviews were more truthful and meaningful due to my work affiliation with Deerfield
County people. My hope was to interview enough people in the school system and community to gain some sort of commonality in their answers and clues to the impact superintendent succession has on a rural school district.

Furthermore, the results of this study were limited by the fact that only one rural school district was studied. Since the sample size was somewhat small, the results were not generalizable to all superintendent successors as a whole.

**SUMMARY**

The overall purpose of qualitative research is to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, and describe how people interpret what they experience. According to Merriam (2009), “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences”(p. 5).

The researcher’s key objective was understanding superintendent succession through the eyes of rural school district superintendents, school board members, teachers, community leaders, and parents. The goal was to see this phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s, and in doing so, illustrate a very detailed and rich account of this rural school district. Therefore, the research design was a historical case study. According to Yin (2008) (Merriam’s book pg 45), “when asking the how and why questions, the case study has a distinct advantage” (p. 13). Merriam (2009) stated that case studies are descriptive, thick, and particularistic (p. 43). They focus on a particular event, program, or phenomenon.
When looking at superintendent succession and successor origin in a rural school district and community, the researcher must not only understand the participants’ perspectives but also understand the role a rural community plays in succession. Succession in a rural school district and community is very significant for the community and town, as well. With change comes the great unknown which is followed by major anxiety and stress for many involved. The succession of an outsider or an insider leads to the debate in the teacher lounges, school classrooms, and around town about who would have been a more appropriate hire. This research has looked back into the culture of a rural community where the school system is the largest employer and where the majority of working people in the town were born and raised.

The research has looked back into the past fifty years in a rural school district to determine what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) had on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. Present and former superintendents, teachers, school board members, and community leaders were contacted and invited to participate in this study through face to face interviews. In order to reduce the bias that often is the result of research conducted by a single person, triangulation was used. According to Merriam (2009), triangulation strengthens the reliability of qualitative research. The researcher read and analyzed the data after the interviews. Data was coded to indicate themes, experiences, and beliefs that emerged during the study.

Chapter Four of this study will address the findings found from the research conducted. It will examine findings related to the characteristics of successor origin and superintendent succession in a rural school district and community.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this historical case study was to design and analyze what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. To begin, superintendent succession and successor origin must be researched. The top educational leader leaves a school district and moves to another district or job, he or she retires, or a previous superintendent is fired. Who is then ready to succeed into this important role? The question on everyone’s mind is, “Will it be an insider or an outsider?” Hiring from the inside rewards or honors those who have worked their way up the educational ladder and feels as if he deserves a chance to lead in the district in which he has spent his entire career. Hiring from the outside involves change and a new way of doing things. Therefore, rural school boards are faced with an important school decision that will have a lasting effect on their communities, not only the duration of the superintendents’ contract but for many years to come. With the frequency of this job change, why aren’t school boards and communities more prepared to make the best decision for their community and their schools?

During this qualitative research design, information was collected from past and present community members, school board members, staff members and superintendents over the last fifty years from a small, rural North Carolina school district. A personal interview was utilized to gather the information on each participants’ experience in the Deerfield County School District. The data derived from these interviews was utilized to determine what impact the type
of superintendent (insider or outsider) had on the community and what knowledge, skills or traits a superintendent successor would need in a rural school district. This qualitative research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs. outsider) have on a rural school community?

2. What specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district?

Overview of Sample

Initial contacts were made with the present and past superintendents, past and present staff members, school board members, and community members over the last 50 years in the Deerfield School District via email, phone, and face to face contact. Each participant was invited to participate in a personal interview that would add to the knowledge base of superintendent succession in rural school districts. The participants were informed that the study had the approval of North Carolina State University’s Institutional Review Board as well as the support of Dr. Cathy Gran, present superintendent of the Deerfield School District.

Confidentiality was addressed and submitted in the IRB at North Carolina State University. Upon IRB approval, all subjects were presented an informed consent form prior to gathering any information. In order to ensure that participants felt comfortable participating in the study, participants were assured of complete anonymity. They have been assigned numbers and are referred to by pseudonyms in the write up in this chapter. Furthermore, the names of the
schools and school system will be changed in order to protect confidentiality. Table 2 provides a summary of participants from all the participant groups.

### Table 2.0 - Summary of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group - Per sample school district (go back Fifty years)</th>
<th>Participants (where possible and appropriate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Community members (past and present) | People who meet at least one of the criteria below: 
Member of the clergy 
Prominent Business owner 
Prominent Political figure/ Mayor, City manager and or city council members 
Current parents who have children in the sample district 
Former parents of children in the sample district 
Community members who are actively involved in schools PTO |
| 12 people | Board Members (past and present) 
10 people | Board Chairperson 
Board member |
| Staff Members (past and present) 
12 people | Certified teachers 
Building level principals 
District secretaries and or administrative assistants |
| Superintendents (past and present) 
7 people | Current superintendent 
Past superintendents (superintendent successors) |

### Introduction of Deerfield County Today

Deerfield County is a small rural county consisting of two small cities. The school district has approximately 7900 students and is located over 75 miles from a very large urban district. These small cities are isolated and a significant portion of the working population drive 30 to 40 miles to work and to visit appropriate healthcare facilities. Many of the people who live and work there have grown up in the community, and there are multiple generations of Deerfield
High School graduates in each family. The school district, as in most rural settings, is Deerfield County’s largest employer. Due to this fact, the superintendent of the school district is a very important figure in the county. In many situations, the superintendent will have taught many of the district’s teachers and school board members. This makes the job even more difficult. Starratt (2004) states that, “superintendents function in an environment of nearly continuous turbulence challenged by concerns and pressures that compete for their attention and resolution” (p. 29). While a small county might seem like a place where less turbulence may occur, the rural superintendent is the primary decision-maker in the district; therefore, he or she must always take complete ownership of any problem that arises. Barker (1985) states these obstacles include isolation, limited resources, and community resistance to change. According to Bryant and Grady (1989), the simple reality for rural school districts at the start of the 21st century is that it is difficult to attract, reward, and retain school leaders. While becoming a superintendent in a rural town may seem less stressful than the big urban areas, smart educators realize that is certainly not the case. Deerfield County is such a place.

Of the seven former superintendents and present Deerfield County leader, seven agreed to participate in the study yielding an eighty eight percent response rate. The one that was not interviewed was deceased, and the interviewer made every effort to talk with all school personnel from that time period in order to fill in any gaps and to replace the personal interview. Deerfield County’s present superintendent was very helpful and made every effort to help where needed. Arrangements were made to conduct the interviews with each former and present superintendent face to face. In each case, the interviewer traveled to the home of the participant.

The school system in Deerfield County in the fall of 1968 included fourteen schools. The total number had been changed due to the city school district consolidation into one large Deerfield county school district and the completion of integration.

The 1968 – 1969 school year in Deerfield County was an eventful year as was the case in many rural school districts in our country during that time. Desegregation had been in effect in Deerfield County since 1965 with efforts in the fall of 1968 to move towards the closing of the all black schools forcing a total integration of schools. According to the book published by the Deerfield County Historical Society, Mixed Blessings, the author states that, “while there was no open violence, there were difficulties for many of the first black students at Deerfield High School.” They reported “being taunted to the point that some parents thought they needed special transportation provided to and from school.” (pg. 156 – 157). The 1960’s were years of protest, education reform, and controversy. It is with this backdrop that the Dr. Bill Brown era began.

Dr. Bill Brown was an outside hire for the Deerfield County School district in the summer of 1968. He came from another school district in our state with the assumption that he was a good people person and one that would make the tough decisions if needed. As fate would have it, one short year would tell the story. His arrival could not have been scripted any tougher with the issues Dr. Brown faced immediately. He was facing all the politics of two small city school systems merging into one, along with the racial tensions of school integration of the late 1960’s. The two small cities of Rock-City and Ham-town were merging into the present day Deerfield school district and total school integration was to be put into action as school began in
the fall of 1968. In talking with some parents of students at that time, they mention the word “tension” as a good way to summarize that summer. One community leader at the time states that “nobody really particularly wanted integration”. Another comment that summarized this era was “how are we as teachers going to get everyone on grade level?” A black principal in the Deerfield district during this controversial time states, “It was not a zeal to integrate in the white community. Finally the time came when we were going to have to do it, everyone had no choice.” He went on to talk about the first day of school that year at the once black high school:

When school opened that fall, you looked down the street and saw black and white children coming to the school. We greeted them in the gymnasium and had a short introduction. Each teacher called out the names of the children in their class and everyone went to their classrooms. That day a couple of white parents came to their child’s room and removed them from the school. I understood that this happened in a number of places in Deerfield County. There was a private school for white children that started that year but it didn’t last too long.

There were many doubts and much apprehension when Dr. Brown arrived in Deerfield County that summer.

During my interview with Dr. Brown, I found him to be delightful. Pushing 90 years of age, he was sharp mentally and truly enjoyed talking about his tenure in the Deerfield School district. In my interview with Dr. Brown he believed that as an outsider he had quite an effect on the rural Deerfield school district. I asked him about the attitude and climate of the county at this time. He stated that,
“I just told people that integration was the law of the land and we had to do it. There was no other way. We had to do it and we were going to be successful in doing it. You have to do your best. I had worked with black people for a long time and kind of understood their culture. I had attended their PTA meetings, drunk their punch, and ate their cookies. I wanted to treat everyone alike.”

He also states that “I was gone every night during that year trying to promote our schools.” He believed that he needed to be seen often, and he took every opportunity to talk with civic groups, churches, and PTA’s about the new things that were happening in the Deerfield school system. This work ethic to go above and beyond served Dr. Brown well as he battled the many political issues that came about during this turbulent time. He remembered one particular incident at the beginning of the 1968 school year at the county wide teachers meeting. He states that there were a lot of school teachers in the meeting talking about the problems with teaching “black kids.” One particular teacher stood up in the meeting and stated, “I know that black kids are going to be in our schools but I am going to teach on grade level. If they don’t come up to grade level we are going to flunk them.” Many teachers and staff in attendance at that meeting remember vividly Dr. Brown calmly standing up and stating, “we are teaching students and we have got to meet them where they are academically and give them what they deserve – an education, regardless of their color”. Dr. Brown goes on to state, “after that meeting, I didn’t hear much complaining from the teachers”.

This is validated by research that shows a rural outside hire does have its advantages. According to Matthews (2002), outsiders foster change and have been characterized as innovators. He or she does not know the inner workings of their particular district and is very
unfamiliar with the system. Therefore, when the school system needs a change or shake-up, an outsider is usually the best fit. The Deerfield County School District at that time needed a strong leader who could make solid decisions based on what was best for the students of Deerfield County. They did not need a leader who could be swayed by public opinion. With the consolidation of the two small city school districts into one and finalizing school integration, my research indicates that the outside hire of Dr. Brown was the best fit for the Deerfield County School board. Pastor Leathers of the First Baptist Church in Rock City at that time stated that “Dr. Brown was able to stand up for what was right in the face of much adversity. He tried his best to do the right thing in all the decisions he made.” One school board member from that time stated that “Dr. Brown was new. He was tough. He knew people and could talk to people which served him well in the political arena of that time.”

In my interview with Dr. Brown, we also discussed what specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district? He stated, “well I think you have got to understand rural people and city people both; and I had a background that I understood them both. I am getting old you know. I’m 90 years old and fought in World War II and I knew a lot about people.” He believed that an outside hire such as himself needed people skills and an understanding of all types of people. This research also tells us that a relentless work ethic matched with good people skills can serve an outside superintendent well in a rural community.

My research indicates that the outside hire of Dr. Bill Brown did have a very positive impact on Deerfield County because of his people skills, his toughness, his work ethic, and unwavering stand on the issues. His desire to meet the community and become a part of the
community was a major step to building a successful foundation. But as fate would have it, after the spring of 1969, Dr. Brown resigned and left the Deerfield School District to return to his home in the mountains of North Carolina. Therefore, he was not able to finish any initiative or plan he had begun. Although he began a foundation of trust within the community, his tenure as superintendent was not long enough to have any lasting affects.

The Buck Liles Era  1969 – 1979

Dr. Liles began his time as superintendent of Deerfield County schools in the fall of 1969. He was an outside hire that followed an outside hire. Deceased at the time of this research, I gathered information concerning Dr. Liles and his tenure as the Deerfield County School leader from various interview participants.

Dr. Liles began his tenure with the continuation of integration and all the protests and reforms of the 1960’s. One former teacher states that, “times were tough”. Young Americans demonstrated against the Vietnam War. African Americans demonstrated for civil rights. Women demonstrated for equal treatment. For many, society’s hero was the person who helped others. A period of change came during the 1970’s. The United States ended its military involvement in Vietnam, the civil rights movement and women’s movements reached many of their goals, and the economy suffered an economic recession. Interest rates and inflation were high. With all this going on in America, leaders took a laid back approach to education. The prevailing thought was that “schools don’t make a difference.” This view of schooling caused many to conclude that if schools don’t matter, then what you do in school doesn’t matter either. This negative attitude of education at that time deflated school standards and caused the
deconstruction of the curriculum. This laid back view of education hurt Deerfield County as it did many rural school communities at that time. One parent from Deerfield County during this time period stated that “there was no urgency in curriculum and instruction. We seemed to be much more concerned about integration and what our buildings looked like instead of what was being taught in those buildings.” Additional interviews led me to the conclusion that the thought in the school system in this era was construction and repair.

When integration began, black and white schools were consolidated into single buildings. This resulted in many building maintenance issues that had to be considered. A school board member at the time of the hiring of Dr. Liles states that “we had many schools that needed renovations and some needed rebuilding completely. We did not have enough money. We needed a superintendent at the time that could build schools and do it as quickly as possible.” A central office employee during that time stated that “Dr. Liles was very qualified for the job. One of his primary responsibilities in his previous job as Associate Superintendent in another district was handling the building and maintenance of schools, and we felt like we needed that expertise at this time. There was urgency in building school buildings.”

The major school building project at this time was the construction of Deerfield County High School. There were many debates within the community and school board on whether the county should have one high school or two as Dr. Liles arrived in Deerfield County. A former county commissioner at that time stated that “the idea of a one county wide high school was appealing to the residents of Deerfield County.” As in all rural communities, loyalties run deep. The majority of the residents of these communities were born and raised there and have special and unique ties and allegiances to the schools in the area. Most families are related in some way
and, therefore, know what is going on in the school system and, more importantly, care deeply about the decisions made. Deerfield County had major issues with all of the decisions involving the building of a new high school. The location of the school, the school mascot, the school colors, were all major issues Dr. Liles had to discuss with community members and get worked out. One resident told me that “one reason there is a front gate and back gate at Deerfield County High School today is that one gate leads to Rock-City and the other leads to Ham-town.”

The school board presented a bond for the community to vote on the winter of 1969 during Dr. Brown’s tenure. It was voted down. The school board believed that Dr. Liles could get the community ready for another bond vote with a 2nd referendum. An administrator in the district at that time stated that “we had to get the bond passed. We needed a new high school. We believed that our community felt good about Dr. Liles and our hope was that he could get it done.”

In the many interviews I had with those employed during Dr. Liles superintendency, I heard about his personality. He was a man that was called a people person outside of the workplace. A principal during that time stated that “Dr. Liles was a good leader. People respected his authority and his status as a superintendent, but he was very arrogant and had a hard time with the relationships in the central office. In day to day work relationships, Dr. Liles was hard to get along with.” A former principal for Dr. Liles stated “Dr. Liles had an awful temper. He would sit in his office and someone came by with a problem and everyone could hear him getting louder and louder. He would explode.” Others stated that “General Patton was his hero and he read everything about him.” That Patton influence seemed to bring about a dictator type of leadership that really caused him many negative relationship issues in the central
office and employees throughout the school district. The superintendent at that time in charge of Human Resources stated that “Dr. Liles was a people person until he walked into the office, therefore many Deerfield County employees disliked him greatly.”

The 2nd bond referendum did pass and the high school was built. During the ten years of Dr. Liles time as the Deerfield County superintendent, he built three school buildings and renovated four others. A long time Deerfield school employee stated that “I believe that Dr. Liles was the right person for the job at the right time.” The impact this outside hire had on this county was tremendous. Forty five plus years later, the Deerfield County High School facility is still in use along with the other facilities he helped build and renovate. Therefore his impact is still felt today by all residents and students walking those school halls. His knowledge and skill of “bringing bricks and mortar to life” was his upside, but his lack of people skills and arrogance with his fellow employees ultimately cost him his job. In the spring of 1979, the new buildings and renovations were all up and running. The Deerfield County School board decided a change was needed and Dr. Liles resigned.

The Chuck Harold Era 1979 - 1983

Dr. Harold came to Deerfield County in the fall of 1962 as the principal of an elementary school in Rock City. He quickly moved to the central office as the Director of Elementary Education and moved from there to Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. He was named superintendent after Dr. Liles resigned in 1979. Spending the majority of his work career in the Deerfield County School system, Dr. Harold was an inside hire following an outside hire.
He had worked his way up the ladder from principal to the top job while residing in Deerfield County.

At this time in 1979, Deerfield County had been through the controversial issues of the 1970’s and seemed to be moving forward in a positive manner. This rural county had endured racial integration, school consolidation, and had built and remodeled many schools throughout its communities. A school board member at the time of Dr. Harold’s hiring stated that, “we felt like we needed a public relations person.” An administrator also stated that “Dr. Liles had made many enemies. The morale of our teachers and principals was at an all-time low. We all felt comfortable with Dr. Harold because it felt like he was one of us.” Dr. Harold also stated that “the school board told me at that time that they needed someone to be a public relations person between the community and the schools rather than someone to just build schools.” In interviewing the various community and staff members, everyone stated that building morale for teachers and staff was a key component of Dr. Harold’s tenure. He was well respected, a former principal, a good and moral person. Everyone stated that public relations were important, but the issues that characterized Dr. Harold’s tenure dealt with school board relationships and all the politics that it entails running a school district in a rural community. An assistant superintendent that worked for Dr. Harold stated, “Chuck was a people person, but was lacking when it came to administrative skills.”

One major issue with Dr. Harold centered around school board relations. During Dr. Liles tenure and the merging of the two city school districts, the Deerfield County school board had a split group of individuals representing each respective town. There were three school board members from Rock City, three members from Ham-town, and one school board chair,
for a total of seven members. Over the past few years, prior and up to the hiring of Dr. Harold, this split group had remained the same, which over time had resulted in a board lacking unity. This lack of trust and unity caused the Deerfield School board at this time to have severe problems in making school decisions. Research states that pivotal to the success of any school district is a positive, professional relationship between school boards and their superintendents. School boards are legal extensions of state government, and they have a legislative responsibility to set policy and to ensure the state laws and regulations are followed. As top-level administrators, superintendents make policy recommendations, ensure policy enforcement, and provide leadership and management necessary for the day-to-day operation of districts and schools. Clearly, school boards and superintendents have dissimilar roles; however, the line separating policy development and administration is often unobserved (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

Research also states that of the problems that contribute to voluntary and involuntary succession, friction between the superintendent and board members is one of the most cited reasons. According to the 2010 American School Superintendent Decennial Study, the relationships between superintendents and school boards have far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of school districts’ educational programs. Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson, (2011) state that “poor relationships can cause many problems that weaken district stability and morale, increase conflict over district instructional goals and objectives, impede collaborative visioning and long-range planning, and ultimately, generate institutional instability” (p. 5). Dr. Harold inherited this type of school board. The lack of unity on the Deerfield County school board created dysfunction and was a problem for him.
and his staff. One former teacher during those years stated that “Dr. Harold was limited in all of his decisions because the board could never get together on anything. It seemed like it was a struggle to get anything accomplished.” Neglecting the needs of the children in the county, the Deerfield County school board’s allegiance to their hometown cities and to the former schools in those cities caused friction on the board for Dr. Harold. He states that “you could sometimes cut the tension in the room. Board meetings were not fun and I knew there were problems.” The personal agendas of school board members was the motivating factor for all school decisions during Dr. Harold’s tenure.

Coupled with the lack of unity on the Deerfield County School board and politics in a rural school community, Dr. Harold had his work cut out for him. True to rural characteristics, politics always plays an important role in a rural school community. Research shows that superintendents often feel pressures exerted from various segments of the community (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). In addition Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011), in the American School Superintendent: Decennial Study, found that rural environments are often highly involved in education, thereby, fostering a more nurturing environment for students. The authors suggested that rural communities can pose inherent hurdles for superintendents. As the main link between the community and its schools, Dr. Harold found himself trapped by community leaders and factions within Deerfield County with competing expectations.

Deerfield County was and still is a community with a tight-knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, or employees. For Dr. Harold and many rural superintendents before and after him, this became a double-edged sword. On one hand, many schools profited and students profited from Dr. Harold’s expertise of positively and effectively dealing with community issues. On the other hand, this community
involvement/public relations involving school personnel caused friction and many problems for Dr. Harold. These problems were magnified with the dismissal and hiring of a number of high school coaches. There became much racial tension and a black vs. white dilemma that Dr. Harold was never able to overcome. One community group was pitted against the other, and Dr. Harold was faced with the decision to break the tie. He really could not win regardless of his decision and faced extreme community backlash when he did make the call. This ultimately cost him his job. One school board member at the time stated that “Dr. Harold did a tremendous job being a public relations person for our district. He did not do a good job playing the politics that superintendents have to play.” Dr. Harold also stated that “It was essential that I be an effective PR person for the district. We were trying to bring the community back into the schools. That was my strength. But then you have to be a good politician and to be honest that was not my strong point playing politics against what I thought was right.”

School board relationships and small town politics both played a part during Dr. Harold’s tenure as the superintendent of the Deerfield County school system. Dr. Harold was only in the office of superintendent for four years. Administrators, teachers, and staff felt much more comfortable with Dr. Harold, and I believe that public relations were improved according to the transcripts received. However, it took more than public relations to be successful in Deerfield County. His trait of being a good people person served him well, but was not enough. He needed to be very good at playing all the politics with the school board and all of his constituents in a rural school district. When asked what knowledge, skills, or traits does a superintendent need in a rural school district, Dr. Harold stated:
“You must do two things. One, you must get along with the community which involves making decisions that is best for the children. That is all there is to it. Not their specific child, but all the children. The other side of it from the school board and county commissioners, you must play the politics too. It is a combination thing. You can’t do one well and not the other. That is why superintendents don’t stay too long.”

The Doug Jaye Era 1983 – 1994

Previous to Dr. Jaye’s hiring, the National Commission on Excellence in Education came out with its report entitled *A Nation at Risk* in 1981. By 1983, this report had become the educational statement of the 1980’s. This report stated that America was headed towards a national catastrophe due to its mediocrity and laid back approaches of the 1970’s if the local school districts did not begin improvement campaigns immediately. According to Education Week this report “jolted Americans out of their complacency and indifference to the state of schools.” Reform of teacher education became a key item on the educational agenda of this time period. Nationally, one of the most significant shifts during this time was the changing role of testing. With the implementation of new state assessments, the pressure for school improvement had begun.

With this backdrop, Dr. Jaye was hired as the new superintendent of Deerfield County Schools. He was an outside hire after an inside hire. He was coming from a similar school system in which he also served as superintendent of schools. In talking with members of the school board at that time, one stated that “we felt strong as a group that hiring from the outside was the best way to go. We needed a leader that could come in with fresh new ideas about curriculum and instruction to raise student achievement and begin to build new relationships.”
The Deerfield County school board knew the system needed some repair and change. Research by Sendor (1981) reports that in many situations similar to that of Deerfield County, the community doesn’t have faith in the current administration, and “school boards should choose an outsider if the system needs a shake-up”. (p.31)

Sendor states:

This might be only a perception rather than actual fact, but they might feel the academic program isn’t what it should be. People who are already in the system are identified with what’s going on. If there is a need for new direction, it’s probably more difficult for an insider to make major changes. An outsider comes to the job with a clean slate. (p. 31)

By bringing in a leader from the outside, the new superintendent is able to make changes because he or she has no ties to individuals, particular projects, or segments of the school system or community. The Deerfield County school board thought an outside superintendent could look at things in an objective way, and therefore, make any tough decisions or changes needed in the district. With the previous relationship problems inside the Deerfield County School board, and the past issues of hiring of an insider as superintendent, the board agreed that the community would profit from an outside hire. One board member at that time stated that “we had to go with someone from the outside and we had to mend the issues we had previously in our group. An outside hire would hopefully help us do that.” Dr. Jaye stated that when hired he felt as if the school board knew that “it’s candidate must come from the outside to not show any favoritism towards any other candidate to help mend the problems of unity they had previously experienced under Dr. Harold.” An administrator at that time stated that “hiring Dr. Jaye was fearful at first.
We did not know him and did not know what to expect. But we as principals did need a shake-up. Education was changing and we wanted to improve our schools.”

Dr. Jaye knew from the start that he had to be concerned with the politics that come with running a small rural school district. Research states that superintendents often feel pressures exerted from various segments of the community (Ornstein & Levine, 2003); whereas Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011), in the American School Superintendent: Decennial Study, found that rural environments are often highly involved in education, thereby, fostering a more nurturing environment for students. These authors also suggested that rural communities can pose inherent hurdles for superintendents. As the main link between the community and its schools, superintendents find themselves trapped by community leaders and factions within a rural community with competing expectations. These communities are a tight-knit group of people who have invested their entire lives in their communities and schools as students, parents, or employees. For rural superintendents, it is a hard call. On one hand, community involvement is a gift from which schools profit and students prosper. On the other hand, the community involvement causes friction and many problems for these school leaders. Dr. Jaye knew this and wanted to begin his tenure as the Deerfield County superintendent on a solid foundation. He also knew with “buy in” and unity from this community, his major goal of raising student achievement could result.

In the interview process he states:

I wanted to make sure that we did all we could to unify the system and that whatever was done as far as the schools were equal. We had to make sure there was good equity reflected in those decisions, and they could see that one school was being treated as fairly
as any other school. I saw that as being extremely important. Also, I felt as if I needed to build strong relationships with the school board and county commissioners. It was a matter of dealing with relationships and trying to work for unity and try not to generate any issue that would have been controversial. It was best to get to know the people and the school system and try to find out as much as I could about the historical aspects of the system. Once I could develop relationships, I could begin working on school improvement. What I found when I went to Deerfield County was not a school system. It was a system of schools. If you know what I mean.”

Dr. Jaye found “a system of schools” who were all doing different things. There was no continuity from one school to the other, therefore there was no unity or direction when school decisions were made. “Each school unit handled their own “system” as Dr. Jaye described. Research states that a close-knit community such as Deerfield County may pose inherent hurdles for rural superintendents. Rural communities tend to promote a sense of cultural reproduction often resistant to new ideas and change in education; likewise, smaller factions of rural communities tend to disagree with how things are being run in their school district (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Rural factions in Deerfield that did not agree on educational policy included neighborhoods, businesses, school board members, administrators, teachers, elected officials, and religious leaders; each of these factions had their own expectations for the school superintendent (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). When community dissatisfaction and frustration occurs, school board and district leadership turnover may rise (Alsbury, 2003). This counterproductive scenario describes the Deerfield County school system Dr. Jaye faced as superintendent.
In order to gain unity and trust, and to begin the road to improvement, Dr. Jaye engaged in a comprehensive planning process which involved community members, parents, business people, principals, central office staff, and teachers. He explains:

We wanted to take a look at all the aspects of the Deerfield School system. What were the strengths and weaknesses and areas we needed to improve in. In these groups of people were different committees specifically working on curriculum and instruction, facilities, student services, etc. We had about 6 or 7 teams that met periodically. This gave a chance for all of the community stakeholders to give input on the different aspects of Deerfield County Schools. From there, each team would make recommendations to the board, and from those recommendations develop goals that gave us direction in growing as a school district.

This developed “buy in” from the community and staff that led to a more unified district. It also allowed all stakeholders to have a say in the way the school system operated. Under previous leadership, the lack of community involvement was evident and needed reformation. The Deerfield County school board was a dysfunctional unit which caused many political problems for the former superintendent. Dr. Jaye was able to develop a team-like atmosphere that served him well during his superintendency. By involving all the stakeholders, Dr. Jaye not only developed unity throughout the county but also with the school board. However, more importantly, student achievement improved. Research states that rural environments contribute to student achievement through a high level of community involvement (Jacobson & Conway, 1990). Increased community involvement in rural schools is common since rural areas often
depend on their schools to be a focus of community life (Jacobson & Conway, 1990; Stern, 1994).

This outside hire had a positive impact on the Deerfield County School system. His knowledge of how to unify the community and how to get buy-in from all the important players served him very well. While interviewing many of the stakeholders during that time period, they all stated that “Dr. Jaye had a great knowledge of how to handle people and the politicians of that day.” After eleven years on the job, Dr. Jaye accepted a new superintendent position in the eastern part of the state. This was not only near his home but also provided a big increase in his salary. Ready or not, the school board and the community was having another superintendent succession.

The Herbert Wilson Era 1994 – 2000

With the 1980’s came ‘A Nation at Risk’ which shocked our school systems into an era of assessments and testing. As the 1990’s moved forward, the focus shifted to educational outcomes, such as the percentage of students attaining a score of “proficient” on a statewide assessment. State government passed legislation, adopted new procedures and standards, and pursued policies in a number of areas that reflected a new emphasis on outcomes. Much of the legislative activity related to education in the 1990’s focused on raising academic standards and holding schools accountable for student performance. With this backdrop of school accountability, Deerfield County hired a familiar face. They hired an insider who had practically been in the district his entire career.
Dr. Wilson began his career in education as a teacher in a neighboring county but soon was hired in Deerfield County as a middle school principal. Then, he was selected as the first principal of Deerfield County High School when it opened in the fall of 1971. After serving eleven years as a high school principal, he then moved to the central office as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in 1983. Having worked with former superintendents Harold and Jaye, Dr. Wilson was well known in the community and had a vast amount of knowledge about this rural community. This superintendent succession came at a time when Deerfield County needed a known identity in its top job. The school board felt as if they could not take a chance on an outsider. One board member states that “we had to have someone we knew. We wanted to keep the momentum that Dr. Jaye began.”

Research by Carlson (1961) reasoned that insiders such as Dr. Wilson put place of employment above career as superintendent. They usually complete their careers in one district. Carlson also found that school boards look to replace a superintendent with an insider if they want to keep things as they are. The insider is seen as having a stabilizing effect on the district. According to Roger and Safer (1990), an insider is considered a candidate who has worked in the school district for a number of years working his or her way up to the top, advancing each step of the way. Matthews (2002) states that an insider usually has a good reputation among the school board and educational community in the district and feels as if they are due the chance to be the district leader. Sendor (1981) reports that a school board should hire an insider if their best candidate is in the district and if the community, as a whole likes the way the schools are being managed. Additionally, Matthews (2002), suggest a district should hire an insider if you desire a leader who is not going to make major changes or one who is not going to make major waves. These leaders are characterized as adaptors and have the ability to maintain peace in unstable
situations. Also, Matthews (2002) states that districts should choose an insider if the school board wants to pay him or her less money.

Historically, boards satisfied with the status quo have tended to give preference to internal candidates. This practice decreases the chance of disruption caused by leadership transition (Geisel, 2002) and improves overall employee morale (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

A lesser chance of disruption coupled with the ability to adapt and not cause any waves of discontent are major reasons Dr. Wilson was given the opportunity to become the superintendent of Deerfield County. In a time when the word proficiency began and the beginnings of accountability were underway, Dr. Wilson seemed to run the Deerfield county School district without a hitch. The school board during Dr. Wilson’s tenure consisted of people in our community who thought a lot of Dr. Wilson. Being the first principal of Deerfield County High School and serving in that position for eleven years enabled a sense of trust between many parents, teachers, and businessmen. Various school board members stated:

Dr. Wilson was the obvious choice for superintendent. He knew the district very well and would maintain a calming effect within the school system. No one on the board wanted an unknown at this time. He brought our district comfort at a time when the state and federal government was beginning to push accountability. As the administrators began state initiatives, this sense of security with Dr. Wilson as our leader helped us get through the tough times.
In hiring Dr. Wilson, the school board made it apparent that teacher and staff morale was very important, and Dr. Wilson did his job. Accountability and test scores were always at the forefront of all his decisions. While interviewing Dr. Wilson, he repeatedly mentioned importance of having good people skills as the superintendent of a rural school district. “As the school leader, you need to be able come in and talk nice and hug the women’s necks.” He had the ability to talk to everyone and put people at ease. Dr. Wilson also talked about the negatives of being an inside hire in Deerfield County. He states that an “insider is often haunted by inside politics and cannot do or make the kind of decisions that a school board typically allows an outsider to do. Although I had everyone’s trust, I had a hard time making any major changes in our district. The board had no problems voting me down every time.” The politics at this level are so intense at times that an outsider is looked upon as an expert in major decisions while the insider, who the board knows so well, cannot get the respect to bring about any major change. Carlson (1961) states that “the outsider is in a position to bargain and win; the insider is not interested in bargaining and would probably lose if he did” (p. 214). This presented some problems for Dr. Wilson. The Deerfield County School Board trusted Dr. Wilson totally, but never felt he had the expertise to make any major district decisions. The board hired him to maintain a peaceful status quo; therefore, he was always handicapped if he desired any major change.

Maintaining good staff morale and public relations throughout the Deerfield County School district are traits Dr. Wilson exhibited that kept his “head above water” during his time as the Deerfield County School superintendent. But the knowledge of handling a multi-million dollar budget was a different issue. Not his expertise, school finances caused him many difficulties throughout his superintendency. The lack of this skill was heard repeatedly while
interviewing parents, community members, former teachers, and staff. When I asked Dr. Wilson about this problem he fumbled around the question and stated “that he had a person in charge of finances and she was in charge of the budget.” Certainly not as cut and dry as people think, the knowledge of balancing a multi-million dollar budget is important in all school districts, but especially in a small rural community. Money is tight and there is never enough to go around. There must be sound decisions made daily because there are only so many pieces of the pie to go around. Having the ability to make sure the money is spent the way it was intended and having the backing of the board with each financial decision is often a juggling act for many superintendents. A former businessman during that time states that “Dr. Wilson struggled with handling the budget. There was always questions about the various pots of money. As citizens, we never felt like our money for schools was well spent.” This became an obvious problem for Dr. Wilson and a big risk for Deerfield County Schools as time went on.

After six years as the Deerfield County School superintendent, Dr. Wilson out of the blue decided it was time to step down and retire. He stated “at my age I don’t need to be questioned anymore about my intentions the budget. I felt like I was not being respected.” Tremendous people skills and his knowledge of the Deerfield County School system were positives for Dr. Wilson. People trusted him and felt comfortable with him as their leader. His lack of respect from the school board when it came to new ideas or change, and his ability to manage rural school finances were both things that led to his retirement. From the *Daily Journal*, “after forty four years in education I am ready to go on with another chapter of my life. Deerfield County has been my home for many years and I will always be forever grateful for this opportunity”. Since Dr. Wilson’s retirement came so abruptly, the Deerfield County School Board voted to
appoint an interim superintendent. They voted to name Dr. Luke Wallace Interim Superintendent beginning August 1, 2000.


After serving as the interim superintendent for seven months, Dr. Luke Wallace received unanimous approval by the Deerfield County School board on February 23rd, 2000 to become the new superintendent of the Deerfield County School system. Dr. Wallace began as a teacher and a coach in Ham-town working his way up the ladder from assistant principal to the principal of two different Deerfield County Junior Highs. (they were called at that time) He then moved to the Central Office as the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources and progressed to the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction before being named superintendent. This superintendent succession was an inside hire after an inside hire. As mentioned earlier, research states that historically, boards satisfied with the status quo tend to give preference to internal candidates. This practice decreases the chance of disruption caused by leadership transition (Geisel, 2002) and improves overall employee morale (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

The Deerfield County School Board at this time had an aging board with the chairman serving a 3rd term. In an interview with the board chairman at that time he stated:

Dr. Wallace was a very capable candidate for superintendent of schools. He had spent his entire career in Deerfield County and we felt like he deserved his opportunity to have this job. We also didn’t want to go through the process of hiring someone new. The entire board agreed that a succession at this time with an outside hire would be too
expensive to not be totally sure what we were getting. We knew Luke and knew what to expect with him.

Hargreaves (2005) states that “one of the most significant events in the life of a school system is a change in its leadership” (p.163). Superintendents set plans and programs in motion involving the entire district, and then he or she leaves for another job, retires, or possibly even gets fired. All organizations, including school districts, are often left to manage the day to day operations without a leader. The Deerfield County school board wanted to avoid this major change with limited interruptions and stress. Other research indicates or shows that when school leaders change, there is a disconnect. In many schools, teachers see their leaders come and go like revolving doors and quickly learn how to resist and ignore their leaders' efforts. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), the result is that school improvement becomes like a set of bobbing corks with many schools rising under one set of leaders, only to sink under the next. The cumulative result is that a school’s efforts to sustain “deep learning” experiences for all its students are severely limited (p. 164). The school district, then, suffers when plans for succession are not in place. Although an insider was replacing an insider, the Deerfield County school board planned this succession with Dr. Wallace becoming superintendent with the idea that change would be less expensive and there would be minimal change for all the employees in the Deerfield school system. Therefore, the status quo for students and staff would continue without major interruption.

Also, the Deerfield County school board believed that test scores would be less affected if the inside hire was again made. According to Matthews (2002), veterans of superintendent searches say there is something in the dynamics of the new emphasis on student test scores that
may be pushing the external versus internal debate in new directions. Matthews (2002), also mentions that several superintendents and headhunters say they think there is a renewed interest in insiders for no other reason than that such a high percentage of outsiders fail to measure up to the high expectations of their first days on the job. School boards find themselves feeling like lonely people who have had too many failed opportunities. Therefore, old familiar faces, such as Dr. Wallace, assistant superintendents they have known for years, begin to look more attractive. This research restates the circumstances of Dr. Wallace’s hire as superintendent of Deerfield County. Its school board believed this inside hire was the best possible decision for the district at this time.

Dr. Wallace served for seven years as the superintendent of Deerfield County Schools with seven months of that as the Interim Superintendent. In hiring him, the school board made it plain that they wanted to bring about as little change as possible and to try and save money. As time progressed, it was evident that school morale was fine and that the change from insider to insider was a smooth transition. When interviewing former teachers and staff during that time they all stated “we all knew and respected Dr. Wallace. He was one of us and we had a high comfort level with him making the decisions.” The advantages that served Dr. Wallace well was his ability in dealing with people. He stated “that dealing with people and gaining their trust was key in our community. Everybody knew everybody and I wanted to be seen as trustworthy, fair, and not someone who just carried a big stick. Gaining the trust of all our employees was a key to my success.” Dr. Wallace continued to state that “you have to make people feel like they are a part of the community and I wanted what was best for the community.” In our conversation, he repeated many times that the school board did not want any major changes to come about in the district. He felt as if he could not really do some of the
things he knew was best for the school district because he knew the school board so well. He
taught and coached with many of them and they were all personal friends. They saw Dr.
Wallace as a friend, not the superintendent. He considered that a real disadvantage during his
tenure. He stated, “I had to be politically correct in making any and all decisions. I saw some
things that needed to be done, but felt as if I could not afford to do those things. It would just
cause too many problems. My experience of working and residing in Deerfield County for so
long hurt me in some areas of my superintendency.”

During Dr. Wallace’s tenure as superintendent, student achievement was not improving
and a number of schools were beginning to fall to below standard. Although many residents
knew of the low scores, the thought around the county was why change a system that is not in
need of repair and has worked well for many years? One administrator mentioned that “school
change was a very hard thing to overcome when our superintendent had relationships with so
many school employees and school board members over so many years.” As time went on, the
district mantra became maintaining the status quo, and the Deerfield County Schools began
falling into a pit of mediocrity.

**The Glenn Knotts Era  2007 - 2014**

The Deerfield County school board was faced with a major job in the spring of 2006. Dr.
Luke Wallace was superintendent at the time and had been in the Deerfield County school
system for forty plus years, working his way up the ladder from a teacher and coach to the
superintendent’s office. He had held this position for six years and had performed admirably.
Being a life-long Deerfield county resident, he knew virtually everyone and had for the most part
ran the system status quo. According to the hometown paper, *The Daily Journal (July 2006)*,
the time of his retirement, student achievement was down and many schools were performing below standard. Although low scores were evident, the thought around the county was why change a system that is not broken and has worked for many years? School change was a very hard thing to attain when the superintendent had close relationships with so many school employees over so many years. But after back to back inside hires equaling twelve plus years, the Deerfield County school board knew the system needed improvement. One school board member at the time stated that “we knew change was inevitable. Our schools were not improving and we needed a different type of leader.” Research by Carlson (1961) also states that the insider-to-insider succession pattern is a detrimental pattern in most situations because of the tendency of insider superintendents to practice job perpetuation rather than being innovative agents of change.

As previously mentioned, Sendor (1981) states that “school boards should choose an outsider if the system needs a shake-up” (p. 31). He also states that in these situations the community doesn’t have faith in the administration. An outsider comes to the job with a clean slate (p. 31).

By bringing in a leader from the outside, the new superintendent is able to make changes because he or she has no ties to individuals, particular projects, or segments of the school system or community. Without county ties or connections, the Deerfield County school board thought an outside superintendent could look at things in an objective way, and therefore, make any tough decisions or changes needed in the district.

The Daily Journal reported that Dr. Glenn Knotts, an outsider, was hired as the Deerfield County school superintendent in April 2007. According to Sendor (1981), being hired from
outside of the county has few disadvantages and many obvious advantages. Although unfamiliar with the Deerfield County school system, Dr. Knotts was hired by the school board, and they were committed to doing whatever was necessary to guarantee his success. According to some of the board members at that time, the board had rejected two inside applicants during the interview process and certainly wanted to show the constituents of Deerfield County they had hired the right man for the job. *The Daily Journal* (March 2007) reported that they wanted and would hire a superintendent who would improve student achievement.

Dr. Knotts had previously been a superintendent in another state and was let go by the previous school board due to a poor relationship with the school board. Retired at the time of the hire, the Deerfield County school board members stated that “they were nervous but really liked Dr. Knotts during the interview process. We felt like he had tremendous vision and would be a great fit for Deerfield. We wanted to see some things change.” According to Matthews (2002) outsiders foster change and have been characterized as innovators. Therefore, choosing an outside candidate would be someone who is new to everything in the district. He or she does not know the inner workings of this district and is very unfamiliar with the system. Therefore, “when the school system needs a change or shake-up, an outsider is the best fit.” (p. 19) In my interview with Dr. Knotts he stated that he was able to foster change because he was an outside hire. He states, “I did not have any history or connections to the community or anything to protect. Folks did not know me or get to me through my family. I did not have kids in the school system. I don’t think my predecessor would have been allowed to do the things I was able to do.”
Six months into Dr. Knott’s tenure, he saw inequalities in many grade levels in the Deerfield county system. In an interview, Dr. Knotts stated that “there was a lack of consistency in the teaching methods across the county. EOG and EOC test scores had fallen below standard, and the dropout rate had doubled in the last two years. The high school was really under the gun. They were on academic probation by the state and had to undergo a three year process to help improve student performance.” He saw the need for major reform. There had not been an organizational change in the school system in thirty five years. Being a one county high school, Deerfield County High School was functioning as the only 10th grade through 12th grade high school in the state. Deerfield County was also still in a junior high school organization with four junior high schools. Additionally, the elementary schools were operating as K-3 and 4-6 schools. District test scores verified that rising 10th graders were not ready for high school work. Teaching rigor was very inconsistent throughout the eighteen schools in the county. Dr. Knotts indicated that some students were receiving very good instruction, and others were receiving much less, resulting in low achievement. Dr. Knotts believed that realignment would not only raise the achievement gap, but meet the academic needs of all students in the district.

In order to push this forward, Dr. Knotts knew he would need to have the full support of the school board and his instructional staff. This reform would be something that had not been considered by previous leaders. Therefore, he would need the ability to communicate the entire reform to the school board in such a way that they saw the need for change as much as Dr. Knotts. He would no doubt face a large amount of public disagreement, but also disagreement from many teachers and principals due to the many changes that would inevitably take place. In our interview, Dr. Knotts said “I spoke with a lot of citizens and people individually. It was one of those things that people realized that they needed to do but they did not want to come out and
say that because there were so many people still stuck in the old way of running the school system.” In order to pull it off, he knew he must have an organized, well thought out plan.

For a new school leader to come into Deerfield County and change the entire system, the superintendent must have the full support of the Deerfield county school board. In order to realign the district in this way, the entire school system would need reform. This would mean that many schools would change in name, and many teachers would be sent to other parts of the county to work. In our interview, Dr. Knotts stated that “he needed to begin with the end in mind.” In other words, he began with the establishment of a vision. He met with his instructional staff to help organize and form this vision of the realignment. Once the vision was established, he and his staff gathered data to diagnose the many problems. This data included test scores, attendance, dropout rates, finances, and building construction.

Within six months, the staff had developed a realignment plan which included each school change and why, a cost assessment, a needs assessment, and a time table. The plan included: 1.) changing a primary school into the 9th grade academy. This included transforming the building to house 9th grade students both physically and athleticism. 2.) Changing a primary school into a transitional 9th grade academy for rising 9th graders not academically prepared to enter the 10th grade. 3.) The four former junior high schools (7-9) would all become middle schools (6 – 8). 4.) All former primary (K-3) and elementary schools (4-6) would become K-5 schools. 5.) The construction of an additional K-5 school for the year 2010 - 2011. With the vision on paper, Dr. Knotts then met with each board member individually, proposing to them what the realignment would involve. He stated that “they had to develop a plan that the board would agree on totally or the plan may fail.” According to Shannon (1989), school board and
superintendent relationship studies have been many with most concluding that “a positive
board/superintendent interaction is the single most important factor to successful governance of a
district” (p. 26). Trotter and Downey (1989) go on to say that both boards and superintendents
recognize the importance of a good relationship to effective leadership and superintendent
success. Dr. Knotts believed and knew communication would be the key. Chance and Capps
(1990) indicate that communication is a major obstacle to a positive school board/superintendent
relationship. Kowalski (2005) concludes that the superintendent’s new role should be
characterized as that of an expert communicator. At the beginning, a few of the board members
were skeptical, but with time, everyone on the school board was in agreement with Dr. Knotts.
Each felt this plan was in the best interest of the Deerfield County school system.

The Deerfield Daily Journal (February, 2008) reported rumors heard throughout the
county about the many possible school changes and what may happen. Dr. Knotts believed that
his communication should be only with the school board, his staff, and the principals in our
system at this time. He felt that with their support he would get the realignment plan up and
running. Dr. Knotts stated “that if we are going to make this change, we must get it done as
quickly as possible.” With the many changes in grade levels and buildings, a large majority of
teachers and principals would be moving to other schools in the county to work beginning in the
fall of 2008. For this reason, Dr. Knotts believed that to move quickly would ease some tension
and possibly make the transition an easier one. This caused much anxiety and anger for many
employees. Change causes stress in all of us. Therefore, to make the move as fair as possible,
all teachers were given the opportunity to give the school district administration their top three
choices of where they would like to work in the county. The district then placed each teacher
where they thought they could best help the children of Deerfield County.
In May 2007 at the monthly Deerfield County school board meeting, the realignment plan was voted on and passed unanimously. The *Deerfield Daily Journal* reported on May 23, 2008 that there was a tremendous uproar from the public. Dr. Knotts stated that he had kept the public in the dark as much as possible until the plan was ready. He believed that for the most part, the public’s opinion would be negative and very selfish (Dr. Glenn Knotts, personal communication, October 15, 2008). He states that “in doing it this way, it cost him some public trust but only for a short while.” He goes on to state that he wasn’t interested in the public’s ideas. He had the statistics to back his plan and was concerned about student achievement, not teacher reassignment or the changing of schools. “We needed a change. It had been 35 years with no organizational change.” Editorials became the norm in the hometown paper. One such editorial in the *Daily Journal* in June, 2008 was entitled “School Board showed arrogance”. Dr. Knotts felt like the most important facet of getting the realignment plan accomplished was holding the school board together during the period of time before the group could vote on the process. According to Lutz (1977), “while community special-interest groups and the public in general expect more voice in shaping school policy and procedure, most board members (87%) don’t believe their behavior needs to be based on the wishes of the public and view themselves as trustees rather than delegates of the citizenry (p. 2).” Dr. Knotts ultimate goal was for all board members to be in agreement with the realignment plan and ready to move forward. He felt if public forums were held that he and the board would only hear from those that disagreed with the plan, and that may hurt the group’s decision and could break them apart.

The Deerfield County school board remained in consensus with Dr. Knotts and his staff. In the fall of 2008, the realignment plan was put into action. Currently, the district has one high school (9th through 12th grades) with the 9th grade in a separate building. Four middle schools (6-
8) currently feed the high school; these were formerly junior high sites. There are seven K-5 schools which includes another K-5 school that was built in 2010 under Dr. Knotts original plan. Buildings have changed physically. Teachers and principals have moved to other schools, and athletic playing fields have been built. There were many physical changes that took place in school facilities during the realignment. However, the most critical reform that occurred for this district during this time came with student achievement. From the 2009 – 2010 school year through the 2013 – 2014 school year, Deerfield Counties EOG/EOC scores showed steady improvement as compared with other schools in our region (see Table 3).

**Table 3  Deerfield County Schools Overall Performance on EOG/EOC Tests – Regional Ranking**

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<td>State Score</td>
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In our interview, Dr. Knotts talked about the different knowledge, skills, and traits needed by a successor in a rural school district. He made some very interesting and valid points. He began by stating, “You have got to have a good vision of your finances. I spent time with our finance officer daily. Having a working knowledge of the school finances helps you stretch the dollars. This is a necessity in a rural school district.” Secondly, he states that “the superintendent must know something about curriculum instruction and how kids learn. We just learn differently today and we must be able to change.” Dr. Knotts realized that present research has informed us much about how students learn and we as leaders need to be in tune with that in order to raise achievement. Thirdly, the former superintendent said that “today a rural school leader needs to be up to date with technology. It changes everyday.” Making wise investments in our students’ future through technology will keep children ahead of the game was a constant theme that ran through the interview. Lastly, Dr. Knotts continued to talk about the ability to build relationships with the community and with the school board. He states that “you have got to know your school board and work with them. You must get their trust and understanding. Invest time and effort in your community and board to get the buy in you need.”

Dr. Knotts retired from Deerfield County School in June 2014 with the majority of its schools showing improvement on the EOG/EOC annual tests as compared to other regional school districts. (see Table 3) His plan had worked and put the Deerfield County Schools on the road to even greater successes. Although a newcomer to the county, he saw the need for reform. This reform began with a vision that led to a well-planned course of action. Through communication with the school board and his staff, he skillfully handled the political issues of realignment. Regardless of criticism and countless complaints, he continued on a course for
student achievement. Upon his retirement, with realignment now a thing of the past, Deerfield County hired its present superintendent.

**The Cathy Gran Era  2014 – Present**

Dr. Gran was hired in the summer of 2014 with a unanimous vote by the Deerfield County School board to accept her as the new superintendent. She was an inside hire after the outside hire of Dr. Glenn Knotts. At this time, Deerfield County Schools were moving together with one heartbeat and student achievement was rising. Dr. Gran was considered an inside hire but I would like to think of her as a hybrid insider. She was born and raised in Deerfield County, and was the first Deerfield County school superintendent that was a graduate of Deerfield County High School. Beginning her career as a teacher in Deerfield County, she quickly moved to nearby Scotland County and became a school administrator there. Beginning as an assistant principal, she quickly moved her way up to becoming a principal. Known as an outstanding principal, Dr. Gran served twelve years in that capacity in Scotland County and then moved to the Central office as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction. After a few years, Dr. Knotts hired her back to Deerfield County as the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources. She served three years in that role until she was named superintendent. Therefore, Dr. Gran spent the majority of her teaching and administrative career in a county other than Deerfield. She was raised in Deerfield County and began her career there, but was not involved in the school system for many years. She is considered one of Deerfield’s own, an insider but a hybrid without all the attributes of an insider or an outsider.

Was Dr. Gran an insider? According to Roger and Safer (1990), an insider is considered a candidate who has worked in the school district for a number of years working his or her way
up to the top, advancing each step of the way. Sendor (1981) states that a school board should hire an insider if their best candidate is in the district and if the community, as a whole likes the way the schools are being managed. Dr. Gran was currently working in the Deerfield district when hired as superintendent, but she worked her way up the administrative ladder in another district, not in the Deerfield school district.

Was Dr. Gran an outsider? According to Matthews (2002), outsiders foster change and have been characterized as innovators. Therefore, choosing an outside candidate would be someone who is new to the district. He or she does not know the inner workings of this district and is very unfamiliar with the system. Therefore, when the school system needs a change or shake-up, an outsider is the best fit. Dr. Gran was not new to the Deerfield School district, nor did the district need a shake-up at the time of her hire.

Dr. Gran was some of both, a hybrid insider, which the Deerfield County School board felt was a perfect fit. The school board chairman stated that “Dr. Gran was exactly what we wanted in a superintendent. She knew our county, she was one of our own, yet she had a proven track record of excellence in another county. We recognized her expertise and felt like we could look far and wide and not find someone more qualified. We unanimously voted for her.” Another board member stated that “the majority of our teachers and administrators did not know Dr. Gran prior to her arrival. This made the hire even better.”

While interviewing Dr. Gran, she talks about insider and outside superintendent successors in rural school districts. “I think that sometimes the outside hire is the correct one. In Dr. Knotts’s case it was helpful that he did not have all the relationships to deal with in a rural community and he therefore could genuinely make the best decision for all children in our
Dr. Gran was an insider that felt in some ways like an outsider although she was working in Deerfield County at the time of her hire. She states, “I knew a lot of people in Deerfield County when I came back to work there. I felt like an insider.” She continued talking about the future as an inside hire stating, “I really have an outsider’s point of view. At this point in my career I really don’t have an agenda in terms of advancing my career or trying to make certain groups happy. I guess I am in a unique position because I am heading towards retirement and I am married to an established person so it is not important to me who I happen to make happy or mad. I do not want to upset anyone but I will make decisions for the right reason regardless if I step on anyone’s toes.”

In our interview, we discussed what knowledge, skills, and traits a superintendent needed in a rural school district. Some of these characteristics were illustrated by Dr. Gran during her second year as superintendent involving the hiring of Deerfield County’s football coach. As in most rural communities, athletics is an integral part in the lives of its residents. The majority of the residents in Deerfield County were born and raised there and have special and unique ties and allegiances to its home town school. The Deerfield county community is a tight knit group of people who have invested their lives in the school system and you can guarantee they enjoy and expect excellence in athletics, especially football. One resident I had the pleasure to interview stated “in Deerfield County you are born with two things – a birth certificate and a coaching license.” Another resident stated that “there is a reason the football stadium was finished before Deerfield High School was built.” Football has everyone’s attention, especially when it comes to hiring the new head coach. Deerfield County’s newest Head Coach was hired in the spring of 2015. After weeks of interviews, Dr. Gran stated that “this has been the hardest thing I have done as the superintendent. I wanted to make sure we had the right person for the job.”
his first season this past fall, Coach Castle had some big shoes to fill. His predecessor had won over 80% of his games and decided to take another job near his aging mother and father. Feeling the pressure to succeed, Dr. Gran was concerned about the hire and hoped the best for the upcoming season. As summer changed to fall, the team was winning and Dr. Gran began to gain more confidence in this major hire. After a big Friday night win and a pleasant Saturday, Deerfield County residents woke up Sunday morning to the news that Coach Castle had been arrested and charged with a DUI. Dr. Gran stated later on that week that “Coach Castle was suspended with pay until further investigation.” While interviewing Dr. Gran, she stated that “thus far in my superintendency, there has been nothing harder than having to make a decision about this incident. Our community cared deeply about what was going to happen and I really felt like I was on the hot seat. There were reasons to let him go and reasons to keep him. This decision affected so many people. I had to do what I thought was right for our students and staff.” Research by Jenkins (2007) states that the superintendent in this rural situation is the one person that the entire district and everyone in the town looks to for guidance and leadership. According to Houston (2007), although certain characteristics and problems are associated with the position, rural superintendents find themselves saturated with unique circumstances and experiences. Dr. Gran had her first major decision to make and all eyes and ears were upon her. After a couple of days of discussions with school board members, executive staff, and legal representation, she decided to reinstate Coach Castle with stipulations that involved alcohol rehabilitation and specific personnel guidelines. The football season continued with much success, and the team making the playoffs and receiving numerous accolades. In making this decision, Dr. Gran exhibited the ability to not only make a tough decision, but make a decision that she felt was right, regardless of public opinion. She states:
“In a rural community, there is nothing that can replace good public relations. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody is related to somebody. As an insider in a rural school district, you have got to understand that every decision is scrutinized down to every detail. Therefore, make decisions only for the right reasons. It takes tough skin.”

Going on two and ½ years, Dr. Gran has been the superintendent of Deerfield County Schools. She has set the bar high and her expectations are very demanding, but realistic. Being considered both an insider and an outsider has certainly helped her with relationships from her constituents in the county, but more importantly has given her instant respect from the Deerfield County School board. In a short time, she has proven to be an excellent leader and has done nothing but gain credibility each year during her tenure. The Deerfield County School board chairman stated that “Dr. Gran has been a wonderful hire. We thought we lost a lot when Dr. Knotts retired, but we have continued to improve student achievement and I could not be more proud of our leadership in our central office.” Also, because she was a successful principal, and an Assistant Superintendent in Curriculum and Instruction Dr. Gran has expertise in helping coach and guide the principals in the county to strive for excellence, as evidenced in the continued improvement in student achievement on the EOG/EOC tests when compared regionally. (see Table 4) At the present time, there are nothing but positives in the county. All future indications for this insider seem to be very bright.
Table 4.0 Deerfield County Schools Overall Performance on EOG/EOC Tests

– Regional Ranking

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SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW DATA

The overall summary of the interview data tells a story of one rural school district over the past fifty years and its different superintendents. The study explores, from the perspectives of community members, board members, staff members, and past and present superintendents, the impact that superintendent succession had on a rural school community and what knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district.

In these rural school districts and small towns, the largest employer is the school system. The communities are small with the residents tied to community loyalties and patriotism to each
other’s hometown and school. Alsbury and Shaw (2005) states that there are various problems with social justice in small communities due to school politics. Everyone seems to have a voice and opinion on the major political topics and most certainly on who should fill the job of the superintendent. When there is a change or successor needed in the superintendent position many people are affected. It has been my hope to describe in detail through this historical case study the past fifty years of the Deerfield County School system through the eyes of community members, board members, staff, and past and present superintendents. Each superintendent was discussed in detail during their era or time period.

The Bill Brown Era was a time when the Deerfield County School system faced consolidation and the federal mandate to integrate schools. Staying in the Deerfield County School office only one year before moving back to his home, Dr. Brown made a good impression in a short period of time. Never swayed by public opinion, Dr. Brown was an outsider who was employed when Deerfield County needed its strongest leader. His unwavering stand on the issues, work ethic, toughness, and tremendous people skills, began a foundation for the future in Deerfield County Schools. Only staying in Deerfield County one school year, any initiative that he began was never completed.

The Buck Liles Era was a time of tremendous change for America. The 1970’s took a laid back approach to education, while dealing with the continuation of integration, Vietnam, civil rights, women’s rights, and the economic recession. This approach deflated school standards causing negative repercussions in education to be felt for years to come. With this backdrop, Dr. Liles was hired as the Deerfield County School superintendent. He was an outside hire after an outside hire. Having much experience in building and maintenance in his former
job, the board believed that his expertise in this area was needed for Deerfield County. Once on the job, Dr. Liles built three schools with one of them being Deerfield County High School. Therefore his impact is still felt today as students continue to walk up and down those hallways. Building and maintenance was his upside, but his lack of people skills and arrogance with his fellow employees was his flaw. Morale in the district became a real issue and ultimately cost him his job.

The Chuck Harold Era was a short period of time characterized by public relations. He was an inside hire after an outside hire in which the Deerfield County School board wanted to mend and repair relationships within their employees and throughout its community. Having been a part of the Deerfield School system as a principal and assistant superintendent, Dr. Harold knew the situation and felt like he could help in the area of public relations. Morale within the district did improve, but morale on the school board began to splinter causing trouble. Dr. Harold was caught in the middle and retired from the Deerfield County School system after four years on the job as superintendent.

The Doug Jaye Era began in the 1980’s with the many influences of *A Nation at Risk*. Reform of the teacher education program and the beginning of new state assessments signaled an era of school improvement. Dr. Jaye was an outside hire after an inside hire who was brought in to unify Deerfield County Schools and raise achievement. Being from the outside, he was able to look at all decisions in an objective manner and make any changes needed in the district during this era. Over time, Dr. Jaye developed a comprehensive planning process which involved all the stakeholders in the schools and community. This developed “buy in” that ultimately led to a more unified district.
The Dr. Herbert Wilson Era began in a time when raising achievement meant holding schools accountable for student performance. With having to be accountable, Deerfield County turned to a familiar face. Dr. Wilson was an insider who had practically been in the district his entire career. The first principal of Deerfield County High School, Dr. Wilson was well known in the community and had vast amounts of knowledge about Deerfield County. People trusted him and felt comfortable with him as their leader. In time, this familiarity of Dr. Wilson with the school board developed into a lack of respect. They trusted him, but felt as if he lacked the expertise when it came to new ideas or change. Further magnified, this lack of respect grew when discussions over school monies were discussed. Dr. Wilson resigned after a total of forty four years of service to Deerfield County Schools.

The Luke Wallace Era began as an inside hire after an inside hire. Beginning and ending his career in Deerfield County, Dr. Wallace was a true insider. The school board at that time saw a need to maintain the status quo and looked to an assistant superintendent who had worked his way up the ladder from a teacher/coach to the top job in the district. Dr. Wallace’s familiarity to Deerfield residents and staff was a comfort for the community, but with time became a curse. The district mantra of maintaining the status quo saw student achievement eventually decline and a number of schools fall below standard. The Deerfield County School board realized they needed a major change.

The George Knotts Era was a time of change in the work lives of Deerfield County teachers and staff. Dr. Knotts was an outside hire following two previous inside hires. Research states an outsider is usually chosen when the district needs a shake-up. Having no connections to this rural community, Dr. Knotts looked at Deerfield County very objectively and saw there
needed to be some changes if student learning was going to improve. With help from the school board and the instructional staff, he had a vision of realignment that he believed would raise the achievement gap. Dr. Knotts developed a plan that only an outsider could have brought to reality. Upon retirement from Deerfield County Schools, the majority of its schools showed improvement on the EOG/EOC annual tests as compared to other regional school districts. By handling the political issues of realignment and constant communication with the school board and staff, Dr. Knotts put his vision of reform to work and it has made all the difference. With realignment a thing of the past, Deerfield County continues on a course of student improvement.

The Cathy Gran Era is a story that is still being written. Dr. Gran is the present superintendent of Deerfield County Schools. She was an inside hire but had many of the attributes of an outside hire. Born and raised in Deerfield County, she spent the majority of her work career in another district. She returned to Deerfield County as an assistant superintendent during the Dr. Knotts tenure. Having the reputation of being an excellent principal for many years, she immediately gained the respect of the Deerfield school board and staff. Upon her selection as superintendent, she set a course of action for the continued improvement of student achievement. Her ability to maintain good public relations in the face of tough decisions, and the growth of student learning, has characterized her tenure up to this point.

The purpose of this historical case study was to design and analyze what impact the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) has on a rural school community and what specific knowledge, skills, and traits would a superintendent successor need in leading a rural school district. Numerous people were interviewed to collect data regarding leadership in the Deerfield district that spanned a time of five decades. These included superintendents, community leaders,
school board members, and former and present teachers. The information gathered gave me a deeper respect and appreciation for the Deerfield County district, its people, and the great heritage of this school system. This summary takes a brief look at each superintendent era and describes the successes and failures of that superintendent during that time in Deerfield County history. Each time period included insiders and outsiders that impacted the Deerfield County School district differently. The knowledge, skills, and traits of each of these superintendents also provided each with special abilities that served them during their tenures. Different as they all were, each superintendent had an impact on the Deerfield County School system and has future implications for school boards in rural districts when they face a succession. Findings and recommendations will follow in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings as compared to existing research, implications for research, implications for practice, and conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter Four.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Analysis of data from the interview transcripts led me to draw several conclusions in reference to my research questions.

1. What impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) have on a rural school community?
During the past five decades, there have been eight superintendents hired by the Deerfield County School system. Four were from the outside, and four were from the inside. The order in which these rural leaders were hired tells a story about successor origin. The order was as follows: outsider, outsider, insider, outsider, insider, outsider, insider, insider (modified). The first outside successor was Dr. Bill Byrd who was hired during an uneasy time. Integration and school district merger was in full swing, and he provided a consistent work ethic and toughness needed to get through the school year. Only completing one year, his ability to really affect the district in any way was minimal. This outside hire was followed by another outsider. Because he had much experience in building and maintenance in his former job, the board believed that Dr. Buck Liles was needed for the Deerfield School system. During his tenure, a number of school building projects were started. However, because he had poor people skills, once these building projects were completed the Deerfield County School board wanted a familiar face and some stability for its staff and community. In hiring Dr. Chuck Harold, the school board went to a person who had served as a principal in Deerfield County and was at this time working as an Assistant Superintendent. He was an insider who the entire community knew and with whom they felt comfortable. In some way, Dr. Harold was hired because of his familiarity with the school board which resulted in having the majority of the board in his corner when the succession of Dr. Liles occurred. He gave the school board the stability of hiring someone who they knew would be in that position for a reasonable amount of time and also at a fair bargaining price. Matthews (2002) states that districts should choose and insider if the school board wants to save money. Also, research by Carlson (1961) states that school boards look to replace a superintendent with an insider if they want to keep things as they are. The insider is seen as having a stabilizing effect on the district. By contrast, the board looks for an outsider when they...
want to create change. “School boards expect a creative performance from outsiders and are happy with stabilizing performance from insiders” (p. 214). As Sendor (1981) explains, “choose an insider if you-and the public-like the way the schools are run and if you want stability” (p. 30). For a four year period, Dr. Harold helped the Deerfield School district maintain status quo in educational initiatives. Moral among district employees improved; however, moral among school board members began to falter. Dr. Harold was caught in the middle and decided to retire. He was replaced with an outsider, Dr. Doug Jaye. The literature review in Chapter Two states to “choose an outsider if the system needs a shake-up” (Sendor, p. 30). Matthews (2002) also followed with research on the insider/outsider debate in education and found benefits and disadvantages to either status. He stated that outsiders bring change to a school district and can be thought of as innovators. Serving eleven years as the Deerfield County School superintendent, Dr. Jaye put the system on solid ground. Having the opportunity to go back near his home town, he resigned and the Deerfield school board was faced again with a superintendent vacancy. The school board wanted to keep the status quo from Dr. Jaye’s administration, and therefore hired the insider Dr. Herbert Wilson. He was followed by another inside hire, Dr. Luke Wallace. The back to back hiring of insiders totaled thirteen consecutive years with an insider as the superintendent. These insiders had a greater chance of becoming superintendents in Deerfield County because of their past experiences in the Deerfield School system. Knowing the board personally gave each insider support from the school board that could have never been attained by an outsider. Matthews (2002) states that insiders are those with outstanding reputations within the educational community in which they live. He stated that “insiders” are characterized as adaptors and have the ability to maintain peace in unstable situations. He continues:
The familiarity of an inside candidate is the selling point. School boards know what they are getting with the inside hire, which gives the school district the knowledge of where the weaknesses of the inside leader lie. In other words, the school board knows the insider’s strengths and weaknesses. An inside candidate should bring no surprises to the table. The expectations of test scores are so high, the familiar face has begun to look more attractive. In our world in which test scores and accountability have become so important to the educational leader, an internal hire seems more likely. (p. 25)

Any person can understand why a rural school district would desire an insider for such a long time. There is a comfort level for everyone involved in hiring someone you know. There are no surprises. But with this comfort level, over time, came the need for a change. After Dr. Wilson and Dr. Wallace, the district needed a “shake-up”. The school board knew the system needed drastic improvement and hired Dr. George Knotts as their superintendent. He saw a need for change in the Deerfield school district and presented a vision to execute that change. During Dr. Knotts tenure, the district was realigned and test scores improved. Upon his retirement, Deerfield County hired Dr. Cathy Gran, an insider who had been working in the district a few years and was a Deerfield County native. Dr. Knotts laid a foundation of improvement that the district wanted to see continue with the inside hire of Dr. Gran.

Recruitment and retention of superintendent successors was also a part of my findings. Recruiting an outsider took more time, money, and was very risky for the Deerfield county school board whereas recruiting an insider was as easy as an invitation and a small bump in pay. In hiring an outsider such as Dr. George Knotts, the school board had to take a chance that he
would be the key to improvement for the Deerfield school district. Each board member was willing to take that risk and pay him a deserving salary at the cost of hoping he would stay as their leader long enough to show school improvement. The school board could have settled for a familiar inside name but thought the possible reward far outweighed the risk of the outside hire.

The findings from my research closely correlates with the existing research discussed in Chapter Two on superintendent succession. Data from interviews clearly illustrates that each successor filled the need of stability (insider) or of change (outsider) needed by the Deerfield County school board at the time of each hire. When the school board and community wanted a change, they hired an outsider. On the other hand, when the school board and community wanted stability, they hired an insider who brought familiarity to the community. Each type of superintendent satisfied the need of the school board and rural community at that particular time in history.

2. **What specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district?**

The following themes were generated from the analysis of data in the interview transcripts, and provided information to answer this research question. They were: A.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have good people skills and must be effective communicators. B.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a good sense of ethics and moral leadership. C.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a vision and an organized plan for his or her district. D.) Superintendents in a rural school district must understand school and hometown politics. E.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a strong work ethic.
People Skills and Communication

Chapter Four data clearly states that people skills and effective communication skills are essential for a superintendent in a rural school district. In this study, every participant in some way mentioned the importance of communication. Of the seven superintendents interviewed, all of them stated the importance of having good people skills. For example, Dr. Bill Brown stated that he could not have survived the 1968 school year without his people skills. With the integration of schools and the merging of two small school districts into the present day Deerfield County school system, Dr. Brown depended on his ability to communicate with people to assist him in getting the job done. A school board member at that time stated “Dr. Brown had good interpersonal skills. He could talk to people and that ability served him well.” In a rural community where everyone has a voice in what goes on in their school system, the superintendent’s ability to talk with all the constituents helps promote a vision for the district.

During the tenure of Dr. George Knotts, he structured a district realignment in the face of much adversity. Although he was an outsider, he relied on his people skills to get the school board unified which enabled him to move forward with his plan. Based on data, good people skills is a trait that superintendents must possess when working in a rural school community.

Ethics and Moral Leadership

Chapter Four data also confirms the importance of rural school superintendents demonstrating good ethics and a belief in doing what is best for all students. This involves the superintendent believing in what he or she is doing and always putting the children’s needs in the district first and foremost in all decisions. Six of the seven superintendents interviewed had negative issues that plagued them during their time as superintendent. However, each leader had
the trust of the Deerfield County residents and stakeholders believed that decisions made were based on what was best for the children in the county. A political figure in Deerfield County stated “regardless of the circumstances, Dr. Wallace was going to make decision for our children.” In numerous interviews of superintendents and community leaders from each era, a common phrase was “believing in what you were trying to do for the county.” Dr. Cathy Gran in her interview stated “in every decision I make, I try to do what is right for the students of Deerfield County.” Ethical behavior and moral leadership are crucial skills for a school superintendent in a rural community.

Having a Vision

Of the seven superintendents interviewed, all seven mentioned a plan or vision that each had for the Deerfield School district. In addition, school board members from each era spoke of the attribute of its superintendent having a vision for the school district. As the existing research stated in the literature review, school boards typically hire an outsider if the system needs change. Therefore the opportunity to create a vision is seen more often with an outside hire rather than an inside one. One rural outside superintendent successor in this case study really put this attribute into action. Dr. George Knotts was an outsider that saw the need for reform in the Deerfield County School system. He began with a vision that led to a well-planned course of action. Regardless of criticism and countless complaints, he continued on a course for student achievement. As an outsider, Dr. Knotts was hired to bring about reform and he had the school board’s full support. Two previous inside hires had a more difficult time when it came to developing a plan or vision for the district. Both had worked their way up the ladder up to the superintendency. Each had the trust of the board and its community members, but lacked the
respect needed to bring about change or initiation of new ideas. Based on data from Chapter Four, a superintendent must possess a clear vision to bring about change in a rural school district. One constituent stated, “without a vision or plan, nothing gets accomplished.”

However, an interesting finding in my research (Matthews 2002) correlates with previous mentioned studies about the ability of insider/outsider superintendents to carry out the vision. All insiders interviewed from the Deerfield School district had vision but lacked the support of board members during their tenure to execute it. On the other hand, all outsiders interviewed had a vision and were given the support needed to implement the plan and see it through to fruition.

Understanding School Politics

All seven superintendents interviewed mentioned the word politics. The ability to handle, and the brains to understand, the political aspects of rural school and rural community politics is a trait not all leaders possess. Each superintendent interviewed discussed the different political decisions and pressures that were part of their superintendency. From dealing with the school board and Deerfield’s rural community, understanding school politics is a theme that all Deerfield’s superintendents had to learn if they were going to survive. Speaking very truthfully, Dr. Chuck Harold stated “You must do two things. You must get along with the community and you must play politics. You can’t do one and not the other. That is one reason superintendents don’t stay too long.” In the literature review, research states that pivotal to the success of any school district is a positive, professional relationship between school boards and their superintendents. Blumberg, Blumberg, & Chalker (2002) state that the job of the rural superintendent is a highly complex position that is full of politics and conflict. These leaders must be “jacks of all trades” and highly skilled in dealing with political issues and conflict
resolution. In order for Dr. George Knotts to develop and implement his school realignment plan without chaos and failure, he had to earn the full support of the Deerfield School board and the majority of Deerfield’s residents. His ability to achieve this feat enabled him to execute his vision and plan. Student achievement was raised, and a standard of excellence was instilled that continues today. The ability or trait to have political savvy with a school board and its constituents is a necessary skill for all superintendents in rural school districts.

Having a Strong Work Ethic

Chapter Four clearly illustrates that superintendent successors must possess the attribute of being a hard worker. The importance of having a strong work ethic is seen in the grueling work schedule described by each leader and the desire each possessed to do whatever was necessary to get the job done. In similar ways, all interview participants discussed how he/she worked long hours to try and make Deerfield County a better place for students and employees. For example, Dr. Brown stated that during integration and district consolidation that “I was gone every night during the year trying to promote our schools. I needed to be seen in the community often and I took every opportunity to talk to civic groups, churches, and PTO’s to get my message out to the public.” In the Dr. Doug Jaye era, a comprehensive planning process was utilized which involved community members, parents, business people, principals, central office staff and teachers. Dr. Jaye met often with members from these groups to develop “buy in” from the community and staff which led to a more unified district. Also, Dr. George Knotts explains how he burnt the candle at both ends getting the school board and community the information concerning his plan for school realignment. Having a type strong work ethic is a trait needed for all superintendents in a rural school district.
When people think of the knowledge, skills, and traits needed by superintendents in rural school communities, they often conjure up presidential like qualities of intellect, great wisdom, and trust. This research study found that the knowledge, skills, and traits needed by superintendents in a rural school district are common qualities that all educational leaders or leaders in any arena should strive to attain. They are: people skills, moral leadership, creating a vision or plan, understanding school politics, and having a strong work ethic.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Additional research is needed about successor origin and the study of rural schools and their communities to give even greater validity to the impact of insider vs outsider superintendent hires in rural school districts. Going back fifty years, this researcher studied a small rural school district to find out the impact the type of superintendent (insider/outsider) had on that type of district and what knowledge, skills, and traits would a successor would need in a rural school community.

Recommendations for future research:

1. A study about the impact an insider vs outsider has in an urban district. In many city urban districts, the superintendent is more of a name, and not a face, and handles a lot of bureaucratic red tape. Of interest would be a comparison of the impact the type of superintendent (insider/outsider) has on an urban school district and a rural school district over the past fifty years. Are there any differences in the successors and are there any new patterns of hiring these leaders?
2. A study to research the best practices for states in meeting the needs of a large number of small rural schools. Examples of best practices would be maintaining continuity, balancing the budget, and best practices for instruction in each rural school district. Rural school communities are good places where all citizens share a voice in what happens. These schools are the center of community life and where every child is known by name. Rural neighborhoods are laboratories for applied learning and democracy. Perhaps rural schools could be a source of hope and possibility for a better tomorrow in our public schools.

3. A study to continue research leadership succession in education. This historical case study only involved one small rural school district. Another researcher could add to the research very easily. Research indicates or shows that when school leaders change, there is a disconnect between leadership and the trust and relationship with employees. In many schools, teachers see their leaders come and go like revolving doors and quickly learn how to resist and ignore their leaders efforts. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), the result is that school improvement becomes like a set of bobbing corks with many schools rising under one set of leaders, only to sink under the next. The school district, then, suffers when plans for succession are not in place. According to Riddick (2009), little has been written about the topic of succession planning in education. In fact, very few school districts have “come close to having all the components of a well-designed management development system” (Tucker & Codding, 2002, p.22). The lack of leadership and direction causes the organization to flounder and, therefore, decrease in productivity. Ultimately, student achievement is affected which affects our greatest resource – our children.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the findings of this study, it would be beneficial for educational leaders and school board members in rural districts to consider the following recommendations to enhance superintendent succession.

1. Professional development (PD) is crucial to ensure that educators continue to grow professionally. I recommend that rural districts recognize leadership qualities very early in young educators and begin leadership training for these individuals in the form of monthly or quarterly Professional Development sessions. In this training, the knowledge, skills, and traits needed for superintendents in rural school communities should be discussed and expanded on to help these young people grow into what it takes to be an effective leader in a rural school system. As they grow and job opportunities become available, the district is then able to make better decisions about who to fill those vacancies. Future applicants will bring to the position a greater skill set which better equips them to face the challenges of being a superintendent in a rural school district.

2. I recommend that school board members go through PD on superintendent succession. Discussion on the insider/outsider debate would educate school board members on the type of leader needed when faced with a superintendent vacancy. While discussing the insider/outsider debate, having PD on the knowledge, skills, and traits a rural superintendent will need in this job would be beneficial for board members when looking for such a candidate. The understanding of an insider vs
outsider and the attributes needed for an effective successor can help school board members make the correct and best decision possible for their school district.

**SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

The research questions were:

1.) What impact does the type of superintendent (insider vs outsider) have on a rural school community?

2.) What specific knowledge, skills, and traits, would a superintendent successor need in a rural school district?

This historical case study began approximately five decades ago in the rural community of Deerfield County with the hiring of an outsider as its superintendent. When employing a new superintendent (insider or an outsider) within a rural community, the type of superintendent employed is based on the needs of the school board and or community at the time of the hire. Data and research verify that when a school board wants stability they hire an insider, and when they want a change, they hire an outsider. Therefore, the impact of successor origin is contingent on the wants of the school board and the needs of the rural community at the time of the vacancy.

Research also states that the rural school community constituents all play a part in the naming of the superintendent. The residents are loyal to their hometown. The largest employer in these rural communities is often the school system. As a result, residents of these rural communities often have an opinion and voice when it comes to the decisions made about school issues. All seven superintendents interviewed expressed that Deerfield County was a community
in which its residents had extreme loyalty to their schools and were involved in whatever was going on in the school system at that time.

If a rural community of people plays a part in the decision making of a superintendent successor, it is of interest to note the knowledge, skills, and traits that are needed for a superintendent successor in a rural community. The results from the study reveal five themes that summarize these attributes. They are: A.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have good people skills and communication skills. B.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a good sense of ethics and moral leadership. C.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a vision and an organized plan for his or her district. D.) Superintendents in a rural school district must understand school and hometown politics. E.) Superintendents in a rural school district must have a strong work ethic.
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