

How British Columbia School Superintendents Spend Their Time

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By

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Abstract

Every school district in North America has a superintendent. But what occupies their time? That was the core question of this project. This study looked at how school superintendents in British Columbia, Canada, spent their time during the school year. This study explored the demographics of superintendents and their school districts, the level of responsibility that superintendents reported on various leadership and management tasks, the time spent in key areas of their work, and their perceptions of their ability to control their time and the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

All superintendents in British Columbia were asked to complete a questionnaire for this study. Of the 60 superintendents, 59 participated (98%). This survey was conducted via email in the spring of 2021.

Nine key themes were established through the research:

- Superintendent gender has an impact
- Student population size matters – At least until about 6,000 students
- Some stunning numbers with experience, but little impact on their work
- Superintendents are drawn into the urgent
- Superintendents are committed to being educational leaders
- Learning leader vs. community leader
- Boards matter
- Control of time is a matter of perspective
- COVID-19 created complexity and opportunity

BC School Districts have been lauded as some of the top performing in the world. This study showed the complexity of the work of their top leaders and the commitment of the superintendents of BC to be educational leaders for their students, staff, and community.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Visit any school district across North America, and you will find a superintendent. Often referred to as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and seen as the educational leader, in most circumstances, the superintendent works with an elected board of trustees with responsibility for delivering education to a community. While there is a common perception of the superintendent as “the boss,” there is often little understanding of what consumes the time of the school superintendent. The superintendent has a high level of autonomy. He or she has a wide range of responsibilities but can choose to spend more or less time on the range of tasks that fall under their authority. This study looked at a seemingly simple question: how do school superintendents spend their time? The rest of this chapter will outline the rationale for focusing on British Columbia (BC) school superintendents and details why this information could be valuable to many in the education system.

Purpose of the Study

This study was intended to develop a better understanding of how school superintendents spend their time. By surveying all superintendents in British Columbia, the goal was to gain a global view of the work of the superintendent and a sense of the similarities and differences across the province of British Columbia. The study collected demographic data, including superintendent gender, years in education, years as superintendent and district size.

Superintendents were asked to rate their level of involvement based on a typical school year in 33 management and leadership tasks in various areas, including finance, facility management, personnel, human resources, special education, auxiliary services, instruction and curriculum, and community relations. They were also asked about their time commitment with their Board,

administrative work, and instructional leadership. Finally, they were asked their perception of their ability to control their time and the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

Various studies have looked at time use and the superintendency (Armbruster, 2011; Jones & Howley, 2009). Some of the limitations, particularly in the context of this current study, include that these studies were based on American samples and did not examine the uniquely Canadian context. Further, the findings, which are limited to specific states, and in some cases, only parts of US states, are dated; many studies are from before 2013. Such studies also only sampled superintendents, but my study surveys all BC superintendents. These previous studies found that superintendents in smaller school districts reported greater involvement in all operations with fewer staff to delegate work to. Armbruster (2011) found no impact of gender or years of experience on the involvement of superintendents. The previous studies also indicated a high level of prioritization for superintendents for engaging with their Board (Armbruster, 2011; Jones & Howley, 2009). Previous studies came to obvious conclusions but also seemed superficial in the details of findings. Finding that superintendents are busy with their Boards and those from smaller districts need to do more of the day-to-day tasks feels limited. Studying the time use of superintendents should reveal more than the fundamental premise that superintendents in large districts are less hands-on than those in smaller districts.

The work of education and the work of superintendents have shifted in the last decade, highlighted by the massive growth in the use of technology (Jones, 2020). Whether the tremendous technological changes resulted in shifts in the work of superintendents is an interesting question. Much has been made of 21st century learning over the last decade, so it was interesting to see if this study showed any differences in how superintendents spent their time compared to the previous American studies. Canada, and British Columbia in particular, has

prided itself on its place as a world leader in education (Coughlan, 2017), and this study looked at the activities of its chief education leaders to see if they align with other jurisdictions.

This study also considered the level of involvement of superintendents in various tasks, the areas that superintendents saw as most important in their work, time commitments they had with Boards, administration, and educational leadership, whether they feel they have control over their time, and the impacts of COVID-19 on their work.

Research Question

The study's primary question was how British Columbia K-12 school superintendents spend their time in their school district during the school year. Variables that were considered concerned thirty-three management and leadership tasks, including the gender of the superintendent, their years of experience in education, their years of experience in the current position, and the student population of their school district. Given the context of COVID-19, the study also considered the changes, if any, that COVID-19 has had on how BC school superintendents spend their time. Some questions asked the number of hours they spent on their governance work directly or indirectly with their Board, the time they spend on administrative work, and time they spend in schools or working directly with teachers. Superintendents related their experiences in a typical week during the school year. Superintendents completed a questionnaire that also allowed for open-ended responses.

This study answered the overarching question of how BC School Superintendents spend their time, and the more granular questions of whether there was a difference between how male and female superintendents spend their time, if being new or experienced in the role of superintendent is related to the time spent on various activities, and what were the effects of the student population on how superintendents spent their time.

Out of this research emerged a clearer picture of what superintendents in BC do and a better understanding of how and why it differs in different situations. This study was about time but also about leadership and what it looks like in the modern education world. In looking at the time use of superintendents, I also looked at what superintendents value to be important. Efforts were made to categorize superintendents based on the areas in which they spent their time, whether with the Board and the broader community, in dealing with administrative tasks, and the general running of the district or with teachers, principals, and in schools focused on instructional leadership. As the often-used quote goes, “Tell me how you spend your time, I’ll tell you what you value most” (Wilding, 2018, para. 1).

The study also examined the demographics of the superintendency, including the gender make-up, the time they have spent in their current positions, their longevity in their district and the profession and the student populations that they are responsible for in their districts. This study sought to describe the reality of the demographics, how these could suggest a need for new supports to attract more women to the superintendency, and what is needed to equip current school superintendents better.

Context

British Columbia has a population of 5.2 million people and is the third-largest province in Canada (Varrella, 2021). The student population in BC’s public school system is about 550,000. These students attend 1678 schools in 60 school districts (Ip, 2019). British Columbia has been heavily highlighted for its strong education system; in particular, it has received kudos for having some of the strongest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in the world (Coughlan, 2017; Marchildon, 2017). Student populations in BC are ethnically and culturally diverse, and there is a strong dual focus on equity and excellence in the school system

(McGregor et al., 2019). The British Columbia education system has a co-governance model with local school boards and the provincial government sharing responsibility and superintendents employed locally but having responsibilities to both levels of government.

Significance of the Study

The role of the BC School Superintendent is worthy of consideration. There is evidence that the superintendency can successfully be accomplished in a variety of ways; research shows that district leadership is essential to school district success, and British Columbia, in particular, has been a global focus in recent years for its high levels of performance (Brandon et al., 2013; Friesen & Lock, 2010; Hart & Ogawa, 1987; Leithwood, 2013).

The roles, responsibilities and specific tasks of superintendents vary from district to district. I currently serve as the Superintendent of Schools and CEO of the West Vancouver School District. While my job description in the West Vancouver School District is documented in board policy, it is different from others across the province. And the day-to-day work that I do as superintendent has elements of the defined role, but the policy is not adequate in describing the work. I am the third superintendent over the last 25 years in West Vancouver, and each of us has done it very differently; anecdotes like this are repeated across the province. I often hear there are many effective ways to be a school superintendent. The literature contains substantive documentation of the tension between superintendents and elected boards (Campbell & Fullan 2019; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; McCloud & McKenzie, 1994) but not a lot on the specific tasks that superintendents are undertaking beyond the listing of broad areas of responsibility (Meador, 2019).

While the tasks can vary greatly across jurisdictions, it is important to see in the literature the important role central leadership plays in the success of the district (Brandon et al., 2013;

Friesen & Lock, 2010; Hart & Ogawa, 1987; Leithwood, 2013). High performing jurisdictions are often seen as having strong superintendent leadership; conversely, districts with high superintendent turnover are linked to poorer student outcomes (Waters & Marzano, 2007). So, a better understanding of the work of superintendents helps answer questions of what school superintendents do that contributes to the success of school districts. And understanding what superintendents currently do can open up to questions of whether there are better or more impactful ways superintendents can be spending their work time in school districts.

The focus on leadership in British Columbia was particularly important and potentially powerful since BC has been perceived as a global leader in education in recent years (Coughlan, 2017; Marchildon, 2017). Largely driven by its performance on standardized assessments, including the results on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), British Columbia and Canada more generally have gained increased interest from around the world for their school systems and their learning models (McGregor et al., 2019; Leithwood, 2013). Authors like McGregor et al. (2019) give a lot of credit to strong district leadership for the BC education success story. They write about “inquiry based networked learning systems . . . and a practice of learning centered leadership” (p. 135), which leads to change. This study looked for evidence in the time commitments of superintendents showing a connection between this high level of instructional leadership in the literature and the time and leadership superintendents devote to various tasks.

Because there is a range in how school superintendents perform their work, there is literature on the importance of district-level leadership, and high-profile attention has been given to the successes in BC’s education system, better understanding the work of school superintendents becomes a critical topic of inquiry. Without research, the story of BC

superintendents is simply anecdotal, and little coherence is brought to what is an exceptionally diverse province. The superintendency is often a very autonomous position, but a closer examination of those in British Columbia highlighted specific areas where there is convergence and divergence in how they work.

The results of this study will allow superintendents to put their experiences in the context of their colleagues. Superintendents' jobs are often disconnected, so these results allow them to see how their experiences align with others that might be in similar circumstances, and it will highlight areas of variance across the province. Each district has only one superintendent, so there are no opportunities for an easy comparison of individual superintendents, as can often happen in a district with teachers or principals. The work also benefits the provincial superintendents' association, as they can speak with more certainty about the work of their members and support the design of professional learning to meet their collective needs better.

The BC Ministry of Education is often responsible for professional development for school superintendents, and this study helps them see exactly where superintendents are spending their time and how that aligns with their expectations. It also shows areas that they may wish to support better if they want to adjust the provincial picture around superintendents and time use. The Ministry of Education requires some specific tasks of superintendents, such as the completion of various forms, and this survey puts this work in the context of the larger work of the position.

Superintendents are often the sole employee reporting to Boards of Education, and Boards have complete autonomy over the hiring into the job. This study gives them information that can assist with their recruitment process and potentially with their evaluation process. My experience is that superintendent evaluation is often inconsistent within districts. Boards of

Education often lack educational expertise and a clear understanding of the work of the superintendent, who is their direct conduit to the education system will assist them in their governance role for the school district.

These findings will help guide university faculties of education in developing programs for potential and current school superintendents in BC. There is no required credentialing in BC for the superintendency as there is in some jurisdictions, so there is no curriculum for preparing school superintendents. A better understanding of the work of superintendents could assist universities in designing programs that meet the needs of the work of current and future educational leaders. The research also highlights gaps they could address provincially or regionally.

Finally, there is a great opportunity to educate both the school community and the broader public on the work of superintendents. The common understandings of the work of superintendents often come from popular media, like Superintendent Chalmers from *The Simpsons* TV show or Superintendent Frank Tassone from the movie *Bad Education*. It is easy to dismiss superintendents as out-of-touch bureaucrats. However, “as the chief executive officer of schools, the superintendent is ultimately accountable for the operation of the entire school system” (Melton et al., 2019). Understanding the work of superintendents can help to humanize superintendents and better position them in their districts and communities as educational leaders.

Conclusion

Having served as a school superintendent for more than a decade and as one of the longest-serving superintendents in British Columbia, I know this research has the potential to

positively impact the work of my current and future colleagues. The remainder of the dissertation will look at the relevant research related to the superintendency and this study, the survey methods used for the study, a review of the findings, and a discussion on what these findings mean.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature

Studies of school superintendents are not new. Numerous studies have looked at how superintendents have spent their time. There are also various case studies on superintendents and on the relationship between superintendents and boards. There is some research, albeit limited, to the uniqueness of the Canadian education experience and some new thinking on what the impact of COVID-19 may be on the education system.

Time and Superintendents

A consistent theme in studies similar to this one is the critical attention that superintendents give to spending time with their Board. Armbruster's (2011) study, with which my study is most closely aligned, identified spending time and interacting with school board members as the most significant performance task for Virginia superintendents. While superintendents said they wanted to spend more time on school curriculum and instruction, the study indicated that they were not spending a lot of their time on such matters. Armbruster's findings pick up the ideas of Kowalski (1999), who wrote of the importance for superintendents to provide leadership beyond the school district as a result of both professional responsibilities and political realities. It is important to note the American context of the superintendent as a community leader and quasi-political leader. There seems to be a disconnect between the aims of the superintendent as the learning leader and the realities of how they spend their time with the community, particularly the elected officials they serve.

Jones and Howley (2009) also looked at time use by school superintendents and found educational leadership is not a priority. This study was conducted with superintendents in Texas, Tennessee, Nebraska, and New Hampshire. This study also found that the time superintendents dedicated to managerial tasks was in large part dictated by the student population and the

urban/rural divide. The study also looked at the relationship of accountability measures to superintendent tasks, which is something that would be of lesser value in British Columbia, as there are no high stakes measures of accountability used in the system. Two conclusions of the study were that smaller districts have fewer administrative personnel, which gave superintendents a greater responsibility for administrative tasks, and smaller districts had greater political turmoil, so superintendents completed more of the managerial tasks. In particular, this second suggestion seems worth dissecting, as, in the British Columbia context, it often seems as if larger districts are associated with a higher degree of politics. It is also worth considering that Munther (1997) found that superintendents in smaller districts have more of a focus on instructional leadership. This fact may be due to their smaller size; they simply have more hands-on work with all aspects of the district. Clearly, while there may be some differing views on exactly how it changes, as districts grow, the work changes (Jones & Hawley, 2009). Hentscke et al. (2008) concluded that “leadership behavior of superintendents in smaller districts appeared remarkably distinct from what superintendents do (or are expected to do) in very large urban school districts” (p. 334). They found superintendents to be exceptionally hands-on in their work on instructional leadership in their districts.

Duea and Bishop (1980) focused on time management, job priorities, and stress in selected administrative tasks among superintendents. In their study of more than 2000 US superintendents, they found that superintendents felt their relationship to their school boards was the most important criterion in evaluating their job performance and handling of student affairs the least important (Duea & Bishop, 1980). In another study from 40 years ago of six mid-western superintendents, Larson (1981) found that superintendents faced a workload that varied greatly in place, and they spent more than 50% of their time in unscheduled meetings. The study

also found as districts increased in size, there was less structure to the work of the superintendent. As both studies are pre-internet, one could see the unstructured time that was identified here could now be seen as a time that superintendents are responding to emails, for example, rather than connecting via phone or in-person with others in the organization.

All the studies of superintendents and time show a picture of superintendents who spend a lot of time on what can be seen broadly as community connections, and as districts increase in size, there tends to be less “hands-on” work from superintendents of the various central office portfolios. Given the growth of technology, particularly in the last decade, it is interesting to see if this growth has impacted the work of superintendents in my study. There is a sense that leaders no longer need to be tethered to a desk to stay on top of their work, but whether that has shifted how they spend their time is an open question. None of the previous studies really get into the impact of technology, even email, on the time that superintendents spend on various tasks.

The Tasks of the Superintendent

Beyond studies of time, those that look at the tasks or work of superintendents illustrate a similar picture. In looking specifically at the tasks of the superintendent, Meador (2019) lists the following high-level responsibilities for superintendents: Board of Education liaison, educational leader, manager of finance, daily operations, and lobbyist for the school district. These broad categories seem consistent in both American and Canadian contexts and a good starting place for areas to pursue in this study. Of course, these are so broad they could encompass almost all activities within a school district.

When I look at the *Board Policy - Role of the Superintendent* in my own district, it covers similar ground, listing leadership and culture, policy and governance, communications and community relations, organizational management, curriculum planning and development,

instructional management and district accountability, human resources management and values and ethics of leadership (West Vancouver Schools, 2014). The challenge of these lists is they are saying that superintendents have responsibility for everything, but this kind of list leaves a lot of discretion to what they actually do—knowing that doing everything is not really an option and time needs to be prioritized. It also leaves open the question of which tasks the superintendent does themselves and which ones they delegate staff to complete.

In looking at some specific case studies, for example, Chris Barbic (Farrell, 2013), a relatively new school superintendent in Tennessee, estimated he spent half his time meeting with community groups and leaders. His story was about a focus on relationships and building trust as superintendent. It seems that the early part of one's tenure as superintendent is spent building relationships. Just as it is often easier for principals to bring changes several years into their time in a school, the same holds true for superintendents, who often spend a lot of time, particularly early in their career, building relational trust. Again, looking at my own experiences, I spent far more time with the Board early in my tenure as superintendent, and as we built our relationship, I could spend less time with them and more time on other parts of the portfolio. This experience aligns with Barbic's experiences with an early focus on building community connections.

There is also evidence of the loneliness of the position (McKenna, 2016). In their article, Kimball and Jazer (2004) describe their interview with North Carolina Superintendent Larry Allen, who says he “watches young rising administrators who don't have a clue how isolated the superintendency can be for someone who is accustomed to collaboration. They do not see until they are a superintendent how lonely it is” (para. 10). This view is shared by many new superintendents in Canada and the United States. Susan Enfield, superintendent in Shoreline, just outside of Seattle, describes this well (McKenna, 2016): “being a superintendent can be a lonely

job. There's only one of you in a district, and there is no way you can keep on top of everything" (para. 17). Isolation and loneliness are almost seen as expectations of the work of the superintendent (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Due to the many researchers who point to the loneliness and isolation of the position, I would think superintendents might choose tasks that they are most familiar with or ones that decrease the sense of isolation.

One of the largest areas of research on superintendents and how they work is around the issue of governance and superintendents' relationships with the elected officials they serve. Campbell and Fullan (2019) argued for the importance of school trustees and superintendents working together in the name of good governance. They said it was essential that superintendents work with their boards to be strategic and focus on effective governance. The relationship and tension between school superintendents and trustees are well documented and cited for high turnover in American superintendent positions (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). According to McCloud and McKenzie (1994),

The tension has been highlighted during periods of education reform. In today's reform-minded environment, citizens and educational leaders point with concern to the high rate of turnover among urban superintendents and to the large number of vacancies in city superintendencies that attract few candidates. They point to inefficiencies of local boards of education and superintendents as a major part of the problem, but they all seem to ignore the fact that this problem is mired in the history of local school governance.

(p. 384)

Particularly in the American context, there is a lot of discussion about superintendent turnover. While it is an issue in Canada, it does not seem as pronounced as in the United States.

According to Grissom and Anderson (2012), in the United States:

The story of school superintendent turnover is a well-known one: energetic new leader assumes position with plans for revitalization, only to clash with a dysfunctional school board or impatient community and move on to greener pastures before the plans can be fully carried out, leaving the district once again searching for the next great leader bearing the requisite comprehensive reform plans (p.1).

Superintendents are often hired to improve test scores, and even if they have some short-term success, if these results are not sustained, they move on—either at their choice or at the choice of their board. If superintendents are in flux and without long term job security, their job uncertainty could affect the tasks that they take on, looking for short-term success without taking a long-term view. Johnson (1996) affirmed this view, saying that “the relationship between superintendents and their constituents is a collaborative one, not one of command and compliance. Such collaborative leadership exercised in concert by teachers and administrators throughout a district develops over time, not overnight” (para. 9). Researchers Campbell and Fullan described a vision of a school district where the board and superintendent “work together as a cohesive unified team driven by a moral imperative and common vision” (2019, p. 35).

Research shows school district size and superintendent experience are factors in how these top leaders spend their time and which tasks they take on. The literature broadly shows that superintendents are more community-focused early in their time as superintendents, when they need to work to build relationships, and in larger school districts, where they have staff who take responsibility for many of the other tasks. Given these findings, in the present study I would expect the more experienced superintendents and those in larger districts to take high levels of responsibility in tasks related to community involvement.

Superintendents and District Performance

Connecting superintendents and district success often requires reliance on some type of test scores to measure success. In this context, it is worth noting what connections have been made. At the school level, Marzano et al. found “the correlation between the leadership behavior of the principal in the school and the average academic achievement of students in the school to be .25” (2006, p. 10) in a meta-analysis of 69 studies. The role of the principal and their behaviors were seen to be related to the success of students. In a follow-up look at the correlation between district-level leadership and student success, Marzano and Waters (2006) had similar positive findings. In this meta-analysis study, the authors found that district-level leadership made a difference. They found a statistically significant relationship (with a positive correlation of .24) between district leadership and student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006). They also found that effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts, that superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement, and student achievement in a district increases when a superintendent provides more building-level autonomy. As with any meta-analysis, one must be careful about overemphasizing the results, but just as there was seen to be a correlation with school-level leadership, research shows a correlation with specific traits of strong district-level leadership.

In a more recent study of the link between the superintendency and student achievement, Plotts and Gutmore found that “experienced superintendents can have a positive influence on achievement” (2015, p. 34). This study focused on time in New Jersey school districts, and it critiques the American experience discussed earlier of high levels of turnover in school superintendents. This study supports the view of Marzano and Waters that leadership has a large influence on student achievement.

It is worth noting that findings supporting the impact of superintendents on student success are not universal. Chingos et al. (2016) found that district and community factors affected achievement much more than superintendent variables. Their paper challenged the idea that high-performing superintendents can be identified.

Superintendents account for a small fraction of a percent (0.3 percent) of student differences in achievement. This effect, while statistically significant, is orders of magnitude smaller than that associated with any other major component of the education system, including: measured and unmeasured student characteristics; teachers; schools; and districts (Chingos et al., 2016, p. 1).

The advice the authors give at the end of their paper is a reminder to be at least somewhat skeptical of the impact of the superintendent:

A parent who wants the best education for her child would be well advised to care about the teacher and classroom to which her child is assigned and the school in which that classroom is embedded. The district and community in which the school and classroom exist are also worthy of some of her attention as is the curriculum her child will encounter. But, with rare exceptions, the coming and going of school superintendents can be off her radar screen. (Chingos et al., 2016, p. 14)

While the authors of Chingos' study speak with high levels of certainty, their study was limited to student testing data in North Carolina and Florida. This study, particularly when taken in contrast to the others, reflects the challenge and messiness of trying to link student success with superintendent leadership. Drawing a conclusion from a 2019 study that looked at North Carolina superintendents and student achievement, the authors came to a safer conclusion than those who make absolute claims about superintendent impact: "the issue of whether or not

superintendents affect student achievement is not an all or nothing proposition. While we concluded that superintendents do have some influence on student achievement, particularly as their in-state experience increases, there are district predictors that must be considered” (Hart et al., 2018, p. 10). The literature on superintendent impact is inconsistent. On the whole, there does seem to be some correlation, particularly with longevity in the superintendent position, but as is often the case with finding correlations to student achievement data, the total impact of superintendents is not clear. Given the challenges of linking student achievement to the superintendency, this current study does not make the connection.

The Canadian Context

All studies referenced in relation to this study come from the United States. And it is true that the histories of the superintendency and school systems in Canada and the United States have a lot of similarities. There are also some unique factors that make Canada and specifically British Columbia important for this study. One such factor is that Canada is such a well-respected jurisdiction for K-12 education.

In part because of recognition from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), British Columbia has been identified as an exemplary jurisdiction for innovation (McGregor et al., 2019). British Columbia school districts have a long history of success as measured by international measures, including PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (McGregor et al., 2019). In the Ontario context, Leithwood (2013) argued that “conceptions of district directors of education and their immediate colleagues have shifted from central managers of large bureaucracies to transformational leaders of a continuously improving menu of instructional services for students” (p. 16). Research like Leithwood’s (2013) and McGregor et al.’s (2019) place British Columbian and Canadian superintendents as learning

leaders. McGregor et al. (2019) identified “significant Canadian research literature that focuses on the ways in which leaders enable change and innovation” (p. 140).

Coughlan (2017) highlighted Canada’s ascendancy in education via PISA. PISA results show that Canada has joined countries like Finland and Singapore as the highest performing on the international measures (Coughlan, 2017). Despite criticism, the PISA assessments have helped build the perceived strength of the education system in British Columbia and Canada. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, suggested that Canada’s “big unifying theme is equity” (Marchildon, 2017, para. 12). In Canada, the national educational organization, C21 Canada (2015), stated that “based on international benchmarks of student achievement in mathematics, reading, and science, Canada has one of the best public education systems in the world” (p. 8). There is this consistency to the Canadian narrative—a system of excellence built on traditional measures with a commitment to excellence and equity.

However, the research does not explicitly link this success to district leadership. Halbert and Kaser (2019) referred to inquiry and alignment within the system: “the work of superintendents . . . demonstrates the importance of learning centered leadership” (p. 145). The literature on Canadian educational leadership clearly shows something unique, but researchers struggle to describe it in simple terms. While the Canadian education system is, at least on traditional measures, very successful, the reasons for such success are difficult to describe. This study may help to describe the activities of superintendents better, something lacking in the Canadian literature.

The Reality of COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted much of the world, including work-life and the education sector. We don’t have a lot of historical experience with pandemics, but it is useful to draw

connections to previous pandemics and look at the emerging thinking about COVID-19's impact on education to help frame this study. Two essential areas to consider with COVID-19 are past pandemics and similar events and the emerging thinking on the impact of COVID-19 on education more broadly going forward.

We have very few recent historical examples to look at to see how school systems have had to evolve during a pandemic. Studies of the AIDS epidemic, for example, in South Africa in the 1990s (Coombe, 2000) could be considered, but the AIDS epidemic was a very different situation with high numbers of child deaths and not the global situation that was caused by COVID-19. Other lessons outlined include the need for fast, decisive leadership in a pandemic, whether AIDS or COVID-19 (Hargreaves et al., 2020). Another kind of comparison is how systems responded after natural disasters. For example, in Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami (Frankenberg et al., 2013), more educated people were less impacted, and education provided some protection in the face of a large-scale disaster.

As this is being written, we are still in the middle of the pandemic (Harris, 2020). Some early findings show that COVID-19 is disrupting education and educational leadership. Harris wrote, "The impact of COVID-19, in the short term, has been to disrupt schooling globally. With 1.6bn young people out of school during this pandemic, every country has experienced a hiatus in education as usual" (Harris, 2020, p. 321). Zhao reinforced these changes that are taking place. "It is important to remember that the changes to the what, how, and where of learning discussed here are not new. However, they are necessary—not because of COVID-19 but to create a whole new world—the 4th Industrial Revolution" (Zhao, 2020, p. 32). The pandemic is seen as an opportunity to bring about changes to the system and delivery of education. There is also clear evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic is changing how leaders work in the school system.

Harris (2020) also emphasized that the pandemic has brought about new alliances, new connections, and new networking practices. She sees the disruption to education as being an opportunity to inspire school leaders to think differently.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is still a part of everyday life at the time of this study, it is important to document its potential impact on the activities of superintendents. What might seem like changes in the work of superintendents now because of COVID-19 may end up being long-standing disruptions that never snap back to the way things were before. The AIDS epidemic and natural disasters are historical examples of disruption but offer minimal guidance around how COVID-19 may change the life of superintendents. Some emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 suggests some disruptions may change all aspects of schooling and presumably the work of a superintendent. This study will help to clarify how superintendents see their work evolving during the pandemic.

Summary

Chapter 2 looked at the literature related to the time superintendents spend on various tasks, as well as their roles and responsibilities. The research shows a position with a long list of responsibilities that look different—particularly in districts of different sizes. The impact of COVID-19 remains an open question with few historical examples to guide us on how the pandemic is impacting the current and future work of superintendents.

CHAPTER THREE: Methods

The key question asked in this study was how British Columbia K-12 public school superintendents spend their time. The study primarily did three things: 1) it analyzed the demographics of the superintendency, 2) it used a questionnaire to determine the level of involvement of superintendents in 33 leadership and management tasks, along with time spent on governance, administration, and educational leadership, and 3) it got written answers to questions about whether superintendents felt they had control over their time and the impact of COVID-19 on their work. Using a non-experimental population study, this research answered the question: How do BC School Superintendents spend their time? The rest of this chapter outlines the design of the study, the participants, and the data that was collected and analyzed and provides a commentary on the validity, reliability, and limitations of the study. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kansas

Design of the Study

The survey used for this study built on the work of several similar American surveys. The most recent of these surveys is an instrument used by Armbruster (2011) in “How Virginia Public School Superintendents Spend Their Time.” The Armbruster survey was itself a modification of previous surveys. Armbruster’s study was built from Thompson (2008) and his “Management and Leadership Activities of School Superintendents” and Glass (2004) and “Superintendent Leadership Without Management Will Not Reform.” Armbruster’s study looked at how superintendents allocated their time in various leadership and management tasks and included a series of interviews with a subset of the superintendents that were part of the survey. In this case, I used a similar management grid to Armbruster but updated the categories to place a greater emphasis on technology and to also make other changes that align more with the

Canadian experience, such as the inclusion of international education and Indigenous education. Changes were also made to describe tasks differently using terms and descriptors that are more familiar in Canada. Specifically, the survey questionnaire collected the following demographic information from superintendents: gender, years in education, years in their current district, years in their current position, and district student population.

The next section used a management and leadership grid to ask superintendents their level of involvement in seven areas (and sub-areas within these, which totaled 33 individual tasks): financial management, facilities, human resources, district business functions, student support services, instruction and curriculum and community relations. Participants were asked to specify their level of engagement in the managerial and leadership categories using the following criteria:

Level 1 — Supervision and little direct involvement

Level 2 — Minor direct involvement

Level 3 — Major direct involvement

Level 4 — Primary lead person in this area or on this file.

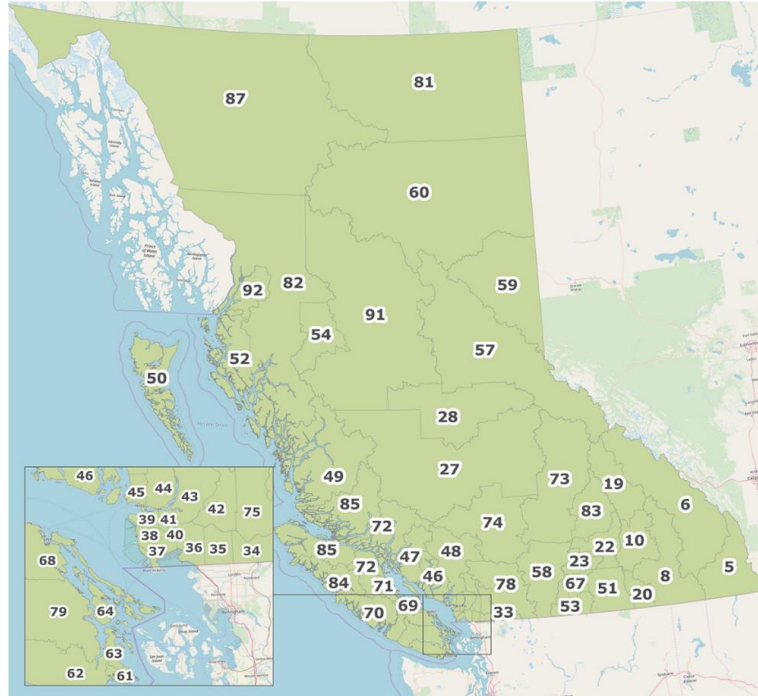
Participants were asked to rank these seven areas in order of importance in their daily work. There were also questions that asked for the average number of hours a week during the school year that superintendents spent on work with the Board, general administration, and instruction and curriculum. The final two open response questions asked if superintendents feel they have control over their time and for the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

This was not a brand-new survey, and it has been used and refined several times. By using the Glass (2004), Thompson (2008), and Armbruster (2011) surveys, in particular, the leadership and management grid, as the basis for this survey, this track record helped to ensure

the quality of the questionnaire. Armbruster (2011) reported that the management grid produced similar results over several studies, suggesting a higher level of reliability and internal consistency of the instrument.

Subject Selection

There are 60 school districts in British Columbia, and each has one person who holds the position of superintendent. This study surveyed all 60 superintendents in British Columbia. British Columbia is divided geographically into 60 school districts. These districts range in population from a couple of hundred students to over seventy thousand students. There is also a range of geographic sizes to the school districts, with tightly compact districts around Metro Vancouver and widespread areas outside of the urban centers. Metro Vancouver contains nine of the twenty largest districts by population in British Columbia. Including the Fraser Valley region and the centers of Victoria and Kelowna, almost all of the twenty largest school districts are in these areas. Conversely, the majority of the smaller districts are in the eastern and northern parts of British Columbia. For example, the Stikine School District (School District 87) has fewer than 300 students in an area of over 80,000 square kilometers—twice the size of Switzerland (Ip, 2019). There are close to 550,000 students who attend public schools in British Columbia. Surrey and Vancouver are the largest districts, accounting for 20–25% of the total population for the province. This map shows the placement of all 60 British Columbia school districts (2019):



While traditionally a male-dominated profession, the superintendency has become more gender diverse in recent times. There are currently 38 male and 22 female superintendents in BC (“Superintendents basic information,” 2019). The current ratio of male to female superintendents is more balanced than in the United States (Superville, 2017).

While there is a lot of turnover in superintendent positions in British Columbia, the culture of changing superintendents does not seem as great as in the United States (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). The experience of superintendents in BC ranges from a few months to more than ten years in their current positions.

Procedure

I created a survey using Google Forms and shared it via email to collect data. In early April 2021, all superintendents received an email asking them to complete the survey. One week, two weeks, and three weeks later, follow-up emails were sent to those superintendents who had not yet completed the survey. Following the first week, 31 of 60 superintendents had completed

the survey. After the third reminder, 59 of the 60 superintendents had completed the survey. All superintendents were assured confidentiality and their participation was voluntary.

Data Collection

An informed consent form was attached to the survey instrument used by the superintendents. Respondents indicated their consent by clicking on a link prior to completing the survey. See the Appendix for the survey questions.

Data Analysis

Much of this study is descriptive, using descriptive statistics, frequency counts and percentages where appropriate. The findings looked at the degree of involvement of superintendents in each of the different leadership and management areas and ranked them based on the level of involvement. For each of the 33 leadership and management tasks, the results were converted to a number scale with Level 1 = 1, Level 2 = 2, Level 3 = 3, Level 4 = 4. This allowed a mean to be produced for each of the areas for comparison. These data was also considered in relation to the superintendent's gender, experience, and the size of the student population.

Hours of involvement with boards, time spent on administration, and hours logged doing educational leadership were reported for the entire population as total numbers and percentages. This data was also looked at by superintendent gender, superintendent experience, and student population. Themes were collated from the open response questions to tell a comprehensive story of the work of superintendents.

Limitations

This study builds on the work of previous studies of superintendents, and the questions are aligned to previous studies. Efforts were made to increase participation in the study, and only

one superintendent in British Columbia did not participate. This study is limited in the questions it collected; thus, it may not fully account for the full range of activities of the superintendent. The study also does not include outcome variables. Finally, the study is also a snapshot in time and represents the views of the superintendent on the day that it was collected, so it may change over time.

Potential Bias

The study is specific to school superintendents in the province of British Columbia, so it may not be generalizable outside of British Columbia. About 16% of British Columbia schools are independent or private schools, and this study does not consider leadership associated with these schools.

With voluntary participation, there is always the chance that getting an appropriate sample will be a problem; however, with such a high participation rate, representation was not an issue in this study. Another concern is bias. Given that all BC school superintendents know each other, respondents might have answered the survey in a way that they thought would benefit the researcher or to look as strong and successful in the role as possible. It is helpful that there is no power relationship within the group. The researcher and those completing the surveys are equals.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study that examined superintendents' responses to a questionnaire that includes a leadership/management grid and other questions related to their use of time. The study was open to all British Columbia school superintendents who chose to participate.

CHAPTER FOUR: Results and Findings

This study was conducted to examine how British Columbia public school superintendents spend their time in various tasks in areas of leadership and management. The study had three key purposes: (a) to survey the state of the superintendency, including gender, experience in their role, experience in education and the student population of their districts; (b) to examine the level of responsibilities that superintendents report for various leadership and management tasks, and (c) measure superintendents' self-report of ability to control their time and the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part analyzes the demographics of the 59 participants who responded to the survey instrument distributed to all 60 British Columbia public school superintendents, which had a 99% response rate.

The second part used descriptive statistics to analyze the superintendents' level of involvement in tasks. Descriptive statistics calculated include frequency and percentage to determine the level of involvement of superintendents in tasks and functions: (a) financial management, (b) facility management, (c) human resources, (d) other business areas, (e) student support services, (f) instruction/curriculum, (g) community relations. Responses were submitted on a scale of Primary, Major, Minor, and Supervisory Involvement.

Respondents also ranked the seven areas by which ones occupied the most to the least of their time during the school year. Additional questions were asked to approximate the hours each week during a typical school year that superintendents spent in three areas: board governance, administration, and educational leadership.

The final part consists of qualitative responses to the questions: "Do you feel you have control over how you spend your time?" and "How has COVID-19 impacted how you allocate

time to various tasks and your overall allocation of time?” Responses from all 59 participants were summarized. As one of the superintendents, I completed the questionnaire and included my data in the analysis.

Demographic Data

Participants were asked to describe their gender.

Table 1– BC Superintendent Gender

Male	38 (64%)
Female	21 (36%)

The number of female superintendents is higher than was found in a 2020 survey of US School Superintendents, where women made up only 24% (Ramaswamy, 2020) of holders of the top education job in America. In the teaching profession in British Columbia, about 75% of all teachers are female (BCTF, 2016), and of school administrators in British Columbia, about 60% are female (BCPVPA, 2021). While both the teaching profession and principalships are increasingly female, there is still a wider gap in the superintendency, though not as wide as occurs in the United States.

Questions related to experience looked at total years of experience, total years in their current district, and total years in their current position. All but one of the current superintendents has at least 16 years in education (Table 2). Given the British Columbia model that sees superintendents move into the superintendency typically after time as a teacher, school administrator, and district administrator, this level of experience would be expected. It is noteworthy that nine of the superintendents have spent more than 36 years in education when typically, school district staff can retire with a full pension at 35 years.

Table 2– Total Years in Education

15 years or less	1 (2%)
16-25 years	15 (25%)
26-35 years	34 (58%)
36 + years	9 (15%)

There are real extremes for the time in their current district. Of the current superintendents, 21 are new to their district in the last five years, while 24 have been in their districts for more than 16 years (Table 3). Superintendents largely fall into two scenarios; they move to a new school district for the superintendency, or they spend a career in a school district move into the superintendency after other positions in the district. There are far fewer superintendents who have a hybrid of these two extremes: they move into a district and, after some time, move into the top position.

Table 3– Years in Current District

0-5 years	21 (36%)
6-10 years	9 (15%)
11-15 years	5 (8%)
16+ years	24 (41%)

United States data shows that despite a narrative that superintendents have short stints in their jobs, they actually tend to serve an average of five to six years (Barnum, 2018). The British Columbia data shows that 59% of the superintendents are in their first five years (Table 4), which leads to similar conclusions as the American data. Only 10 of the 59 BC superintendents have been in their position for more than a decade.

Table 4– Years in Current Position

0-5 years	35 (59%)
6-10 years	14 (24%)
11-15 years	7(12%)
16+ years	3(5%)

School district populations vary widely in British Columbia. Over half of all superintendents in BC have districts of 6,000 or fewer students, while 10% of school districts have at least 22,000 students (Table 5). The two largest school districts, Surrey and Vancouver, have populations greater than half of the other districts in the province combined.

Table 5 – Total Student Population for School Districts

0-2000 students	15 (25%)
2001-6000 students	17 (29%)
6001-10,000 students	10(17%)
10,001 – 16,000 students	8(14%)
16,001 – 22,000 students	3 (5%)
22,000 + students	6 (10%)

The demographics of the superintendency show a group who is majority male, very often in the position for less than five years in districts, with overall professional experience of more than 15 years, and serving in school districts with massive differences in student population.

Superintendent Level of Involvement in Tasks

Superintendents were asked a series of questions to determine their level of involvement in various areas of management and leadership. Superintendents were asked to identify the level of involvement in 33 tasks using the following scale: (a) Level 1 – Supervision; (b) Level 2 –

Minor Responsibility; (c) Level 3 – Major Responsibility; (d) Level 4 – Primary Responsibility.

Each task was grouped into one of seven areas: (a) financial management, (b) facilities, (c) human resources, (d) business areas, (e) student support services, (f) curriculum and instruction, and (g) community relations.

Financial management (Table 6) tasks include a range of involvement for superintendents. In four of the six areas surveyed, “Major Involvement” was the most common response. One common area of less involvement for superintendents is in purchasing, where more than 90% had only supervisory or minor involvement.

Table 6 – Financial Management

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Fiscal Planning	0 (0%)	14 (24%)	39 (66%)	6 (10%)
Budgeting / Forecasting	2 (3%)	17 (29%)	38 (64%)	2 (3%)
Purchasing	32 (54%)	23 (39%)	3 (5%)	1 (2%)
Communication Around Finances	8 (14%)	17 (29%)	30 (51%)	4 (7%)
Risk Management	13 (22%)	22 (37%)	17 (29%)	7 (12%)
Salary / Wage Management	8 (14%)	16 (27%)	31 (53%)	4 (7%)

The majority of superintendents report that they are either in supervisory roles or have a minor role in each of the areas of Facilities (Table 7) work. Specifically, with ongoing maintenance, only seven percent indicated they had a major role, and none indicated they had primary responsibility.

Table 7– Facilities

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
School Construction / Major Projects	11 (19%)	24 (41%)	21 (36%)	3 (5%)
Ongoing Maintenance	36 (61%)	19 (32%)	4 (7%)	0 (0%)
Technology Purchases / Projects	12 (20%)	28 (47%)	16 (27%)	3 (5%)

The majority of superintendents indicated they had at least a minor role in Human Resources (Table 8) in all areas except for payroll. The two tasks in this field with the highest involvement for superintendents were evaluation and contracts/negotiations.

Table 8– Human Resources

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Needs Assessment	6 (10%)	25 (42%)	23 (39%)	5 (8%)
Recruitment	14 (24%)	26 (44%)	12 (20%)	7 (12%)
Evaluation	6 (10%)	19 (32%)	26 (44%)	8 (14%)
Induction	13 (22%)	35 (59%)	6 (10%)	5 (8%)
Staff Training	15 (25%)	30 (51%)	11 (19%)	3 (5%)
Payroll	47 (80%)	12 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Negotiations / Contracts	8 (14%)	13 (22%)	29 (49%)	9 (15%)
Grievance Management	11 (19%)	16 (27%)	24 (41%)	8 (14%)

With Other Business Areas (Table 9), superintendents have a range of involvement. The majority of superintendents only have supervisory responsibility with transportation, and levels of primary responsibility in all areas is low.

Table 9 - Other Business Areas

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Student Transportation	35 (59%)	19 (32%)	4 (7%)	0 (0%)
Contracts with Outside Partners	21 (36%)	17 (29%)	12 (20%)	9 (15%)
International Education	17 (29%)	15 (25%)	17 (29%)	8 (14%)
District Fundraising / Business Companies	26 (44%)	15 (25%)	12 (20%)	5 (8%)

Very few superintendents have primary responsibility in student support services (Table 10). However, more than one-third of all superintendents see identified student support services as areas where they have major involvement.

Table 10 – Student Support Services

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Assessment / Compliance	16 (27%)	19 (32%)	21 (36%)	2 (3%)
Adjudicate Problems	12 (20%)	19 (32%)	22 (37%)	5 (8%)

Superintendents have a high level of involvement with instruction and curriculum (Table 11). In all areas, the majority of superintendents are involved in either a major way or as the

primary lead. With strategic planning, 100% of superintendents see themselves taking on a major or primary role.

Table 11 - Instruction / Curriculum

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Alignment	4 (7%)	10 (17%)	28 (47%)	17 (29%)
Assessment / Testing	10 (17%)	17 (29%)	26 (44%)	6 (10%)
Adoption	3 (5%)	21 (36%)	28 (47%)	8 (14%)
Professional Development	2 (3%)	16 (27%)	32 (54%)	9 (15%)
Strategic Planning	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (17%)	49 (83%)

Of the areas considered, community relations has the highest scores of superintendent involvement. Between 75-100% of all superintendents see the various aspects of community involvement as something where they either have major or primary responsibility.

Table 12 – Community Relations

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Board Relations	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)	56 (95%)
Indigenous Relations	0 (0%)	3 (5%)	33 (56%)	23 (39%)
Governmental Agencies	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	15 (25%)	42 (71%)
Citizen Complaints	1 (2%)	13 (22%)	22 (37%)	23 (39%)
Parent Organizations	0 (0%)	4 (7%)	19 (32%)	36 (61%)

Community relations activities have the highest scores of the 33 tasks over the seven areas considered together. The only one of the top six not from community relations is strategic planning, and this item could have easily been included under community relations, as strategic planning in the BC context is typically an activity that is done in conjunction with the board. Table 13 takes the scores for all 59 superintendents and ranks them by mean score on each task. If, for example, all 59 superintendents listed a task as a primary responsibility, it would score a 4.0. If all 59 superintendents listed a task as only supervisory responsibility, it would score a 1.0. The higher score, the greater the level of responsibility.

Table 13 – Average Level Score for Tasks Based on All 59 Superintendent Scores

Board Relations	Community Relations	3.95
Strategic Planning	Curriculum / Instruction	3.83
Governmental Agencies	Community Relations	3.68
Parent Organizations	Community Relations	3.54
Indigenous Relations	Community Relations	3.34
Citizen Complaints	Community Relations	3.14
Alignment	Curriculum / Instruction	2.98
Fiscal Planning	Financial Management	2.86
Professional Development	Curriculum / Instruction	2.81
Adoption	Curriculum / Instruction	2.73
Budgeting / Forecasting	Financial Management	2.68
Negotiations / Contracts	Human Resources	2.66
Evaluation	Human Resources	2.61
Salary / Wage Management	Financial Management	2.53
Communication Around Finances	Financial Management	2.51
Grievance Management	Human Resources	2.49
Assessment / Testing	Curriculum / Instruction	2.47
Needs Assessment	Human Resources	2.46
Risk Management	Financial Management	2.31
Adjudicate Problems	Student Services	2.31
School Construction / Major Projects	Facilities	2.27
Recruitment	Human Resources	2.20
International Education	Business Functions	2.20
Technology Purchases / Projects	Facilities	2.17
Contracts with Outside Partners	Business Functions	2.15
Assessment / Compliance	Student Services	2.12
Induction	Human Resources	2.05
Staff Training	Human Resources	2.03
District Fundraising / Business Companies	Business Functions	1.90
Purchasing	Financial Management	1.54
Ongoing Maintenance	Facilities	1.46
Student Transportation	Business Functions	1.44
Payroll	Human Resources	1.20

While the community relations tasks clearly stand out as areas in which superintendents take primary responsibility, based on importance in their daily work, superintendents took a balanced position, with many superintendents rating instruction and curriculum above community relations (Table 14). Most (65%) superintendents ranked curriculum and instruction as first or second, while 55% of superintendents ranked community relations as first or second. While Table 13 shows area of responsibility, Table 14 shows how superintendents see the importance of their tasks in their daily work. Thus, while superintendents take greater responsibility for community relations, overall, they see instruction and curriculum as slightly more important in their daily work.

Table 14 – 7 Areas Ranked in Order Based on Importance in Daily Work

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Finances	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	10 (17%)	10 (17%)	10 (17%)	12 (20%)	3 (5%)
Facilities	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	4 (7%)	4 (7%)	8 (14%)	15 (25%)	30 (51%)
Human Resources	9 (15%)	8 (14%)	11 (19%)	16 (27%)	7 (12%)	3 (5%)	4 (7%)
Student Support Services	1 (2%)	5 (8%)	9 (15%)	10 (17%)	15 (25%)	12 (20%)	4 (7%)
District Business Functions	5 (8%)	6 (10%)	5 (8%)	7 (12%)	10 (17%)	12 (20%)	14 (24%)
Curriculum / Instruction	20 (34%)	18 (31%)	13 (22%)	2 (3%)	4 (7%)	3 (5%)	1 (2%)
Community Relations	21 (36%)	11 (19%)	7 (12%)	10 (17%)	5 (8%)	2 (3%)	3 (5%)

Superintendents with the smallest student populations identified the highest level of responsibility for the 33 tasks surveyed. Other superintendents results were close to each other, and those with student populations from 6001-10,000 indicated a lower level of direct responsibility than larger districts. A score of 4.0 would indicate a superintendent had primary responsibility in all 33 areas.

Table 15 – Average Superintendent Rating for Tasks Based on District Population

0-2000 Students	2.77
2001-6000 Students	2.48
6001-10,000 Students	2.23
10,001 – 16,000 Students	2.38
16,001 – 22,000 Students	2.37
22,001 + Students	2.29

Taking into account gender, female superintendents in the study assumed a greater level of responsibility than male superintendents.

Table 16 – Average Superintendent Rating for Tasks Based on Superintendent Gender

Male	2.45
Female	2.59

Comparing superintendents who are new in the job (first five years) to those who are experienced (more than five years of experience), ones with experience scored only slightly lower, meaning they had less direct involvement than those who were new in positions.

Table 17 – Average Superintendent Rating for Task Based on Experience in Position

0-5 years of experience	2.51
5 + years of experience	2.47

The average hours that superintendents work with a Board varied widely. Among superintendents reporting between zero and five hours per week were superintendents in their first five years and others who had more than a decade of experience. Of the seven superintendents spending zero to five hours a week with their Board, six were in districts with populations no greater than 6,000 students. At the other extreme, superintendents spending 21 or more hours a week with their Board included both male and female superintendents and superintendents with different levels of experience. These superintendents were more likely to be in districts with the largest student populations.

Table 18 – Average Hours a Week Working with Board

0-5 Hours	7 (14%)
6-10 Hours	21 (36%)
11-15 Hours	14(24%)
16-20 Hours	10(17%)
21 + Hours	7 (12%)

Table 19 shows the hours that superintendents spend each week with their board, broken down by gender. Five percent of male superintendents and 24% of female superintendents spend 21 or more hours a week with their board.

Table 19 – Hours a Week with Board and Superintendent Gender

	Male	% of Male	% of Overall	Female	% of Female	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	5	13%	8%	2	10%	3%
6-10 Hours	15	39%	25%	6	29%	10%
11-15 Hours	8	21%	14%	6	29%	10%
16-20 Hours	8	21%	14%	2	10%	3%
21 + Hours	2	5%	3%	5	24%	8%

Table 20 shows the hours that superintendents spend each week with their board based on district size over or under 6,000 students. Sixteen percent of superintendents in districts with fewer than 6000 students spend 16 or more hours a week with their board, but 44% do so in the larger districts of more than 6000 students.

Table 20 – Hours a Week with Board and Student Population

	Up to 6000 Students	% of up to 6000 Student Districts	% of Overall Districts	6001 + Students	% of 6000+ Student Districts	% of Overall Districts
0-5 Hours	6	19%	10%	1	4%	2%
6-10 Hours	11	34%	19%	10	37%	17%
11-15 Hours	10	31%	17%	4	15%	7%
16-20 Hours	4	13%	7%	6	22%	10%
21 + Hours	1	3%	2%	6	22%	10%

Table 21 shows the hours that superintendents spend each week with their board. Thirty-four percent of newer superintendents spend at least 16 hours with their board, while only 21% of superintendents with more than five years of experience spend that much time with their board.

Table 21 – Hours a Week with Board and Superintendent Experience

	0-5 Years	% of 0-5 Years	% of Overall	5 + Years	5 + Years	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	3	9%	5%	4	17%	7%
6-10 Hours	13	37%	24%	8	33%	14%
11-15 Hours	7	20%	12%	7	29%	12%
16-20 Hours	8	23%	14%	2	8%	3%
21 + Hours	4	11%	7%	3	13%	5%

Superintendents spend a lot of time on administrative duties (Table 22), such as paperwork, answering emails, and completing necessary office tasks. Such tasks do not align with the demographics. While only 12% of superintendents spent 21 or more hours a week on work with the Board, 52% spent 21 or more hours a week on administrative tasks.

Table 22 – Average Hours a Week on Administrative Duties

0-5 Hours	1(2%)
6-10 Hours	3(5%)
11-15 Hours	13(22%)
16-20 Hours	12(20%)
21 + Hours	30(52%)

Table 23 shows the hours that superintendents spend each week doing administrative duties, including a breakdown by gender. Female superintendents (81%) reported spending 16 hours or more on administrative duties compared to 65% of male superintendents.

Table 23 – Hours a Week on Administrative Duties and Superintendent Gender

	Male	% of Male	% of Overall	Female	% of Female	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	1	3%	2%	0	0%	0%
6-10 Hours	2	5%	3%	1	5%	2%
11-15 Hours	10	26%	17%	3	14%	5%
16-20 Hours	7	18%	12%	5	24%	8%
21 + Hours	18	47%	31%	12	57%	20%

Table 24 identifies the hours that superintendents spend each week doing administrative duties related to the size of the student population over and under 6,000. The table also shows the percentage within the overall sample. Sixty-three percent of the small district superintendents and 38% of the larger district superintendents reported spending 21 hours or more a week on administrative duties.

Table 24 – Hours a Week on Administrative Duties and Student Population

	Up to 6000 Students	% of up to 6000 Student Districts	% of Overall Districts	6001 + Students	% of 6000+ Student Districts	% of Overall Districts
0-5 Hours	0	0%	0%	1	4%	2%
6-10 Hours	1	3%	2%	2	7%	3%
11-15 Hours	7	22%	12%	6	22%	10%
16-20 Hours	4	13%	7%	8	30%	14%
21 + Hours	20	63%	24%	10	38%	17%

Table 25 looks at the hours that superintendents spend each week doing administrative duties based on years of experience. In both groups, approximately half of all superintendents spent at least 21 hours a week on administrative duties.

Table 25– Hours a Week on Administrative Duties and Superintendent Experience

	0-5 Years	% of 0-5 Years	% of Overall	5 + Years	5 + Years	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	0	0%	0%	1	4%	2%
6-10 Hours	1	3%	2%	2	8%	3%
11-15 Hours	7	20%	12%	6	25%	10%
16-20 Hours	8	23%	14%	4	17%	7%
21 + Hours	18	51%	31%	12	50%	20%

While superintendents highly rated their level of responsibility and the priority they give to curriculum and instruction, only 24% of superintendents indicated they spend at least 16 hours a week on tasks related to educational leadership. Of those who spent at least 16 hours a week, none were from districts with more than 10,000 students. Over 60% of superintendents spent between six and 15 hours on educational leadership related activities in a given week. Four of the five superintendents who spent 21 or more hours a week on educational leadership were female.

Table 26 – Average Hours a Week on Educational Leadership

0-5 Hours	9 (15%)
6-10 Hours	17(29%)
11-15 Hours	19(32%)
16-20 Hours	9(15%)
21 + Hours	5(9%)

Table 27 breaks down by gender the hours that superintendents spend each week doing educational leadership related activities. Female superintendents were more likely (76%) to spend at least 11 hours a week on education leadership compared to 45% of male superintendents.

Table 27 - Hours a Week on Educational Leadership and Superintendent Gender

	Male	% of Male	% of Overall	Female	% of Female	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	7	18%	12%	2	10%	3%
6-10 Hours	14	37%	24%	3	14%	5%
11-15 Hours	10	26%	17%	9	43%	15%
16-20 Hours	6	16%	10%	3	14%	5%
21 + Hours	1	3%	2%	4	19%	7%

Table 28 relates the size of districts to the hours that superintendents spend each week doing educational leadership related activities. The table also shows the percentage within the overall sample. Smaller district superintendents are much more likely (41%) to spend at least 16 hours a week on educational leadership, compared to only 4% of the larger district superintendents.

Table 28 - Hours a Week on Educational Leadership and Student Population

	Up to 6000 Students	% of up to 6000 Student Districts	% of Overall Districts	6001 + Students	% of 6000+ Student Districts	% of Overall Districts
0-5 Hours	3	9%	%	6	4%	22%
6-10 Hours	3	9%	5%	14	7%	54%
11-15 Hours	13	41%	22%	6	22%	22%
16-20 Hours	8	25%	14%	1	4%	2%
21 + Hours	5	16%	8%	0	0%	0%

Table 29 breaks down the hours that superintendents spend each week doing educational leadership related activities based on experience. Experience did not seem to be correlated to time spend on educational leadership, with 14% of newer superintendents and 17% of more experienced superintendents spending less than five hours a week in such activities.

Table 29 - Hours a Week on Educational Leadership and Superintendent Experience

	0-5 Years	% of 0-5 Years	% of Overall	5 + Years	% of 5 + Years	% of Overall
0-5 Hours	5	14%	8%	4	17%	7%
6-10 Hours	12	34%	20%	5	21%	8%
11-15 Hours	8	23%	14%	11	46%	19%
16-20 Hours	6	17%	10%	3	13%	5%
21 + Hours	4	11%	7%	1	4%	2%

Superintendents' Control Over Their Time

Superintendents were asked, “Do you feel you have control over how you spend your time?” The snapshot of responses shows some themes emerging but not a consistent approach across British Columbia. The 59 respondents were evenly split on the core question of whether or not they felt they had control over their time.

For those who felt they had no control over their time, it was the tyranny of the urgent that was driving much of this feeling. The phrase “tyranny of the urgent” was specifically used in 13 responses, and 20 of the responses made some reference to urgent issues. Superintendent A argued, “My to do list is usurped the moment I arrive at work with other urgent issues.” This view was corroborated by Superintendent B, who stated, “I feel like I am trying to put out fires all the time. When something comes up in the district, it takes over everything.” Superintendent C also similarly, saying, “Priorities are often dictated by emergent situations.”

Those from small school districts (smaller than 2000 students) were often specific about how they felt the size of their district was limiting to their control. Said Superintendent D, “The work is very complex in a small school district with few district staff,” and they went on to describe the multiple roles they take on with running the district, working with the board, organizing professional development, and taking the lead with human resources. It was also clear that experience in-district led some to feel a lack of control over time. Superintendent E argued, “In the first year of any new role, one puts in a great deal of additional time to make sure nothing is missed.” Superintendent F felt similar and said, “This is my first year in the superintendent’s position in the district. I feel I have no control over my time. I try to manage it and set boundaries but have felt pulled in many directions this year and it is hard to prioritize what should come first.”

There were also several comments about working with boards, which drove feelings negatively and positively on control over time use. Superintendent G argued, “Yes, with the current Board I do. They understand their roles very well, and minimize the time taken on governance and related issues that are not a part of the plan for student success.” The opposite

view of the Board was voiced in Superintendent H's experience, "At this point my board continues to create an ongoing crisis where I am continually trying to respond."

About half of the respondents argued that they felt in control of their time. Superintendent I said, "I do feel that I have control. That is to say I do not always get to choose what I am doing, but I do get to choose how I allocate my time." Many superintendents who argued they had control of their time still saw the same urgent issues as those who felt they did not have control of their time. Superintendent J said, "While there are always potential distractions, emerging issues and other unpredictable periods in every day and week, I do feel like I have a fair amount of control over my time." Similarly, Superintendent K said, "I have broad discretion over how I spend my time; however, it is largely determined by emerging issues on a daily, weekly or monthly basis."

Many who felt they had control, like Superintendent L, had nuanced answers. This superintendent said, "I do have control over how I spend my time. What I am not sure I have control over is the amount of time needing to be spent."

Regardless of whether they felt they had control over their time, in addition to numerous references to the demands of working with elected boards, other common themes in the responses were the seemingly increased demands for reporting from the British Columbia Ministry of Education, the importance of having a strong leadership team, and the challenge of finding time to be the lead learner in the organization.

Impact of COVID-19 on How Superintendents Allocate Their Time

Completing this study during a pandemic required reflection on just how COVID-19 has impacted the work of the superintendent. Almost all superintendents indicated a dramatic impact on their time in answering the question, "How has COVID-19 impacted how you allocate time to

various tasks and your overall allocation of time?” The short version is that for superintendents, COVID-19 meant less travel, both local inside their school district and to meetings outside the district, and more time in their office on video calls.

There was a clear theme that the work had shifted during COVID. Superintendent K described it, “It has meant reduced time at schools, reduced meetings with teachers and principals and much more time ensuring system compliance with guidelines and more HR issues.”

The lack of travel has been positive for some. Superintendent K, who is from a smaller district that has a broad geography, said, “It has actually reduced the amount of time I spend traveling and allowed me more time to focus on student learning.” Others, like Superintendent G, have seen a very different shift, and almost the opposite, “COVID has completely changed the focus of time, managing protocols and expectations of the school community and more broadly the expectations of the community as people look to the schools for support. It has required a much higher level of communication . . . and changed the focus on communication from learning to safety.”

Many respondents commented on how COVID has impacted the work of superintendents at different times during the year, how different levels of COVID in different communities have impacted the work, and how traditional work weeks and year schedules have been impacted. Superintendent L said, “Weekends have been ambushed with the reality of COVID-19 exposures.” This sentiment is similar to Superintendent M, who stated, “I am spending hours every weekend now working with parents who are either angry at imposed safety measures or angry that the imposed safety measures are not strict enough.” Said Superintendent N, “I work seven days a week supporting schools and our health authority response to the pandemic.” There

was generally a sense that the pandemic was far more time-consuming in its early days. This view is reflected in Superintendent O's comment, "Through last spring and summer it dominated my time, sometimes taking 20 or more hours a week. Since then, it has tapered down to five or fewer hours most weeks."

Virtually all of the respondents indicated the pandemic had impacted how they spent their time. As Superintendent P said, "COVID permeates everything we do most days." Some of the superintendents celebrated the positive of less travel. The use of video calling has mixed reviews, with some seeing it as a way to stay better connected, while others are seeing it as a poor replacement for in-person work. Almost 50% of the respondents used the question to mention communication. Superintendents are communicating more in different ways and spending far more time doing it than pre-pandemic.

COVID-19 is recognized as an opportunity by many superintendents to do things differently. As we are still in the midst of it, they still see the challenges of managing the pandemic on top of all of the regular duties of running a school district and leading learning.

Summary

This chapter shared the results of the survey given to all British Columbia K-12 school superintendents in which they reported on their level of involvement in a variety of management and leadership tasks. Superintendents also prioritized seven areas based on their daily work and indicated the number of hours on average they spend per week on board governance, administrative tasks, and educational leadership. Finally, superintendents were given the opportunity to comment on how much control they have over their job and the impact of COVID-19 on their job.

CHAPTER FIVE: Interpretations, Conclusions and Recommendations

This project started with a simple question: How Do BC K-12 School Superintendents Spend Their Time? The answer is not simple; in fact, it is quite messy. It is not surprising that superintendents in smaller districts generally have a higher level of direct responsibility for tasks, as larger districts have more staff who can be delegated responsibility. This rather obvious conclusion was also made by Armbruster (2011). Garner (2005), Thompson (2008) and Armbruster (2011) all found superintendents of small school districts consistently reported a greater level of involvement in management and leadership areas than did superintendents of medium or large school divisions. This study also found superintendents with no more than 2,000 students reported the highest level of direct responsibility for leadership and management tasks.

This study tried to move beyond the seemingly obvious—a superintendent with 200 students and only one board office staff member will have more primary responsibilities than those who lead large teams in school districts of 20,000 students. More interesting in the data is the great range of hours superintendents spend on governance, administration, and educational leadership. This study found that while only 36% of superintendents are female, five of the seven superintendents who spent at least 21 hours a week with their board were female. The study also found that four of the five superintendents who spent at least 21 hours a week on educational leadership related activities were female. While the gender of the superintendent and the size of the student population showed some noticeable results, there were no dramatic results when looking at the experience of superintendents and how they spent their time in various areas.

Superintendents had divided views on whether they had control over how they spent their time. Many highlighted the urgency of immediate issues that limited their control over time,

while others found that they had flexibility in their role and often simply extended their days to ensure they accomplished their goals. Universally, superintendents indicated COVID-19 had impacted their work, from reduced travel to more virtual meetings to changing focus in their work with increased attention to health-related matters.

This chapter is organized into nine themes and sections that present and interpret the findings, draw conclusions, make recommendations, and suggest further areas for study.

Theme 1 – Superintendent Gender Has an Impact

A critical factor in understanding the work of superintendents is who they are and what experience they bring to the job. And while women occupy a higher share of superintendent positions in BC than in the United States, there is still a dramatic difference between the percentage of female superintendents in British Columbia relative to teachers and principals and vice-principals. In BC, 64% of school superintendents are men, which is lower than the 76% in the United States (Ramaswamy, 2020) but far higher than the percentage of male teachers (25%) (BCTF, 2016) and school administrators (40%) (BCPVPA, 2021). While both teachers and administrators are continuing to become more female-dominated professions, the gender mix of the superintendency has stayed quite consistent for at least a decade. Researching for a blog post in 2011 (Kennedy, 2011), I found that 67% of superintendents were male, so this gender divide is basically unchanged in a decade. For future studies, it would be useful to understand better what barriers exist for women moving into the superintendency in British Columbia. It would also be useful to understand more than only superintendents' gender and look at other characteristics such as race in Canada—which the American literature around the superintendency covers extensively.

Female superintendents lead some of the smallest districts in BC, 15 of the 21 women head-up districts of 6000 students or fewer. They also lead some of the very largest, as three of the six districts with more than 22,000 students are headed by women. However, mid-size school districts seem to lack female leaders, as only three of the 21 districts in size from 6001 – 22,000 students have female superintendents.

In looking at the work of female superintendents, four of the five superintendents that reported spending at least 21 hours a week on educational leadership related issues were women. In American literature on school and district leaders, female leaders were far more likely to have a background in teaching or curriculum (Maranto et al., 2018). Considering time with their Board, five of the seven superintendents that spent at least 21 hours a week on governance were also female. Both of these areas would be worth further exploration to consider why female superintendents were more likely to spend time in these areas.

Female superintendents were slightly more likely to be involved in the 33 leadership and management tasks than male superintendents, with an average score of 2.59 versus 2.45 for males (on a 4-point scale in which a 4.0 would mean they had primary responsibility in all areas). However, with female superintendents occupying the position in many of the province's smallest districts, the district population could also be the driver, not gender, for their higher level of involvement. It is true that, on average in BC, female superintendents have more direct involvement in leadership and management tasks and are more likely than their male counterparts to spend 21 hours a week or more with their board and on educational leadership activities.

There are real opportunities to understand better how more women can move into the superintendency. Tom Glass, writing for the AASA on the US experience, argued, “The two

most widely cited reasons for the paucity of women in the superintendency are that women are discouraged from preparing for the superintendency and school boards will not hire them” (Glass, 2000). It would be useful to understand if American experiences for females aspiring to the superintendency are similar in British Columbia. Further exploration would also be needed to understand the findings that such a high number of female superintendents are the heavy time spenders with boards and on educational leadership.

Theme 2 – Student Population Size Matters – At Least Until It Hits a Certain Threshold

The size of school districts is also an important factor in the diverse work of BC school superintendents. Two districts, Surrey and Vancouver, combine for a greater student population than the 32 districts (54%) in the bottom two population categories—districts up to 6000 students. It seems that providing all 60 superintendents with the same support when their populations are so different is a poor idea. Superintendents in the smaller districts regularly commented that they had to take on a greater number of roles, as there are just not enough staff to take the different responsibilities. Often superintendents of the smallest school districts described a job that seemed completely different from those of the larger school districts.

This study confirmed other findings that superintendents have more direct involvement in management and leadership when they work in smaller districts. Superintendents with student populations below 6,000 and particularly below 2,000 students had higher levels of direct involvement in tasks, but above 6,000 students, there was not very much difference. Superintendents of districts with between 6,000 and 10,000 students reported a lower level of direct responsibility than each of the three higher population categories. Superintendents in districts of 2000 students or fewer averaged 2.77 on their level of involvement on the 33 management and leadership tasks. The next highest were the districts of up to 6,000 students, at

2.48. All of the remaining superintendents in the other four population categories averaged between 2.23 and 2.38. It appears there is a threshold at which superintendents' direct involvement drops, and then it levels off. A superintendent of a district with a population of about 8,000 students would be similarly likely to have the same level of direct involvement in activities as a superintendent of 18,000 or 28,000 students. It seems likely that at a threshold of about 6,000 students, a district is large enough that it has senior-level staff that can be delegated some of the specific tasks that take place in the board office. The remaining tasks stay with the superintendents as a primary responsibility even in the largest school districts.

Superintendents from smaller districts were far more likely to spend more hours each week on educational leadership than those from larger districts. Thirteen of the 14 superintendents who spent at least 16 hours a week on educational leadership related activities were from districts with student populations of no more than 6,000 students. Conversely, three of the six superintendents from the largest districts of more than 22,000 students indicated they spent more than 21 hours a week on average with their Board. Moreover, superintendents from smaller districts had more time for educational leadership activities than those from larger districts, who often spend a lot of their hours with their board and on governance issues. In the districts of up to 6000 students, 25 of the 31 superintendents reported they spent more than 10 hours a week on educational leadership activities, while only seven of the remaining 28 superintendents in districts with more than 6000 students reported they spent more than 10 hours a week on educational leadership activities.

Theme 3 – Some Stunning Numbers with Experience, But Little Impact on Their Work

The in-district experience of superintendents did not match my perception entering the study. I assumed that many superintendents had experiences to similar mine, which would have

seen them move into the district in a board role and advance to the superintendency, thus often having between six and 15 years of experience. The data shows that almost three-quarters of superintendents fall into two categories—they are either in their first five years in the district, which likely means they moved into the district to become superintendent or have more than 16 years of experience which likely means they grew up through the system in their district from teacher to school administrator to district administrator and superintendent. There are likely very different kinds of supports required for superintendents who are newcomers to a school district compared to educators who have spent their career in a district and move into the position. This career trajectory for superintendents is important for the superintendents' association and ministry to understand as they support their leaders.

Fifty-nine percent of superintendents are in their first five years in the job. This high percentage is stunning. While there may have been a particularly high turnover in recent years, having such a high percentage of superintendents new to their position offers a huge challenge and opportunity in support for these leaders. Given the level of experience of superintendents when most assume the position, it is not surprising that very few would hold the position for a long time, as retirement opportunities would come up before that happened. Those who support superintendents, including universities, boards, and their own association, must recognize the high level of newness in the group.

The level of experience of BC superintendents was largely unsurprising. Most superintendents have worked from 16–35 years in the system. It is interesting to see that nine of the leaders have worked for more than 35 years. Educators reach their full pension at 35 years in BC, so it is often discussed that there is no financial incentive for them to continue working beyond this point (*When Can You Retire*, 2021). One regret in this area was not asking for

superintendents' ages, whether they thought this job would be their final job, and how many years they planned to work until they retired. All of this data would be useful for further study to understand the position better. Given the data around experience, one could assume that almost 75% of superintendents definitely plan to retire in the next decade, but it would be useful to have this information more specifically.

While there were striking numbers of new superintendents, their experience with how they spent their time was not much different from their more experienced colleagues. With the 33 management and leadership tasks, the level of involvement of superintendents in their first five years was largely the same as those who were more experienced. It was noteworthy in looking at the time new superintendents reported spending each week on educational leadership that four of the five who indicated they spent more than 21 hours a week were in their first five years, and 10 of 14 who spent at least 16 hours a week were in their first five years. This data may indicate a shift in the type of people being hired into the superintendency that are more focused on making time each week for educational leadership related activities, or it may indicate that superintendents early in their tenure invest more time in educational leadership activities.

There are real needs to support a group of superintendents who are often new to districts and where over half of those in positions are new to them in the last five years. Superintendent recruitment and retention is an ongoing issue. It is also worthy of further study to learn more about the commitment of less experienced superintendents to educational leadership activities.

Theme 4 – Superintendents Are Drawn into the Urgent

“The tyranny of the urgent” was commonly used as a comment when superintendents were asked to reflect on their ability to control their own time. Whether human resources issues,

health and safety, or very often board topics, superintendents were challenged to stay focused on their plans, and they are often derailed to deal with an emerging crisis.

Superintendent L described experiences that were common among many of the respondents:

I do have control over how I spend my time. Each day I have a list of the things that I need and want to accomplish and for the most part each day I achieve that list. The complexity is that each day a large number of things get added to that list, which I also accomplish. The result is that the day continues to get longer as I seek to achieve those things that I had put on the list. As I reflect on my eleven years as Superintendent, I think the days, weeks and years are getting longer with new additions and rarely anything being removed from the overall list. So, I guess I have control over how I spend my time, what I am not sure I have control over is the amount of time needing to be spent. This is because I do not want to shift focus from what is a priority for the team and district to accomplish tasks for outside systems and/or organizations.

Many shared this view that the time needed to be an effective superintendent was growing as the tasks that were viewed as urgent took more time. Community concerns and board matters were the drivers of the urgent on the list of items that superintendents identified as most commonly having primary responsibility. One superintendent described the experience as “a crisis every day” that needs to be dealt with. Superintendents recognized the politics of the urgent items that required their specific attention. While many items could be delegated, if the issue involved local or provincial government or had a media angle, they often took responsibility.

While many of the tasks of the superintendency, like budget planning, strategic planning, recruitment, and working with partners, appear to be the kind of tasks for which one could close their door and work on for eight hours in a day, the reality of the experience that superintendents describe is one that is often a frenzied pace moving from item to item.

There was a sentiment among respondents that outside officials, like board trustees and BC Ministry of Education officials, were creating unrealistic timelines with often changing demands that needed the superintendent's attention. For further study, it would be useful to look more closely at the specifics of the tasks that are falling into the urgent category and whether they truly require urgent attention. It is also important for outside agencies who interact with superintendents to know that they are looking for greater predictability, so they can plan with their time appropriately on various tasks.

Theme 5 – Superintendents Commitment to Being Educational Leaders

BC school superintendents want the E in CEO to be Education and not just Executive. More than half of the superintendents reported that they spent at least 11 hours a week on work that they would describe as educational leadership. While there was a great range in the survey on the hours that superintendents spent on educational leadership, it was clear that they saw this function as the key to their job. Given that superintendents in British Columbia and across Canada were trained as teachers, this inclination should not be surprising.

Superintendents with experience in their roles and their district often commented on the strength of their partnerships. Superintendent D described this, "I am grateful to have built a strong team and to have cultivated a very powerful ethos of collaborative practice amongst all of our employees, union and many community partners. I am also intensely grateful for the many collaborative partnerships with other organizations that help inspire and sustain the work. The

culture of collective professionalism allows me to feel a sense of control despite the complexity and challenge of day-to-day pressures.”

Superintendents often take primary or major responsibility for matters of curriculum and instruction. They were far less likely to take this level of leadership for human resources, student support services, or business functions in the district.

Theme 6 – Learning Leader vs. Community Leader

In the literature, many American superintendents were consumed by their board, administrative work, and community commitments (Farrell, 2013). In this study, it was clear that being a learning leader and being a community leader compete for the time of the superintendent. Of the 33 tasks considered, 10 of the top 11 tasks in terms of the level of responsibility for superintendents were either in the curriculum and instruction category or community relations category. And when superintendents were asked to rank the seven areas based on the importance in their daily work, 38 of the 59 superintendents ranked curriculum and instruction as either first or second, and 32 superintendents ranked community relations as either first or second.

Knowing that at some point, time is finite, these two areas do compete with each other for the attention of the superintendent. Superintendents seem torn, they want to spend their time on educational leadership, but they are taken away from this by administrative tasks and work with trustees. Superintendents often commented that they would extend their workday and week and are working more hours now than in the past to continue to be educational leaders in their district.

A basic finding of the similar Virginia study from a decade ago still held with BC’s top education leaders:

Superintendents today must be communicators, collaborators, consensus creators, community builders, child advocates, champions of curriculum and masters of teaching and learning. At the same time, they are expected to fall in with the bureaucrats, carry out mandates for the policymakers. School leaders today need to be versatile enough to respond effectively to these varied pressures while staying focused on the crucial mission of improving student learning. (Armbruster, 2011, p. 114)

The relational capital that Armbruster (2011) spoke about came through in the answers from BC school superintendents. BC superintendents noted their strong ties with various partner groups, their ability to move items forward because of relational trust, and how long-standing relationships were helpful. While superintendents felt the pull of community vs. educational leader, in the end, for most, it was not an either-or proposition. It needed to be both, and the tension of time was exacerbated by this conflict.

A further study would be to look at the strategies individual superintendents use to balance time between these competing demands. Such an inquiry could also be raised as an area for support and professional development for superintendents as they strive to be both community and learning leaders.

Theme 7 – Boards Matter

There were dramatic differences in the time that superintendents spent with their boards. I had expected the data on hours a week that superintendents spend on governance work to be quite straightforward: the larger the student population, the more hours on governance. This trend was partly, but not completely, true. Six of the seven districts where superintendents spend five hours or fewer each week on governance had populations of up to 6,000 students, but the final one in the group was a district of more than 22,000 students. Looking at the other end of the

spectrum, and those superintendents that spend more than 21 hours a week with on governance, three of the seven districts are from the highest student population category of more than 22,000 students, and there is one each from districts from the four next categories in population.

There is a dynamic with superintendent gender and time spent with the board. Twenty of the 28 superintendents that indicated they spent ten or fewer hours a week over the year with their board were men, while five of the seven that spend more than 21 hours a week were women. Similar to educational leadership, there was not a dramatic difference between superintendents in their first five years and more experienced superintendents on the time they spend with their Boards. Both the newer and experienced superintendents had comparable numbers at both ends of the spectrum of less than five hours and more than 21 hours a week.

Working with boards is a task that virtually all superintendents take primary responsibility for. This area scored the highest among the 33 tasks for which superintendents take the highest level of direct responsibility. The second highest task was strategic planning, a task that is often done in concert with elected trustees. Other high-ranking tasks for direct involvement by superintendents included working with government organizations, working with parent organizations and citizen complaints, all of which are often tasks that have some level of shared responsibility between the governance and administrative sides of the organization.

In written responses, many superintendents lamented about what they saw as excess time that they spent with the board, as this was time taken away from working with the school system and focusing on student learning. Several superintendents referenced general guidelines they try to come up with to divide their time between governance and working with the board and all other time working with the rest of the system. Superintendents referenced goals of 20-30% of their time working with trustees, but the data shows some are working more than this, and others

are working less. This study was not intended to determine what the ideal number of hours per week is for superintendents to spend with trustees on governance work, but the range of hours clearly opens up this question.

Superintendents expressed some frustration about how they work with their board. It is also important, particularly given how inexperienced so many superintendents are in the province, that they need support around governance, and not just the trustees. Campbell and Fullan argued, “many superintendents simply view the board as an external power source, important and legitimate but not a part of the superintendent’s team” (2019, p. 55). There needs to be continuous ongoing work to support superintendents to understand the crucial role that boards play in the system and how superintendents support the work of the board and boards support the work of the superintendent.

For further study, it would be interesting to ask each board how many hours a week they spend with the superintendent to measure that time and see if there is an alignment in their views. There is probably no perfect answer, and this study did not set out to determine if five hours or thirty hours is more appropriate, but the vast differences are worthy of more discussion to understand the range of governance models better and determine what the successes and drawbacks of the various number of hours that superintendents spend with their trustees are.

Theme 8 – Control of Time is a Matter of Perspective

Different superintendents sometimes described two almost identical situations, and one would use it as an example of how they had no control over their time, while the other would use it to show how they were masters of their own time. The experience might be best summed up by Superintendent R, who argued, “In some ways no and others yes” when asked about the control of time.

Many superintendents acknowledged that they do have some choice on where they allocate their time. The views were often like those of Superintendent S, “I feel I have control; however, there is limited time and those items that are deadlines driven or urgent in nature get prioritized.” Superintendent D also took a reflective view of time: “Control is about juggling planned versus unplanned – and also find time for reflective practices and vision to sustain innovative practice.” Many of those who felt in control pointed to strong governance structures with their board, highly effective management teams, and their willingness to extend the workday to deal with the urgent during business hours but still make time for areas of passion in the evening and on weekends.

Those who did not feel in control largely felt their primary objectives around student learning were being hijacked by the demands of the Ministry, the board, and urgent emerging issues in the district. They would see themselves entering each day and week with a clear list of priorities, but this list would quickly shift to other items that would require their time and attention. Many described the superintendency as a “reactive” job that required continuous shifts.

For further study, it would be worth knowing what barriers to controlling their own time that superintendents see. Those who felt time was out of their control seemed to take a hopeless view that there was nothing they or anyone else could do about it.

Theme 9 – COVID-19 Created Complexity and Opportunity

There were numerous negative comments on how COVID-19 had impacted the work of the superintendent. As Superintendent E said, “It has had a major negative impact, and it has taken priority over many other issues on my desk.” Others described COVID as all-consuming, and as Superintendent N stated, “I work seven days a week to support schools and our health authority responding to the pandemic.” It was definitely clear that many felt similar to

Superintendent Q, “It really limited what we were doing and detracted from the momentum we had going.”

The pandemic has placed an increased role of the superintendent as the communicator-in-chief. Many reflected on the pandemic similarly to Superintendent P, “My attention has now become focused on communications: when, how and what. It requires considerable effort to continue to shape a narrative that allows staff, community and students to feel safe, supported and cared for.” Superintendents described new communication skills they built, often through video platforms, and there are real opportunities to find ways to continue to use these communication skills and platforms in the post-pandemic world.

Most interesting is how superintendents describe the change in meetings and travel. The travel changes seem particularly helpful for superintendents from more remote districts, like Superintendent K, who said, “It has actually reduced the amount of time I spend traveling and allowed me more time to focus on student learning.” A number of superintendents said it has really adjusted the work week, with meetings that used to be at night now in the day because they are virtual and the work week now being a seven-day week. While many positions in the school system lack the opportunity for flexible hours since they are currently governed by the traditional school day, the superintendent position has some greater flexibility, which has been utilized by some superintendents during COVID. Rather than shifting hours, many have simply added more hours to their day and week with the growth and ease of virtual meetings. Going forward, having some greater flexibility with remote meetings, they may be able to focus better on student learning during the traditional school day.

For future study, rather than simply looking at the impact, it would be useful to reframe the question and look at the changes made during COVID that had a positive impact on the work

of the superintendent and the success of the district. Given that British Columbia has not had the lockdowns and a complete shift to remote learning as some other jurisdictions in North America, some of the changes that others have seen may be blunted in BC. It is challenging to see the forest for the trees, and still being in the midst of the pandemic at the time of this survey has definitely limited the ability to see silver linings that may emerge.

Implications

This study shows there are patterns in how superintendents spend their time. The study is less clear on why these patterns are occurring, but it does open the opportunity for further discussion. The superintendency is a lonely position. There is only one superintendent in each district so there is no chance to look in the next classroom like one does as a teacher, or in the neighboring school as one can as a principal. One answer to the question of how superintendents spend their time as they do could be that while influenced by gender, experience, and size of district, it is the unique situation of a given superintendent, with their predisposition to a certain leadership style, with their board at a particular time and the challenges that come with it, and the particular community and its expectations that connect together to lead to how a particular superintendent allocates time.

This study reaffirmed many of the findings that Armbruster (2011) found in a similar study in Virginia a decade ago. When participants in this current study described the complexity of managing an organization while remaining focused on student learning, this finding was reaffirming of Armbruster who said, “School leaders today need to be versatile enough to respond effectively to these varied pressures while staying focused on the crucial mission of improving student learning” (p. 131). Armbruster found, like this study, that superintendents in smaller districts take on a greater role in educational leadership, and a greater role in all

operations with fewer staff to which they can delegate responsibilities. This study also aligns to Armbruster's conclusions that it is board relations which is the task that most superintendents take on primary responsibility. Where this current study and Armbruster differ is that this study does show some differences based on the superintendent's gender that Armbruster did not find with his study. Armbruster also identified a greater political role for Virginia superintendents than this study found for British Columbia superintendents, and an important role of testing results, something no superintendent referenced in this study.

It is also worth considering the role that the transformation agenda is having and will have on the superintendency in British Columbia. Superintendents are being expected to lead major changes in curriculum and assessment that are intended to ensure British Columbia maintains its standing in global education. While all school jurisdictions in North America have ongoing reform efforts, those in British Columbia have been exceptionally broad and ambitious. British Columbia has built "a landscape of innovation, personalization, and inquiry in classrooms, schools, and districts" (Sanford & Hopper, 2019, p.107). These transformation expectations, which have increased over the last decade, could lead to differently skilled individuals aspiring to the superintendency and to boards making different selections in their hiring for this position. The Ministry of Education in British Columbia has been clear about its vision, "to truly transform education, the BC education system must empower innovation throughout the province" (BC Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2). Being a passionate learning leader with a strong background in curriculum and assessment, with a vision around transformation, is now mandatory for the superintendent position. Tracking how this focus might impact who is hired into the superintendent position will be interesting to follow.

There are several implications from this study for various educational partners. For superintendents, this study allows them to put their work in the context of their colleagues. With the high participation of superintendents, the study gives a complete picture of the entire province. Particularly for newer superintendents, the ability to compare their experiences to others in the role is valuable. I would encourage current superintendents to look at their use of time in relation to their colleagues and use this as an opportunity to consider other approaches to their work. This study can act as a conversation starter for superintendents who often do not ask each other how they allocate their time.

For the British Columbia School Superintendents' Association, this study makes a strong case for adding additional supports for newer superintendents and for differentiating support for superintendents based on the size of school districts. It does seem that being a superintendent of a district of fewer than 6000 students is far different from a superintendent of larger districts. Typically, support for superintendents has been similar, but if the jobs are different, small and large districts' superintendents should be offered different types of support. There is also an opportunity for the superintendents' association to support female leaders currently in other district positions who may aspire to the superintendency. It can be an uncomfortable question, but what can the superintendents' association do to ensure greater diversity in its ranks. More generally, for aspiring superintendents, this study shows that if they have seen one model in their district of how a superintendent spends their time, it is not the only model. As these individuals move into the role, they should seek out others in the province to consider different approaches to how they allocate their time and areas that get their primary attention.

For boards, there is an opportunity to reflect on their interactions with their superintendent. The wide range of time commitments is worthy of follow-up. Numerous

superintendents referenced the distraction some board behaviour can be to the organization, and this issue is worth additional study. Boards also have a role to play in supporting new superintendents and ensuring they have the professional development in place to be successful. Both boards and the BC Ministry of Education should be looking at how they could make fewer urgent requests and be more strategic in their asks of superintendents.

Finally, this study provides a useful look into the superintendency for those in the community. This study helps to humanize the position. Armbruster (2011) described an evolving and changing role for the superintendent, and that is supported by this study. The leaders in these positions are experienced educators spending long hours both managing and leading the school system.

Final Recommendations

The nine themes covered in this chapter summarize the key findings of the study:

- Superintendent gender has an impact
- Student population size matters – at least until it hits a certain threshold
- Some stunning numbers with experience, but little impact on their work
- Superintendents are drawn into the urgent
- Superintendents are committed to being educational leaders
- Learning leader vs. community leader
- Boards matter
- Control of time is a matter of perspective
- COVID-19 created complexity and opportunity.

It was incredibly useful that this study included 59 of the 60 school district superintendents to get a complete picture of the position across the province. Within each of the nine themes are some

questions worth studying further. There is clearly a tension between time with the board and governance and time on leading learning. This tension is neither new nor unique to British Columbia but worth further examination. There is also more work to be done to understand who is being attracted to the position, how they are being supported, and if the turnover is simply a product of educators moving into the superintendency late in their career or if more can be done to keep them in positions longer. Finally, it was striking just how committed to student success and learning leadership the BC superintendents are in their daily work. They prioritize it in their commitments of time and will often extend their workdays to 10–14 hours to ensure that this portfolio has their leadership. BC School Superintendents are committed to leading learning.

While there is a lot that unites the 60 school superintendents in British Columbia through how they work, it was also clear that the experiences of superintendents in smaller districts, those under 2,000 students and those in remote communities (these are often the same), is different from the experiences and job of the superintendent in larger school districts and those in urban centers (again these are often the same). While some support for superintendents should be universal, other support should be targeted based on student populations and geography.

In starting this project, I was not expecting to write much about gender beyond describing the numbers of male and female superintendents in the province. The findings around gender were surprising, and of all the possible next areas for consideration, they are the ones I would be most interested in learning more about.

I also think this study should be repeated in five years to see what, if any, changes have taken place. This data was useful as a point in time, but it would be interesting to see shifts that may occur over time.

This study suggests the role of the superintendent is getting more complex. Superintendents are required to know a little bit about everything in their district and take primary leadership in many areas. Superintendents see themselves as learning leaders and community leaders and describe ever-increasing work hours. The study also suggests that COVID provides an opportunity, but first, the challenges of the pandemic need immense time to manage. Finally, BC superintendents are driven by purpose—to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for their students in their districts.

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Appendix

5/14/2021

BC School Superintendents Survey of Tasks and Time

BC School Superintendents Survey of Tasks and Time

Thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. Any questions please follow up with me at chrkennedy@ku.edu

* Required

1. Email *

2. How would you describe your gender?

Mark only one oval.

- Male (including transgender men)
- Female (including transgender women)
- Prefer to self describe (non-binary, gender-fluid, agender)
- Prefer not to say

3. What is your total years in education?

Mark only one oval.

- 5-15
- 16-25
- 26-35
- 36+

4. How many years have you had in your current district?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5
 6-10
 11-15
 16 +

5. How many years have you had in your current position?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5
 6-10
 11-15
 16 +

6. What is the total student population for your school district?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-2000
 2001-6000
 6001-10,000
 10,001 - 16,000
 16001 - 22000
 22001 +

7. Financial Management - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Fiscal Planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Budgeting / Forecasting / Demographics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Purchasing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication around finances	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Risk Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Salary / Wage Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Facilities - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
School Construction / Major Projects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ongoing Maintenance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technology Purchases / Projects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Human Resources - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Needs Assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Recruitment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evaluation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Induction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff Training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Payroll	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Negotiations / Contracts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grievance Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Other Business Areas - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Student Transportation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contracts with outside partners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
International Education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
District Fundraising / Business Companies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. Student Support Services - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Assessment / Compliance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adjudicate Problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. Instruction / Curriculum - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Alignment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assessment / Testing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adoption	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional Development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strategic Planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. Community Relations - for each item indicate your level of involvement Level 1 - SUPERVISION - Little Direct Involvement, Level 2 - MINOR Direct Involvement, Level 3 - MAJOR Direct Involvement, Level 4 - PRIMARY - Lead Person on File

Mark only one oval per row.

	Level 1 - SUPERVISION	Level 2 - MINOR	Level 3 - MAJOR	Level 4 - PRIMARY
Board Relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Indigenous Relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Governmental Agencies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Citizen Complaints	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parent Organizations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Please rank the 7 management areas below in order based on importance in your daily work *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Finances	Facilities	Human Resources	Student Support Services	District Business Functions	Curriculum / Instruction	Community Relations
1 (Most Imp)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7 (Least Imp)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. How many hours a week, on average between September and June, do you spend engaged in work involving trustees and / or Board governance?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21 and above

16. How many hours a week, on average between September and June, do you spend engaged in work you would describe as administrative (e.g. government reports, answering emails, regular scheduled meetings etc.)?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5
 6-10
 11-15
 16-20
 21 and above

17. How many hours a week, on average between September and June, do you spend engaged in work you would describe as educational leadership (e.g. working in schools, working directly with principals or teachers etc.)?

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5
 6-10
 11-15
 16-20
 21 and above

18. Do you feel you have control over how you spend your time? Explain.

19. How has COVID-19 impacted how you allocate time to various tasks and your overall allocation of time? Explain.

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