

PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS REGARDING GROW YOUR OWN APPROACHES  
TO HIRING RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

Concerns about a strong positive correlation between leadership and student success (Wood et al., 2013) coupled with community input around hiring from outside an organization, or hiring from within and selecting existing employees to fill superintendent vacancies contribute to the complexity of the hiring process. The limited research available on this issue has highlighted the concern of the shortage of highly qualified superintendent candidates available to fill vacancies (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014).

The role of district superintendent can be cumbersome, yet with the optimal personnel, it can be a role worth pursuing. The information gathered for this ethnographic study was derived from the responses from various stakeholders' opinions, feelings, and experiences as it relates to the superintendent position and 'grow your own' hiring practices in rural districts. Fink and Brayman (2006) make note that the recruitment and selection of administrative candidates have become a national dilemma for the educational domain. It is crucial to attract and employ high-quality applicants when hiring for this essential district role. The information gathered for this ethnographic study was derived from the responses from various stakeholders' opinions, perceptions, and experiences as it relates to the superintendent position and 'grow your own' hiring practices in rural districts. This study revealed there are both advantages and disadvantages to implementing the 'grow your own' (GYO) approach. While implications include limiting the pool of qualified applicants, and contributing to a gender-bias impression on the pool of potential candidates, the building of a culture of leadership and shortening the learning curve are identified as advantages of a GYO hiring approach. This study is significant to the educational community for educators seeking to advance their careers into leadership

positions. The study is also significant to school district leadership teams when assessing internal and external strategies to consider in order to find the best candidate to fill an administrative vacancy.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the educational leaders who have preceded me, as well as those who are yet to be discovered. Throughout my doctoral journey, I have had the opportunity to truly reflect on my career in education and my personal growth through the years. I attribute my growth and successes to the great educational leaders I have encountered in my lifetime. I aspire to be such an admirable and inspirational leader. I am now an educational leader myself and holdfast to the words of Jesse Lyn Stoner, “Be a leader worth following.” As educational leaders, we never know the lengths at which our leadership skills will impact others. I am grateful for every leader I have known, for I have learned something from each and every one of them. To all the future leaders, I wish you the *hope* to be as inspired as I am, the *strength* to continue to grow, and the *courage* to find fellow leaders amongst you and inspire them to grow.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have inspired and supported me on this journey to earn a doctoral degree, a dream of mine for as long as I can remember. My first year teaching my campus was assigned a new principal. My principal, Mr. Garza was a true leader. He was professional, respectful, and a great communicator. I remember how supportive he was and interested in student learning. Thank you, Mr. Garza, for being a great leader.

Ironically, when I accepted my first school counseling position my campus was assigned a new principal. Mr. Hannum was a leader who was lighthearted and wanted the staff to enjoy the workplace. He appeared to have two missions in life: make people smile, and take the potential he saw in others and encourage them to grow and become leaders themselves. Mr. Hannum encouraged me to pursue my administrative certificate. I was hesitant at first, but his persistence paid off. Thank you, Mr. Hannum, for seeing potential in me and encouraging me to succeed.

While it has always been a dream to pursue my doctorate degree, I had not yet begun the journey. I was an assistant principal when my principal, Mr. Rogers encouraged me to start looking into doctorate programs. I remember it like it was yesterday. He said I had the potential and no excuses valid enough to not do it. Thus, I began the journey. Thank you, Mr. Rogers, for your encouragement.

I wish to also thank my doctoral chair, Dr. Maxwell, for all her guidance and words of wisdom. For without her, I would not be where I am. She is truly a great educational leader and an inspiration to doctoral students, such as myself. I will miss our classes and the pearls of

wisdom. Thank you, Dr. Maxwell, for all your support throughout this journey. I could not have done this without you.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

The multi-dimensional role of the school superintendent finds her serving simultaneously as teacher-scholar, instructional leader, business manager, political leader and even applied social scientist (Bjork et al., 2014; Heron, 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2013). Jong (2017) proffers that public leaders, such as school superintendents, are also called upon to serve as mourner-in-chief, orchestrator, buddy, and, advocate. In consideration of the complexity of the role, search firms often create a contextual community profile to further define expectations when hiring school superintendents (Benigni et al., 2020). Concerns about a strong positive correlation among leadership and student success (Wood et al., 2013) coupled with community input around hiring from outside an organization, or hiring from within add to the intricacy of the process. While many scholars value the advantages of hiring candidates from within the current employee applicant pool (Hammer et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013), there are still those who contest the idea of hiring from within the district (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015).

Nonetheless, although some scholars challenge the notion of hiring from within, a number of school districts have begun filling leadership vacancies via ‘grow your own’ (GYO) programs or leadership approach (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammer et al., 2005; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Through grooming and honing the leadership skills of existing employees to develop future school leaders, as positions become available, onboarding downtime is diminished via access to this internal leadership pipeline.

Securing and retaining high-quality educators and administrators for rural districts is challenging (Hayes et al., 2021). Moreover, research provides evidence that there tends to be more superintendent turnover in rural school districts in comparison to others (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Therefore, GYO programs are one viable approach for facilitating continuity in rural school leadership given the unique nature and needs of these communities (Rey, 2014).

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of various school administrators in rural school districts regarding their perceptions of ‘grow your own’ or GYO hiring practices. Considerations about the use of GYO hiring practices within rural school districts are the anticipated focus of this study to glean both potential best practices as well as potential pitfalls of the impacts of implementation of this approach.

### **Personal Rationale**

As I am in my 17<sup>th</sup> year in education, I look back at my career in education and realize I have ‘climbed the leadership ladder’ rather quickly. I became a counselor at year ten. During that same year, my principal encouraged me to enroll in a principal certification program. I was reluctant at first since I was just getting my bearings in the counseling role. Ultimately, I did decide to enroll in a principal certification program. One year later I was a fully certified principal. Shortly after, a position became available on my campus for an assistant principal. My principal asked if I was interested. I let him know I was more than interested. I applied, interviewed, and obtained the position. The following year a position became available at the high school, which was considered a vertical career move, that being, one which enhanced my experience at a new level and was compensated accordingly. My principal, once again, encouraged me to take the position. I applied, interviewed, and obtained the new position. I will

be honest and say that at the time, I never thought of my advancement in leadership positions within the same district as an ‘internal’ or ‘grow your own’ approach. In all honesty, I hope that I was selected for the position because I was the most qualified applicant. While I loved my position as an assistant principal, and thoroughly enjoyed the adventures the high school atmosphere brought daily, I felt a craving for more. I wanted to be a principal. I wanted to lead a team of teachers and staff to success, and as a giant family, lead students to academic success. Therefore, I sought out to spread my wings eventually knowing I would likely have to leave the district that had given me so much support and growth opportunity. I began my search for campus principal positions.

I am now a principal in a small rural district and finishing up my superintendent certification coursework. I will be considering superintendent positions soon. Perhaps by happenstance, my current district’s superintendent resigned at the beginning of the school year, and an interim superintendent has been serving in that role to finish out the year. The district is in search of a superintendent. While I did not consider applying for the superintendent position in my current district, I was made aware of the long-standing hiring tradition that this district is not known for promoting and hiring from within. Therefore, in the event a position does become available, employees are often discouraged from applying. As I haven’t actually been a principal here very long, and still feeling as a somewhat outsider, I’m perplexed as to why I have been told this, especially if the district doesn’t hire from within, I being somewhat of an “outsider,” should have an opportunity. Nonetheless, I understand when I’m being told to essentially, “move on.” I just problematize what other politics have been at work here and whether in fact, my gender, for example, plays into my opportunities. I have literally been told, “it’s time for a man to run the district, again.”



Having experienced two different school district contexts, I wondered how their perspectives on internal hiring could be so different. It was at this moment that I reflected on my own career advancements. I'm young enough, I have the skillset, yet, in one district, I hit a "glass ceiling" and moved away. Now, in this new district, there appears to be a barrier to my potential ascension to the role of superintendent. Having heard of GYO programs, my perplexity at my own experience has foregrounded my interest in whether *'grow your own' programs are effective, and if so, whether they should be used more often in school districts when hiring for leadership positions?* Or, are there other factors such as gender impacting my ascension into a superintendency?

### **Academic Rationale**

According to the AASA (2017), 72% of the United States landmass is considered rural country. Additionally, AASA asserts 53% of the United States schools are rural school districts, of which 20% of the student population attend these schools. Ratcliffe et al. (2016) wrote a brief on defining 'rural' at the U.S. Census Bureau. The authors identified three major characteristics used for distinguishing rural populations. They take into consideration population density, sparsity, and at a distance (as opposed to close together). Showalter et al. (2017) describe how these rural school districts face unique challenges. The researchers affirm about half of the student population in rural schools are from low-income families, has moved within the past year, and more than one-fourth is a student of color.

When it comes to filling administrator leadership vacancies in these rural school settings, research has confirmed that urban districts frequently implement a standard succession plan for selecting an applicant for an administrative position, versus smaller rural districts that do not implement such succession plans (Zepeda et al., 2012). The practice of "growing their own," has

been illuminated by several scholars (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Rural school districts are joining urban and suburban districts in implementing ‘grow your own’ leadership approaches from which to select administrative candidates, including superintendents, when vacancies arise (Versland, 2013). Multiple scholars, including Rey (2014) assert there are often unique demographics in rural communities. For instance, research affirms in rural communities about half of the population are from low-income families, mobile, with one-fourth of the population being students of color (Showalter et al., 2017). Multiple variables impact the potential pool of interested superintendent applicants as these remote locations with limited amenities compared to those that suburban and urban districts offer, as well as, fiscal concerns related to historical enrollment challenges in rural districts as well as multiple other complexity factors, many rural districts opt to “grow their own” future leaders (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). One benefit of home-grown candidates includes rural school districts creating opportunities to increase leadership retention by reducing the turn-over rates of school administrators (Hammer et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2013).

On the other hand, there are challenges to GYO programs and approaches, including limited availability of quality mentors for future leaders, especially in rural districts. Scholars have contested the practice. Gronn and Lacey (2006) noted that limiting superintendent hires to internal candidates can negatively impact the school organization; moreover, applicants who may be well-qualified to address the needs of the school district could be overlooked due to the practice of only hiring internal candidates. This may be attributed to the organization's culture of past practices in hiring internal candidates to fill the open positions (Buckman et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2014). Concerns related to hiring from within an organization and selecting an internal applicant for the superintendent role include selection based on intuition and favoritism (Palmer

& Mullooly, 2015). Additionally, while practices such as using existing previous relationships through various networks (Doyle et al., 2014) can be beneficial and enhance the known aspects of a candidate, this networking, as well as leadership hand-selecting through a process, known as “*tapping*,” can also be detrimental in limiting the pool of available candidates (Myung et al., 2011). To elaborate, the research describes the trend of *tapping* in the selection of administrative candidates as those who are selected by a previous administrator for a vacant position (Myung et al., 2011). Ultimately, such strategies may cause leaders to be closed-minded when it comes to searching for sorely needed leadership and aptitude but restricting searches to their own limiting, usually small, pool of employees. (McPhail, 2014).

When it comes to the recruitment and selection process of superintendents, one must assess the current hiring procedures, and whether it entails a succession plan of hiring internal applicants. Unfortunately, rural school districts receive few applications for leadership positions (Pijanowski et al., 2009) and this could be problematic in the hiring of superintendents. A contributing factor may be the history of superintendent turnover in particular rural districts (Alsbury, 2008; Melia, 2016; Orr, 2006). Alsbury (2008) also cites additional contributing factors including low pay and a revolving door of superintendents with rural districts’ reputations being stepping stones for career advancement. Rey (2014), however, asserts that another compounding factor is that the superintendent candidates that are applying are not adequately prepared for the role.

There remains a need for a critical leadership in place within rural school districts (Budge, 2006). Lamkin (2006) does stress the importance of adequate training, as she identifies six areas of inadequate training in relation to the challenges of the superintendent role, especially those superintendents in rural school districts. These six areas include inadequate training in

school law, school finances, personnel management, state and federal regulations, local district and board policies, and technology. A noted finding reveals that superintendents did not view technology as a persistent challenge, rather it is viewed as a recent obstacle (Lamkin, 2006). Therefore, these findings suggest a rural superintendent must be well-versed in multiple areas in order to be relieved of some stress from challenges. Some rural school districts have chosen to select to ‘grow your own’ candidates to ascend to the top leadership role (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammer et al., 2005; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013).

While a number of scholars and geographers have sought to define rurality, one definition fitting for this study emerged in 2019, when the 86th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3, including allowance for a teacher incentive allotment. According to Texas Education Code (TEC) Section 48.112, campuses will be able to qualify for the teacher incentive allotment when they meet the "rural campus" classification of being:

located in: (A) an area that is not designated as an urbanized area or an urban cluster by the United States Census Bureau; and (B) a school district with fewer than 5,000 enrolled students; or (2) designated as a rural campus under rules adopted by the commissioner (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Thus, for the purposes of this research study, use of the term, rural, will utilize this TEC definition acknowledging that perceptions of stakeholders in rural districts of 500 may vary from the perceptions of stakeholders in districts of 5,000. Additionally, the Office of Management and Budget (2000) has further identified categories within the overarching *rural* definition. Table 1 identifies the three *rural categories* and provides a description for each. These terms will be referenced in Chapter 4, Findings, as they relate to the participants’ district location.

**Table 1***Rural Categories*

| <b>Category</b> | <b>Definition</b>  |
|-----------------|--|
| Rural Fringe    | Defined by the census as a ‘rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.’   |
| Rural Distant   | Described by the census as ‘rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.’ |
| Rural Remote    | Defined as ‘rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.’   |

Of equal importance in the research findings is the uncovering of the social justice aspect in leadership roles. This includes reviewing the literature on the superintendency known to historically be a male-dominated field (David & Bowers, 2018) and how that bias further restricts viable candidates for superintendent pools. An examination of the historically gendered nature of the superintendency will be explored, discussed, and problematized similarly to Blackmore (2013) who noted that, “A feminist critical sociological perspective treats leadership as a conceptual lens through which to problematize the nature, purpose, and capacities of educational systems . . . and to re-think their practices in more socially just ways” (p. 139).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Superintendents have been historically recruited to fill these leadership positions in rural school districts, and all school districts inequitably (Allred et al., 2017). Amplifying that problem is that rurality itself is a contested term (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008) and the challenges of rural school districts are numerous (Lamkin, 2006; Wood et al., 2013). Addressing the challenges of rural districts such as lack of private life, being the sole administrator, and often the target of public criticism (Lamkin, 2006) requires unique leadership and particularly in South Texas, leadership that understands those unique needs. Some scholars have explored the benefits of the practice of GYO (Hammer et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013), while yet others have problematized the practice of GYO (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). This study expects to contribute to the research literature by illuminating the perceptions of stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages and problematic implications of grow-your-own superintendent hiring practices.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study sought to potentially problematize the verbiage of GYO regarding whether it is indeed a formalized strategy or a means of gender stratification or marginalization in hiring practices for these positions, which are limiting superintendent hiring pools. To elaborate further, his study sought to identify whether there is a social injustice when it comes to hiring, or interviewing, female applicants through gleaning the perceptions of various stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. By listening well to the stories of the participants, data emerged allowing the researcher to ascertain: 1) whether participants were familiar with GYO programs or leadership approaches; 2) where appropriate,

had experienced an internal promotion themselves; and, 3) what their perceptions were of GYO approaches to superintendent hires (internal promotion). Contributing factors that potentially impact the benefit of such practices were explored to examine both the positive as well as the negative impacts of hiring “from within”, as well as implications for the long-term success of rural school districts. Additionally, this study sought to identify where the advantages outweighed the challenges when it comes to implementing a GYO approach through hiring internally.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this study:

What are the perceptions of stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents, about the benefits as well as challenges presented by ‘grow-your-own’ approaches to fill rural superintendent positions?

### **Research Design**

Marshall and Rossman (2016) assert, “Qualitative research takes place in the natural world” (p. 3). Investigators conducting qualitative research study humans, including behavior and interactions, in real-world social settings. This research study also took place in the natural real-world setting and is described in detail below under *site selection*. To be a qualitative researcher in a natural setting means “Observing social life as it unfolds is the stock-in-trade of the ethnographer” (Saldana, 2015, p. 126). The inquiry which takes place in a naturalistic setting allows for non-controlled environments that are susceptible to redirection as the interaction or investigation takes place. Conducting research in a naturalistic setting allows for continuous discovery through observations and an opportunity for obtaining rich answers by using open-ended questions. Further, Saldana (2015) explains, “Fieldworkers carefully watch human action

in given environments and document those actions as written field notes, photographs, and video recordings” (p. 126).

This naturalistic inquiry sought to obtain the perceptions of various South Texas rural campus principals, superintendents, and school board presidents with regard to their perception of ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. The interviews were conducted individually and in person at a site suggested by the participant to ensure their comfort and willingness to share their perspective on the topic (Patton, 2015).

### **Holistic Perspective**

When a researcher decides to conduct a study and selects an event to research, she understands that phenomenon as a whole is an intricate system. “This complex process of conceptualizing, framing, and focusing a study typically begins with a personally defined question or identified problem” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 74). For instance, the concept of a GYO approach entails more than just internal promotions. There is a history that needs to be researched before beginning the interview process. Therefore, the qualitative researcher must take a holistic approach when conducting the study. “Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: to *explore*, *explain*, or *describe* a phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 75). In order for the qualitative researcher to gain a clear holistic perspective, she needs to gather data from multiple sources and literature. Saldana (2016) advises, “Transcend the local and particular of your study, and reflect on how your observations may apply to other populations, to the bigger picture, to the generalizable, even to the universal” (p. 49).



## **Role of the Researcher as Instrument**

This research study consisted of nine individual interviews which all took place in a natural setting. The researcher has chosen to identify the primary data gathering instrument as self (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allows for a better appreciation and understanding of each of the participant's life experiences (Saldana, 2016) and human appreciation for the data. As the main instrument for gathering data, the researcher was afforded the opportunity for collecting real and natural observations, including behavioral, in the field. The researcher was able to gather rich data from the participants through story-telling about their perceptions of GYO programs or approaches. In addition, the analysis of discourse provided a depth of data when identifying the major emergent themes. The observations and field notes became part of the researcher's data collection relative to Saldana's (2016) suggestion that "the more you interview participants and observe them in natural social settings, the more ideas you generate for possible future research action" (p. 51).

## **Sampling and Participant Selection**

This qualitative study took place as a series of open-ended interviews. The information gathered for this ethnographic study was derived from the responses from various stakeholders' opinions, feelings, and experiences as it relates to superintendent position and 'grow your own' hiring practices in rural districts. The participants included three (3) principals, three (3) superintendents, and three (3) school board presidents. An equitable representation of participants from all sizes of rural school districts (including fringe, remote, and distant) was sought. Additionally, all participants are educational leaders in some capacity in those districts, as they are members of the rural educational community. Efforts were made to include a variety of genders, as well as ethnically diverse participants.

The sampling was initially purposeful in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40) resulting in three of the participants being selected in this manner. These initial participants were selected by researching the Texas Education Agency's website and locating and downloading the 'district type' file. This file provides the names of all districts in the state of Texas, as well as categorizes the districts by rural remote, rural fringe, rural distant, as well as city, suburb, or town. After identifying possible initial rural districts, the researcher called a principal, a superintendent, and a school board president by locating the contact information from the identified school district's website. Additional participants were secured via snowballing technique to identify additional participants beyond the initial purposeful sample (Patton, 2015). Of the nine participants, thus, three were purposefully selected and six were recommended via snowball sampling and then interviewed per their consent. Analyzing the participants further, it is determined that of the nine participants, six were located in a rural fringe area, one was located in a rural remote area, and two were located in a rural distant area.

Additionally, the request for participation in this study was declined by potential participants who were recommended by a colleague in the same subgroup. After the initial conversation between the lead researcher and 12 potential participants, several superintendents and school board presidents declined to participate; including five superintendents and seven school board presidents. Significantly, while many of these recommended superintendents and school board presidents stated they were interested in the findings, they apologized that they would not be willing to participate. In other words, by opting out, these participants essentially chose to remain *silent* on this topic of 'grow your own.'

## **Site Selection**

The researcher conducted a qualitative study with open-ended interview questions, consisting of 12 pre-determined questions. While analyzing and internalizing the responses, behavioral observations were conducted in the natural real-world setting to allow for solace (Patton, 2015). The researcher made note of the participant's body language, silent moments, pauses, and deep breaths when responding. The interview site was selected by the participant so they are able to feel most comfortable. The objective of each interview session is to have the participant feel content and safe enough to be willing to participate and divulge as much as possible, and hopefully even take the lead of the conversation (Bernard, 2006).

## **Data Collection**

Qualitative research studies are rich in describing the participant's experiences. In a qualitative study, the data does not consist of numbers, it consists of stories (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using 12 pre-determined questions as an outline for a qualitative information-gathering interview. Those interview questions emanated from the analysis of the extant literature. As a researcher, it is important to not feel confined to the outlined research questions, as data emerges during the study. Therefore, the researcher needed to allow for flexibility. The interview sessions were audio-taped, with participant permission using a signed consent form, and later transcribed. Data was reviewed and evaluated after the compilation.

The data was initially organized by question and participant responses. Data was inputted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for easier sorting of the data. The spreadsheet was designed to allow for the entry of the question, interviewee, response, and identified theme. After all the data was entered in the spreadsheet, each response entry was reviewed and coded for the

keywords or short phrases. Included in the verbatim transcribed responses, were the notations of pauses, body language, silence, and change of tone when the participants were speaking. These added observations aided in creating a theme for the response to a question. All participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility and control researcher bias were implemented (Erlandson et al.,1993). Further, pseudonyms were implemented to protect the identity of all participants, as well as their districts. Additionally, the integrity of the research study was maintained at all times using a feminist ethic of care approach (Noddings, 1992) as well as ensuring the ethical treatment of participants throughout the study. Confidentiality of data was ensured to the participants, as stated in the informed consent forms each participant signed. All research records will be kept securely by the researcher to maintain the highest level of anonymity and confidentiality of data. The research data was collected and stored on the personal hard drive owned by the researcher, which is password protected.

### **Significance of the Study**

The GYO practice in rural school districts was investigated and analyzed based on the data generated by the participants in the study. This study is significant not only to the educational community for those educators who are seeking to advance in their career into leadership positions but also to inform the literature about challenges in filling rural superintendent positions.

Moreover, this study is significant because of the findings on how a GYO hiring process may be detrimental and considered to be a gender-biased approach to filling leadership vacancies. This study of GYO and approaches is significant because of the research evidence asserting there is a shortage of highly qualified administrative candidates and school districts'

leadership succession plans (Normore, 2004). Perhaps there is not a shortage of highly qualified administrators; rather, a shortage of highly qualified applicants.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Grow your own (GYO)* the practice of growing your own future leaders from within the same organization scholars (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013).

*Highly-qualified* consists of possessing such quality characteristics including experience, effectiveness, and efficiency (Rice, 2008).

*Praxis* is described as speaking words into action in order to transform the world (Freire, 2000).

*Rural* is defined as a district located in: (A) an area that is not designated as an urbanized area or an urban cluster by the United States Census Bureau; and (B) a school district with fewer than 5,000 enrolled students; or (2) designated as a rural campus under rules adopted by the commissioner (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

*Rural* is also defined as (1) of, relating to, or characteristic of the country, country life, or country people; rustic; (2) living in the country; or (3) of or relating to agriculture (Dictionary; n.d.).

*Rural* areas are defined as sparsely populated, have low housing density, and are far from urban centers (America Counts Staff, 2017).

*Rural Fringe* is census-defined as rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

*Rural Distant* is census-defined as rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

*Rural Remote* is census-defined as rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

*School-based hiring policies* these policies include school-based interviews and selection decisions, multiple hiring cycles, and teacher-initiated job movement (DeArmond et al., 2010).

## **Chapter Summary**

Chapter I has provided an introduction to this qualitative research study on leadership candidates for superintendent vacancies in rural school districts. This chapter outlined the personal rationale, the theoretical framework, and the academic rationale. Also included in this introductory chapter were the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the overarching research question, and a definition of terms section. This introductory chapter outlines the remaining chapters that follow.

Chapter II provides a review of the research literature that is pertinent to the research study, including rural school districts and their uniqueness; GYO approaches; challenges of GYO approach in the rural area; advantages of GYO efforts; stakeholder perceptions of leadership; the recruitment and selection processes used in school districts; and an examination of social justice in the educational leadership realm. The literature assisted in framing interview questions as well as the interview discussions.

Chapter III provides an overview of the research methodology seeking to address this research topic around GYO practices for hiring administrators.

Chapter IV reveals the findings of this research study. It is presented in a discussion of four major themes, which include the implications of a GYO approach. Within this theme, two specific themes were revealed: limiting the pool of qualified applicants, and gender-bias impact on the candidates. Following is a discussion on GYO approaches among rural school districts, including familiarity with the term and the uniqueness of rural districts. The final theme presented was the advantages of hiring internal applicants.

Chapter V offers a discussion of the findings as they relate to the research conducted and presented. Also included in this final chapter, are the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There exists a need to build leadership capacity within the educational setting in an effort to purposefully and successfully prepare future administrative leaders for the top role of the superintendency. Researchers such as Fink and Brayman (2006) assert the recruitment and selection of administrative candidates have become a dilemma nationwide for the educational world. While larger districts appear to have a formal succession plan to use when there are administrator vacancies, research contends smaller rural districts do not have such succession plans; and therefore, do not have the opportunity to implement a formal approach (Zepeda et al., 2012). The current research on school districts implementing the practice of hiring internal candidates to fill leadership vacancies in rural districts has been limited (Davis & Bowers, 2018; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). There are two mindsets of thoughts on this topic. Some school districts may choose to implement a ‘grow your own’, or GYO, program to hire internal candidates to ultimately fill leadership positions. Other districts choose to hire candidates from outside their organization, filling those positions with candidates who might offer a different perspective.

Fink (2011) notably contends the advantage of intentionality in the leadership succession planning in GYO programs and approaches. Further, the author asserts such a formal plan and program assists in building leadership capacity, which undoubtedly has positive impacts on the entire district. These succession programs and approaches pave the way for school administrators to continue to ascend in their leadership journey.

Other research studies, shared in this Chapter II, will address various motivations for educators entering into leadership positions. There might be some challenges faced by such educators in leadership positions, such as family necessities, community hopes and expectations,



career expectations, lack of support in the workplace, and salary and contract negotiations (Hansen, 2018). Additional findings include research on the recruitment and selection process for leadership candidates. Additionally, [formal] GYO programs and [informal] approaches can be viewed as a subjective selection process (Steed et al., 2020), therefore leading to the best highly-qualified candidate possibly being overlooked. However, there have also been those who have persevered and overcome any obstacles to become educational leaders who pursue additional career goals. An oft-debated topic within this subject is the focus on internal versus external candidates for leadership vacancies, which will also be presented.

Several researchers have provided evidence that there tends to be more superintendent turnover in rural school districts in comparison to larger urban districts (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019); thus, proponents of maintaining continuity in leadership in rural districts would be justified to implement a GYO program. Some of the factors influencing superintendent turnover include (particularly rural) districts being perceived as entry-level positions and stepping stones for career advancement. That perception and trend along with what are often considerable challenges such as lack of a highly-qualified pool of educators, fiscal challenges, and remote access to more urban setting amenities, impact this turnover (Alsbury, 2008, Melia, 2016; Orr, 2006; Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014).

### **Uniqueness of Rural Schools and Communities**

*Many Americans lack value or respect in general for ruralness.*

*Lamkin, 2006, p. 17*

*Rural communities represent a distinct segment of the educational community, and as such, their views of what constitutes values of knowledge and education can differ significantly from the established national norms and values.*

*(Rey, 2014, p. 509)*

According to the AASA (2017), 72% of the United States landmass is considered rural country. Additionally, AASA asserts 53% of the United States schools are rural school districts, of which 20% of the student population attend these schools. Ratcliffe et al. (2016) wrote a brief on defining ‘rural’ at the U.S. Census Bureau. The authors identified three major characteristics used for distinguishing rural populations. They take into consideration population density, sparsity, and at a distance (as opposed to close together). Showalter et al. (2017) describe how these rural school districts face unique challenges. The researchers affirm about half of the student population in rural schools are from low-income families, has moved within the past year, and more than one-fourth is a student of color.

A concern for the administrative world generally in education is the shortage of highly qualified applicants to fill vacancies. Normore (2004) recognized this phenomenon and credited that shortage at the time to the mass retirements of school administrators; however, the trend has continued (Benigni et al., 2020). Further, Normore (2004) stresses the importance and critical impacts that follow, for a district to develop a leadership succession plan. This leadership succession plan would benefit the district in continuity and learning opportunities for leaders (Bryant et al., 2017; Newton, 2001; Peters, 2011). A leadership succession plan, or an internal approach preparing future leaders, is also known as a ‘grow your own’ program.

Many researchers have stated there is a uniqueness to rural schools and communities (Budge, 2006; Eppley, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009;

Wood et al., 2013). Budge (2006) has recognized the uniqueness of rural communities as she outlines the observation that rural places possess similar strengths and challenges, which are categorized into six characteristics. These characteristics include isolation and low density of population; interdependence of school and community; oppression; conflict in the area of schooling; ‘out-migration’; and the attachment to place.

With regards to the sense of place, Bauch (2010) also recognized that rural community members have an attachment to place. Further, research has identified six habits of place. These habits of the way of living include ‘connectedness, development of identity and culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology, and politics, and activism and civic engagement (Budge, 2006, p. 3). Budge (2006) adds to the understanding of rural uniqueness by stating, “To inhabit a place is to be conscious of one’s relationship to it.” To further explain the challenges of rural places, Herzog and Pittman (2003) reveal that it is believed that the dominant culture does not value the uniqueness of rural areas and its community.

Leadership in rural areas is also noted as a paradox (Budge, 2006). While leadership roles entail many facets, rural superintendents face many challenges. The challenges to rural superintendents are as unique as the rural areas themselves. Lamkin (2006) identifies challenges for rural superintendents

Only in rural districts does the superintendent find him or herself to be the sole (or almost) administrator, the only chief executive in the community, and often the only target of public criticism. (p. 17)

The challenges for rural superintendents remain alarming, and critical if not addressed. Lamkin (2006) discusses there are six areas of rural superintendency that are lacking adequate training. These areas include school law, finance, personnel, government mandates, district and

school board policies, and technology. These challenging areas are hindering the quality of performance of the superintendent role. Therefore, there remains a need for adequate training in these identified areas (Lamkin, 2006) to improve the role of the rural superintendent, as well as the success of the district. In spite of the multitude of challenges, Maxwell et al. (2015) found that superintendents were attracted by, as well as challenged by, the work. Both the construct of size in rural places presented challenges as well as attracted superintendents to believe that the smallness made the work doable. The construct of place also served to challenge as well as attract rural superintendents to the work. Additional themes revealed how these superintendents worked to sustain themselves and to maintain resiliency through various strategies, including finding their rudder, managing the work, establishing relationships, and seeking out mentors or relying on spiritual guidance (Maxwell et al. (2015).

Continuing the analysis of the uniqueness of rural districts, it has been observed that children of rural areas are often viewed as ‘invisible’, ‘ignored’, and ‘overlooked’ in various aspects of education (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009). In addition, the findings of a study by Eppley (2006) conclude there are six distinct categories in identifying representations of rural life. These categories include (1) rural people are connected; (2) rural people are self-reliant; (3) rural people are satisfied; (4) rural people are diverse; (5) rural locations are expendable; and (6) rural people are depicted as ‘other’.

### **‘Grow Your Own’ Approaches in Rural Contexts**

School districts implement GYO leadership approaches in an effort to develop and shape existing personnel into leaders to fill open leadership vacancies. GYO approaches are viewed as leadership preparation and are popular in large suburban and urban school districts (Versland,

2013). Sabina and Colwell (2018) describe these approaches as “internal succession planning programs” (p. 375). Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) affirm that urban and suburban school districts are not alone in implementing GYO programs and approaches. Rural school districts have also begun implementing the GYO leadership preparation program and informal approach.

### **Place-Based Leadership**

DeFeo and Tran (2019) have identified an approach known as *place-conscious leadership* (PCL) which is a derivative of *place-based education* (PBE). PBE has been described as a pedagogical framework that is often used in rural school districts. In a PBE environment, the district’s curriculum incorporates students’ local community as the framework for the focus for academic success and learning (Smith, 2013). Place-conscious leadership (PCL) is known as the practice of the superintendent identifying personnel and creating coherent communities by placing specific personnel in identified environments suited to establishing connectedness through leadership (DeFeo & Tran, 2019).

The results of a recent research study conducted by Steed et al. (2020) indicate that several administrators in Australia tend to rely upon internal job vacancies; thus, being an internal candidate. While the debate continues on whether hiring internally, with known and trusted applicants, or hiring externally, the GYO programs and approaches appear to be expanding. ‘Merit selection’ is still a topic of contention (Gronn & Lacey, 2006), and will be discussed later in this paper. Internal candidates appear to be selected for leadership vacancies because of their convenient placement within the district and their knowledge of school-specific skills (Steed et al., 2020). The advantages and challenges of internal hiring will be presented later in this chapter.

## **Challenges of GYO in Rural Districts**

There are some challenges to the GYO program and approach in rural districts. In remote rural school districts, the pool of expert leaders to mentor aspiring future principals and superintendents is potentially a scarcity. Further, the pool of highly qualified candidates to join the GYO leadership programs is limited (Versland, 2013). Another challenge for rural school districts in implementing GYO leadership approaches is their geographic location, limited salary scales, and distance from professional development opportunities (Townsell, 2007). Versland (2013) conducted a study on GYO programs in rural school districts, and the loss of efficacy impact it has on the campus leader. In these small remote districts, there does not exist the training, mentorship, and additional administrative colleagues to help with modeling, coaching, and encouragement that an administrator new to the role needs.

In rural communities, the public views a high turnover rate as a negative trend for the educational group (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). There are concerns, as the results of the study conducted by Kamrath and Brunner (2014) which conclude that the high rate of superintendent turnover is correlated to financial conditions such as low pay for the position. Another result of the study was the conclusion that there is a bias against ‘outsiders’ coming into these districts, including minorities. An interesting finding of the study was that superintendents at the beginning of their careers attempt to move up quickly to achieve greater status and salary. However, many school boards tend to hire superintendents who are near retirement status to keep the salary status low, which leads to the high turnover seen in many rural districts. Both Grissom and Andersen (2012) and Grissom and Mitani (2016) assert superintendents located in smaller (rural) districts tend to leave and search for the same role in larger, more populated districts.

### ***Subjective Nature of GYO***

Steed et al. (2020) outline a disadvantage to the GYO approach. The authors contend that the process is entirely subjective in nature. Further, the term ‘best-fit’ is used to describe the most highly qualified candidate for the position. Steed et al. (2014) cite research findings by Palmer et al. (2016) where 85 top school administrators throughout the nation also exhibited that there are subjective selection and employment on the basis of ‘best-fit’. Unfortunately, this process has allowed for highly qualified school leaders to be overlooked. Essentially, the researchers contend that using merit selection does have a basis, and cannot be considered as a ‘value neutral’ process (Steed et al., 2014). Additionally, Buckman et al. (2018) assert there are times where a member of the interview team reached out to a potential candidate. Subjectivity also plays a role when personal connections come into effect in the selection process.

### **Advantages of GYO Efforts**

Conversely, in a study conducted by Wood et al. (2013), the researchers discovered that among the several types of recruitment strategies used in rural school districts, ‘GYO’ was among the highest strategies identified ( $M=3.62$ ). Additionally, researchers have discovered that GYO leadership approaches have assisted in fostering and developing the local qualified talent through collaboration among post-secondary organizations and school districts (Hammer et al., 2005). GYO leaders in rural school districts were found to be successful when they found mentors in other administrators and post-secondary faculty members (Versland, 2013). The collaboration benefits the members of the GYO approaches in several ways. The support provided in the community-type environment helps to dismantle institutional racism and bring about equity (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019).

Steed et al. (2020) explain that in order for internal candidates to be more successful in their leadership application efforts, a training program may be needed. To elaborate, the authors state educational leaders would be able to take advantage of a valuable opportunity such as a customized professional learning program designed to heighten one's merit, and the identification thereof. Such a program would ideally be tailored to principals with the prerequisite skills and certifications who are seeking to attain a superintendent position within their district.

### **Stakeholder Perceptions of Leadership Positions**

In the educational setting teachers, like any other professional, oftentimes seek out opportunities for leadership roles. Motivated educators keep watch for leadership vacancy prospects, especially within their districts. The chance to ascend into a leadership position opens many new career possibilities for educators. Therefore, to contemplate a new career, an advancement in the career ladder, when opportunities arise it may potentially become stressful while exhilarating for the applicant (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). The perception is that there can be an immense amount of pressure and perhaps anxiety for an applicant when the application process begins. Questions may cross the applicant's mind, such as *whether they: possess the necessary qualifications, will get an interview, or, what are their chances or the political implications as an internal applicant*. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) note that characteristics and behaviors (such as emotional toll, efficacy, and sense of challenge), and external environmental conditions (such as position availability, mentors, and support) play a part in the affective side of administrators [and applicants]. This can be emotionally exhausting. Additionally, the expectations placed on administrators have increased. The assumption of high academic success weighs heavily on administrators as it is one of their major responsibilities (Whitaker, 2002).



Petersen (2002) examines the significance of the role of the superintendent as a district instructional leader, and the perceptions that current principals and school board members have of this district leadership role. In an effort to further investigate recent findings on the role of the district superintendent and academic success of students, Petersen's (2002) quantitative study explores the covariance among school board members' and school principals' views of the instructional foresight and goals of the superintendent. The study consisted of responses from 46 school principals and 32 school board members who completed the survey, Instructional Leadership Personnel Survey (ILPS). The ILPS contained 52 Likert-scale questions. The questions contained items asking about the responsibilities of principals and school board members. Additionally, the questions explored the correlation of the central office personnel and the relationship with principals and school board members in the development of instructional goals, and it relates to the superintendent's responsibilities in leading curriculum and instruction. Important findings conclude that there is a correlation between the instructional vision of the superintendent and the district's ability to become academically successful. Also noteworthy, the study concluded, that there is a need to establish and maintain a positive and professional relationship, including shared decision-making with key educational stakeholders in the development and refinement of instructional leadership.

### **Challenges to Entering Leadership Positions**

There is a resounding theme present of a difference in the perceived need for planning for succession, and the administration and organization between large and small school districts (Rey, 2014; Versland, 2013). While rural school districts are in need of leaders who are able to persevere and make informed decisions in high stressed environments, finding those applicants can be a challenge for potential internal candidates (Hayes et al., 2021).

A challenge as to why educators may choose to not want to take on leadership positions includes a lack of mentorship while in the role. Further, Zepeda et al. (2012) indicate there are many factors that impact the need for principal succession, which include turnover rates related to high demands on instructional leadership as a viable concern for leaders.

Leaders new to administrative roles, like any employee new to a position, need support. Research findings support this claim, as Jackson & Kelley (2002) and Normore (2004) assert that new and aspiring school leaders in administrative roles continue to need ongoing mentoring and coaching to acquire new skills. Without this perception of support and training, prospective administrators may opt out of applying for top administrative roles.

There are other reasons why educators may choose to shy away from leadership positions. A study conducted by Hewitt et al. (2011) compares teacher responses with those of superintendents on the same leadership component areas. The survey consisted of eleven factors, using a Likert scale, which addressed why teachers might be discouraged from entering into administration. Results included teachers ranking the number one reason for abstaining from a career in administration being the overwhelming pressure of testing and accountability, with the overall perceived stress of the job ranking as the second detractor from candidates seeking these positions.

Whitaker (2002) outlined a concise list of why educators are not seeking the administrative roles. The author states work conditions, salary, unclear role definition, disproportionate work responsibility, lack of support, stress, and hiring/selection procedures. While Cruzeiro and Boone (2009), as well as, Whitaker (2002) discovered low pay rate as a reason for educational leaders to resist top-level administrator positions, Wood et al. (2013) identified a problematic area in the existing pool of administrator candidates. The researchers

explained that there is a growing population of retiring administrators. This compounded with a reduction in interested candidates could result in a scarcity of candidates for administrative vacancies.

### **Perseverance of Leadership Candidates**

It takes a great amount of determination and relentless perseverance for an educator to continue their own education and seek career advancements in the form of administrative positions. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) completed a mixed-method research study that presents qualitative data that explores the career paths of educational leaders in administrative roles. The findings of the study indicate that many administrators choose and initiate their own career decisions. However, most of the administrators surveyed were influenced to persevere by other factors such as recruitment, reassignment, being passed over, and being removed.

In Whitaker's (2003) international study, the focus was on how the changing roles of principals over the years have led to obstacles when considering optimal candidates fit for the role of this critical educational and instructional leader. The role of the campus principal has changed to encourage collaboration as they are now viewed as facilitators and mediators who resolve staff conflict. Current principals must also find a balance among instructional leadership and increasing administrative duties. Similarly, the role of the superintendent has continued to transform over the past 150 years (Kowalski, 2013). The position of school superintendent has evolved from teacher-scholar, instructional leader, business manager, to political leader, and even applied social scientist (Bjork et al., 2014; Heron, 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2013).

Various types of educational leaders seek to earn the superintendent certification, and later the position. A study by Rey (2014) found that although superintendent-participants had

varied backgrounds, they valued education and maintained high educational aspirations for themselves. The superintendents in the study regarded education as the door of opportunities for social and economic advancements. These district leaders wanted to continue the aspiration for education; therefore, they created a school culture that fostered aspirations, ambitions, and goals. They included learning opportunities for their students and provided chances for students to discover higher education and employment openings that are outside their rural communities (Rey, 2014).

### **Aspiring Superintendents “Look-fors”**

As indicated, there may be several reasons why an educational leader is seeking a career in a top administrative role. It is important for those seeking a superintendent position to remain vigilant during the search process. Benigni et al. (2020) emphasize several areas of which a superintendent candidate should be aware while they are in search of a position. The candidate should research the background of the school board and assess whether the board goals are aligned with district goals. Further, it is important to identify how much shared-control is in place. While the school board and superintendent are a “team of 8,” have previous superintendents been allowed to make district decisions? An additional area to consider is the tenure of previous superintendents (Benigni et al., 2020). Again, an applicant should consider researching the district’s recent history. Records and reports will also give an indication of teacher and staff retention. Benigni et al. (2020) also advise a superintendent search candidate should become familiar with the district’s facilities and the condition they may (or may not) be in. Within this realm, one must research whether the district has any outstanding bonds, is in need of improvements, and the maintenance of the facilities. While researching these items of importance, Benigni et al. (2020) recommend prospective superintendents to be vigilant and

become familiar with the district's community engagement and family support, technology infrastructure (including learning tools), updated district policies, and any information available from the superintendent associations.

Superintendents must be resilient in their endeavors. A superintendent must work on refining her leadership skills. While there are many types of leadership approaches, situational leadership enables these district leaders to offer their support, instruction, and directions based on the needs of the followers within the school district. *Situational* leadership is an approach based on circumstances at-hand, and the leadership style is therefore situational (Northouse, 2015). Hayes et al. (2021) illustrate a meta-leadership framework where a situational leadership approach enables school leaders to extend support, instruction, and directions based on the needs of the followers within the organization (i.e. school district).

A second useful leadership approach used by many educational leaders is transformational leadership. *Transformational* leaders are those who are invested in the process which transforms people (Northouse, 2015). In order for a superintendent to be effective in all elements of the role, he or she must possess a particular amount of charm and personality. Northouse (2015) describes the transformational leadership style as one with a particular amount of charisma, as these leaders are self-confident and able to do extraordinary things. Researchers stated that leaders with a transformational style are inclined to adjust themselves to the needs of their followers (i.e. staff members) (Howard et al., 2017; Northouse, 2015).

### **Recruitment and Selection Process**

Fairness and equity in the selection process of educational leaders have been a concern for decades. Further, finding the most qualified instructional leader will ultimately have a positive impact on student academic success. DeArmond et al. (2010) similarly recognize that

the quality of educational personnel is a high-stakes issue and has an impact on student learning. Baker et al. (2018) conducted a study among 285 associate professors in the Great Lakes College Association consortium of liberal arts colleges. The study used a regression analysis to examine the leadership pipeline within the college. The survey consisted of 8-questions on a Likert-scale questionnaire, ranging 1-to-5. The results of the study indicate those who were in early or mid-career and were found to be significantly less likely to serve in an entry-level leadership role or achieve an executive leadership position. A significant finding was from the study revealed that twelve participants worked in collaboration with a coach to develop leadership skills. The findings included the participants needed encouragement, as well as they were identified as being unprepared for leadership roles.

According to Pijanowski et al. (2009), superintendents seek to hire highly qualified candidates to fill principal vacancies. Additionally, survey results indicate rural districts receive fewer applications for principal openings. However, superintendents do not express anxiety over this. A theme in responses reveals that superintendents overlook qualified young candidates, which may result in a perceived shortage of principal candidates. This could be problematic for rural school districts in hiring qualified superintendents.

In contrast, Cruzeiro and Boone's (2009) study provides awareness into rural school districts based on the perceptions of superintendents, human resource directors, and other administrators in 83 school districts. Their research indicates that school districts in rural areas are not having an issue of scarcity of qualified principal applicants. However, the theme present is that there are disincentives to apply for principal positions, such as selection and hiring practices that benefit some applicants over others. Supporting this research is a study on socialization during principal succession. Through a qualitative study, the researchers found that

central office personnel recognize a principal position vacancy before it becomes available, and therefore plan ahead (Bengtson et al., 2013). In other words, they have a succession plan (GYO) in place.

Further, a theme revealed in a similar recent study indicates that candidate selection is based on intuition and favoritism, using vague criteria (Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). A thesis revealed in a study conducted by Rammer (2007) proffered that superintendents lacked a methodical plan to classify potential principal candidates or identify whether those candidates possessed any of the 21 responsibility traits from the rubric utilized in the research. Additional research on the screening and hiring process indicates consistency is necessary when assessing various principal demographic factors. Mason and Schroeder, (2010) noted that the personal attributes of the candidates had a greater influence on the hiring decision. Additionally, verbal references (as opposed to written), as well as, the candidate's first impressions had the greatest influence in deciding on a final candidate.

### **Internal Versus External Candidates**

*Transformative superintendent leadership disrupts the rural cultural homogeneity, but it may be a necessary disruption to move rural schools and communities forward to a new conception of quality education – one that is academically rigorous, context specific, and culturally responsive to local values. (Rey, 2014, p.53)*

Having a fully staffed organization with highly qualified personnel is an administrator's ultimate goal. The organization may have applicants from within the organization as well as from outside the district interested in an open position. In regards to a superintendent vacancy, Davis and Bowers (2018) elaborate on various ways a new superintendent may be selected. It may be possible (and common in Texas because the superintendent certification is not required

for central office positions) that a superintendent candidate has a spot waiting for them when they obtain the certification (Davis & Bowers, 2018).

There are, however, three challenges to effectively staffing schools as identified by DeArmond et al. (2010). According to their qualitative study, the researchers identified the three challenges as there is an inequitable distribution of the quality of personnel, there are high levels of turnover, and there is difficulty measuring quality. A proposed solution would entail *school-based hiring policies*.

### **School-Based Hiring Policies**

According to the researchers, these policies include school-based interviews and selection decisions, multiple hiring cycles, and teacher-initiated job movement (DeArmond et al., 2010). School-based interviews and selection decisions are described as committees comprised of a principal or administrator, parent, and three teachers who will be in charge of meeting and interviewing the applicants during one of the three cycles. These committees, in essence, make recommendations to the district about a particular candidate they are interested in hiring. Multiple-hiring cycles are described as consisting of three distinct hiring cycles in the months of May through June. The first cycle is dedicated to only internal-transfers, or incumbent personnel. This is known as the seniority privilege cycle. The subsequent cycles are used to increase and develop the candidate pool or search to include external as well as internal applicants. It is important to note that school districts using *school-based hiring policies* are able to hire in all three cycles. DeArmond et al. (2010) also describe teacher-initiated job movement. This policy is explained as allowing current teachers to seek and apply for new jobs in other schools within the district without notifying their current school administrator. Additionally, these veteran teachers



are able to request an “incompatibility transfer” from their current place of employment to transfer to another school.

A mixed-method study conducted by Doyle et al. (2014) examines the recruitment and placement processes. The study also examines principal personnel currently serving in the role as well as those who were not selected for the position. The study reveals how districts do not focus on actual recruiting methods, rather they focus on internal candidates. In some cases, a member of the interview team reached out to a potential candidate. It was also noted that personal connections play a part in the selection process. Buckman et al. (2018) also analyzed the correlation, if any, between employment and the type of administrative promotion (internal versus external). The study suggests that hiring personnel of high quality is needed to predict the future sustainability of the educational organization. A theme emerging from this research is that there is a substantial positive correlation between internal promotion and employability.

Continuing the theme of internal versus external candidates for leadership vacancies, Gronn and Lacey (2006) also conducted a study worth noting. Their qualitative study analyzes aspiring principals’ responses on how many schools are choosing to ‘clone their own’ principals. This expression is used for those educational organizations that choose to hire applicants internally to fill vacancies. A theme presented is that the selection process is merely a game, and not based on merit. Many aspiring principals felt there was no point in even applying for vacancies.

A variant form of the ‘clone your own’ model is known as ‘tapping’. Educators are often tapped to become educational leaders or administrators. Myung et al. (2011) conducted a research study on tapping which focuses on the process of informal recruitment, which is considered to be tapping educators to become administrative leaders. This qualitative study

included surveys from teachers, principals, and assistant principals. The findings of the survey conclude that assistant principals are 52% likely to be tapped by their principal, versus 70% of principals being tapped by their former principals.

Challenges to the GYO approach can be viewed as opportunities for the external applicants. For instance, the hiring committee may view (and want) new outside leadership to bring innovative ideas and perspectives which can be valuable (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). This can be an obstacle for internal candidates. Sabina and Colwell (2018) ascertain that first impressions are an advantage for external candidates; thus, a challenge for internal candidates. The researchers explain that internal applicants have a prior history with the district which may lead to pre-existing opinions. However, an external applicant has the opportunity for a fresh start. A final advantage for external candidates is the new connections they offer to the district. This helps to connect districts and leadership teams. Internal applicants are once again at a disadvantage.

Conversely, advantages to GYO approaches can also be identified by assessing the challenges of hiring external over internal candidates. Sabina and Colwell (2018) discuss several obstacles a district may encounter when hiring externally. The researchers identify resentment from internal candidates as a potential difficulty. In the event of a position opening, internal employees are hopeful for a career advancement. It can be a disappointment to learn that an external candidate was selected over existing employees. An additional theme acknowledged for external applicants is that the administrators in charge of hiring must find a balance in hiring between internal and external candidates (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). This may be a challenge for potential outside candidates; however, this process is advantageous to internal candidates. Sabina and Colwell (2018) recognize a third and significant challenge of external hires.

Candidates from outside the district are unfamiliar with the existing processes, policies, culture, and climate. In this essential context, the internal applicants appear to have the advantage.

### **Superintendent Turnover Crisis**

As the leader of the school district, a school superintendent has many roles and responsibilities. While some research may state that there is not a need to be concerned about a shortage of superintendents (Kowalski, 2003), newer research proves turnovers in the superintendent role have been a critical concern for years (Alsbury, 2008; Melia, 2016; Orr, 2006). “Superintendent turnover creates disruption in district management and can negatively affect staff morale, funding for district operations, and community support, potentially hurting student achievement” (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). There may be times where superintendent turnover is apolitical and the school board believes it is a warranted measure to maintain the status quo (Alsbury, 2008).

A quantitative research study conducted by O’Connor (2018) contends that with a random sample of 234 superintendents (including assistant, associate, area, or deputy superintendents) there proved to have a negative correlation between superintendent job satisfaction and turnover intent. This study concluded that superintendents who felt dissatisfied or undervalued at work tend to decrease work effectiveness (O’Connor, 2018). Kamrath and Brunner (2014) conclude that there is a high rate of superintendent turnover and it is correlated to financial conditions such as low pay for the position. More specifically, salaries for the superintendent position in rural school districts are noticeably lower than others, which makes the position undesirable (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014). Alsbury (2008) explains this phenomenon as superintendents gaining experience in smaller districts and later moving on to larger districts with greater status and better pay. In other words, superintendents might use low-paying

positions as ‘stepping stones.’ For instance, many rural school districts have noticed a trend of hiring leaders from outside the district and the propensity for them to move on to the larger districts (Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Rey (2014) affirms both educators and parents acknowledge the need for economic improvements in rural districts; however, there was the indication that there is not the proper leadership to help facilitate the need changes in communities. Kearney (2010) adds to these findings by citing specific reasons for turnover including a lack of skill sets, increasing retirement numbers, and a lack of motivation for career advancement.

A closer examination of superintendent turnovers in rural school districts reveals an interesting finding. It is believed that superintendent preparation programs are not properly preparing superintendents for rural positions. As previously mentioned, many superintendents tend to start their superintendency careers within smaller rural school districts. However, the preparation and schooling programs do not prepare superintendents for the real-life challenges a district leader will encounter in a rural district (Rey, 2014). This is where theory and practice do not necessarily always correlate. It would appear that there are implications for reform for superintendency preparation programs.

An interesting correlation in the leadership shortage is that O’Connor (2018) projects 55% of superintendents will be unemployed within 5 years. However, Grissom and Andersen (2019) predict the numbers to be astonishingly higher. A recent study conducted by the researchers concluded that out of 215 rural superintendents, 45% left their position within three years. There is an important additional factor that may be contributing to the reason superintendents leave their position within such a short time frame. The relationship the superintendent has with the school board and how they score its operation as a board as well as

the superintendent's annual performance can have a strong impact on whether a superintendent remains in the position (Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams, et al., 2019).

A more recent contributing factor to superintendent turnover is the national pandemic all educational leaders are now faced with. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, education was greatly impacted. The COVID-19 virus forced the closure of school buildings in Texas in March of 2020 (Hayes et al., 2021). School leaders must remain calm during times of adversity, as well as learn to be self-reliant. However, many have expressed the lack of guidance and decision-making when students were initially sent home and school doors were closed (Hayes et al., 2021). Unfortunately, during these trying and unprecedented times, many educational leaders were forced to learn as they go. Additionally, many educational leaders recognize the impact COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on the retention and recruitment of staff (i.e. administrators). Superintendent Brenner of the Grand Forks school district stated he was apprehensive about the pandemic's impact on retention and recruitment, and the effects it will have on the future of education (Knudson, 2020). Moreover, Superintendent Brenner has added concerns about the future of education as a result of the global pandemic. Brenner speaks of several stressors that have arisen within school districts, including academic learning gaps, the decline in student attendance, and financial strain (Knudson, 2020).

### **Social Justice in Leadership**

Experience has shown that theory and practice do not necessarily correlate. Laura (2017) describes the gap as school administrators receiving leadership training in various social justice contexts, such as multicultural leadership, transformational leadership, and seven habits of highly effective people. She continues by stating these school leaders often find that their various trainings do not align with the facts of day-to-day life. Dantley and Tillman (2010) affirm social

justice in leadership is interchangeable with ‘transformative leadership’. Northouse (2015) describes *transformative leadership* as a practice in which a leader participates with others and forms a union that “raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and follower.” A transformational leader adapts to the needs of the followers and empowers others (Johnson & Hackman, 2018; Northouse, 2015). Additionally, this type of leadership is notably associated with the ‘praxis of social justice’ (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). *Praxis* is described as speaking words into action in order to transform the world (Freire, 2000). The superintendent role has traditionally been held by males, as opposed to their female counterparts (Davis & Bowers, 2018). While advancements are being made in the area of gender social justice for the role of superintendency, there is still room for growth, as hiring practices may impact the potential for candidates to apply for vacant positions. According to Young and McLeod (2001), there is a need for a substantial amount of focus to be placed on female leaders in education, and the placement of these competent females in leadership positions within their districts.

### **Historically a Male-Dominated Field**

Jarrett et al. (2018) noted an important trend in the superintendent position. The researchers posit that superintendents are traditionally White males who have made a long career in education. Davis and Bowers (2018) determined that as of 2010, the nation’s percentage of male superintendents was at 76% and of that 94% were identified as White. There may be several reasons for this phenomenon. For instance, there is the notion that women are not in positions that traditionally lead to the superintendent role (Glass, 2000), and therefore not interested in advancing to such a position. In contrast to this belief, Allred et al. (2017) assert women are indeed attracted to the superintendent position, as they are enrolling in preparation programs. Women are making gains in the employment of superintendent role. Glass (2000)

cites the percentage of female superintendents doubling from 6.6% to 13.2% in the 1990s; however, the percentage of male superintendents is still the majority at 87%. Supporting this evidence is Howard et al.'s (2017) research findings that of the nation's superintendents, only 24% are represented by females. Even more alarming is the perception that female educators do not seek the superintendent role because of subjective reasons. Additionally, women are viewed as ill-prepared or non-experienced with district finances when it comes to their counterparts (Glass, 2000). Gammill and Vaughn (2011) describe how women in, or seeking, the superintendent role tend to experience amplified political problems in comparison to their male counterparts. To investigate, Jarrett et al. (2018) sought out to answer if a superintendent candidate's gender has an impact on the decision to extend an interview invitation and if a superintendent candidate's gender in comparison with the school board president's gender has an impact to extend an interview invitation. The researchers' findings include no evidence to support the theory that superintendent candidates' gender has an impact on whether the school board offers an interview. However, it is worth noting that the study did find a positive relationship when it comes to male school board presidents being 1.3 times more likely to extend an interview to male applicants.

A study by Allred et al. (2017) was conducted to discern the perceptions of female educational leaders who have ultimately risen to the top leadership role in a school district. The researchers aimed to reveal the female gender perspective on the superintendent role. The results of their study concluded that women continue to have aspirations for the superintendent role. Additionally, 3 out of 7 of the participants had acquired the position by age 47 (Allred et al. 2017). Additional findings include the motivation driving force of female leaders. Among the many factors that may motivate a leader, the study concluded that female administrators are

intrinsically motivated for success; the aspiration to have an impact on the learning community; recognitions of district accolades; an inner duty to represent the female gender; a commitment to serve others; and a passion for learning and educational success to name a few (Allred et al., 2017).

### **Impacts on Candidates for Leadership Positions**

The imbalance of social justice on female candidates for the superintendent role has negatively impacted the gender balance of applications. Glass (2000) stated women are discouraged from applying for the position for fear of the school board not being willing to hire them. According to the qualitative study on educational leaders at the administrative level, a major theme presented was that women are in a male-dominated career field and have approached the glass ceiling in regards to leadership positions (Myung et al., 2011). Their research indicates principals may be encouraging more males to pursue roles in leadership. This can be a deterrent for females seeking administrative positions. Similar results were concluded in Baker et al.'s (2018) study within the Great Lakes College Association consortium when findings presented that women were drastically less likely to strive to be a department chair (leadership role).

An additional study by Brown (2014) reveals African American women have, in the past, been members of an oppressed community. Brown asserts African American women must mask their true identity, their true self, and conform in order to be valued within the system of a White male power and structure. Moreover, it is significant to recognize that women, especially women of color, must 'jump through hoops' when it comes to attaining the superintendent role (Davis & Bowers, 2018). Women, especially women of color, in leadership positions must spend more time in other district leadership roles, including assistant superintendent, before being able



to secure a superintendent role (Davis & Bowers, 2018; Howard et al., 2017). Gammill and Vaughn (2011) recount a personal experience where it was determined that Gammill, an internal female candidate, was once considered for a superintendent position alongside a White male. The board was hesitant to not give her the position for fear that she would leave the district. The board's ideal strategy was to give the superintendent position to the White male applicant and have Gammill in the assistant superintendent's position to do most of the long and labor-intensive work (for the male leader).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided the research literature surrounding the existing problem in the way candidates have been traditionally recruited to fill superintendent positions in school districts. This problem has been magnified in rural school districts, as they do not have formal succession plans in comparison to larger urban districts (Zepeda et al., 2012). Therefore, some rural school districts have decided to select internal 'grow your own' candidates for the superintendent position (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammer et al., 2005; Palmer & Mullooly, 2025; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). The review of research identified advantages of formal GYO programs and informal approaches, such as building leadership capacity and positive impacts on the district (Fink, 2011). Additionally, the research also provided challenges of GYO programs and approaches, including it being viewed as a subjective selection process (Steed et al., 2020), and various motivations on behalf of the applicant (Hansen, 2018). There do remain concerns by researchers that there is more superintendent turnover in rural districts (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019); thus, GYO supporters could rationalize herein lies the justification of the need to implement such programs.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

### Introduction

*Mindfulness involves being focused in the moment, being attentive to what's going on, without distraction, and maintaining attentiveness on a moment-to-moment basis.*  
(Patton, 2015, p.60)

The researcher employed empathetic neutrality and mindfulness in conducting this study. A researcher should be completely invested in her research study. Saldana (2015) asserts, "Thinking empathically brings you deeper into the qualitative realm of research" (p. 86). It creates a greater connection between the researcher and the participants as well as to the study. Saldana (2015) further adds, "It reminds you that the study is not about you but about your participants" (p. 86). It is fundamental that the investigator is focused on the participants and the experience. "One chooses a qualitative approach to understand phenomena from the participants' perspectives and to explore and discover, in-depth and context, what may have been missed studies were done with predetermined assumptions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 85). Saldana (2015) adds, "These first-person accounts extend beyond peripheral observation and interviews of others to present a lived-experience perspective" (p. 86). Inasmuch as possible though, researcher neutrality is important for maintaining the research credibility. Efforts to maintain trustworthiness and credibility were employed in the conduct of the study.

This chapter discusses the methodology implemented to explore the overarching research question that guided the research study. A thorough review of the research methodology, including the role of the researcher, sampling, participant selection, site selection, and data collection will be explored. A discussion on the participants will include how the initial participants were selected. An explanation will reveal that many participants chose not to

participate in the study, which impacted the participant pool and possibly the data. As the data collection commenced, even with participants declining to participate considered part of the data set, analysis began with the first effort to interview (Stake, 1995). Throughout the data collection, the research remained open to the emergence of data in qualitative research as described as a process where “issues, emerge, grow, and die. . . the course of the study cannot be charted in advance” (Stake, 1995, pp. 21-22). Additionally, Ginsburg’s (1989) approach being mindful of turning points that signal a break between the ideal and real, the cultural script, and the counter- narrative were considered as there were contradictions. (p. 30). Finally, the chapter on methodology closes with an examination of the approach for the study’s data analysis, as well as strategies implemented to refrain from research bias through the use of trustworthiness and credibility efforts.

### **Research Question**

The following overarching research question guided this study:

What are the perceptions of stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents, about the benefits as well as challenges presented by ‘grow-your-own’ approaches to fill superintendent positions?

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study sought to discover and analyze the perceptions of various stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. By listening to the stories of the participants, the researcher was able to glean participant familiarity with GYO approaches, including their own experiences with internal promotions, and what their views are on a GYO approach (internal promotion). The various characteristics that influence

the benefit of such practices were explored to examine participant perceptions on both the positive as well as the negative impacts of hiring “from within” on the long-term success of rural school districts. This qualitative study also sought to plausibly problematize the verbiage of GYO regarding whether it is in fact a precise strategy to be implemented, or a means of gender marginalization or oppression in hiring practices for these positions which are limiting highly qualified superintendent hiring pools (Allred et al.,2017).

### **Research Design**

When a researcher decides to conduct a study and selects an event to research, she understands that the phenomenon as a whole is an intricate system. “This complex process of conceptualizing, framing, and focusing a study typically begins with a personally defined question or identified problem” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 74). Therefore, the qualitative researcher must take a holistic approach when conducting the study. “Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: to *explore*, *explain*, or *describe* a phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 75). In order for the qualitative researcher to gain a clear holistic perspective, she needs to gather data from multiple sources and literature. Saldana (2016) advises, “Transcend the local and particular of your study, and reflect on how your observations may apply to other populations, to the bigger picture, to the generalizable, even to the universal” (p. 49).

The research design for this qualitative project took place in the natural-world social settings. The naturalistic inquiry aspect of this research sought to gather data on the perceptions of various South Texas rural (including fringe, remote, and distant) stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents with consideration to their awareness of GYO hiring practices. The researcher conducted the interviews individually, and in-person at a

site suggested by the participant to ensure maximum comfortability and inclination to share viewpoints on the topic (Patton, 2015). As a qualitative researcher as the instrument, the observation of social life as it takes place was included in the focus of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2015).

### **Ethnographic Study**

This qualitative research study consisted of an ethnographic approach. As this study investigated three particular subgroups of stakeholders to identify their perceptions of GYO approaches in rural school districts, it is logical to implement an approach that intends to comprehend and appreciate human groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher did not only interview the participants, however, she also made observations of the participants' behaviors, including in the case of this study, rejection of participation. Patton (2015) best describes ethnography as a "method for studying and understanding the *other*" (p. 101). Marshall and Rossman (2016) assert the advantage of an ethnographic study is the focal-point is from the participants' viewpoints. An *etic*, or outside viewpoint, was used during this qualitative study as there was a level of objectivity and an increased degree of analysis by the researcher (Patton, 2015).

### **Emergent Data**

Qualitative research is conducted in the natural world (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to plan for the unplanned, including, "the researcher always being mindful of the need to retain flexibility" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 110). As a researcher, it is important to not feel confined to the original research proposal components, because unanticipated events, as well as themes emerging from those events, were made during the study; thus, this researcher needed to allow for flexibility by being responsive and adaptive to the

research. Marshall and Rossman (2016) elaborated, “In qualitative inquiry, the proposal should reserve some flexibility in research questions and design because these are likely to change” (p. 67). Further, flexibility and allowing for emerging data in the case of this study, clearly led to unanticipated data that has benefitted the research literature on GYO approaches to rural superintendent hirings. The primary strength of the qualitative approach afforded flexibility, which resulted in deeper “exploration, discovery, and creativity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 198).

### **Reflexivity**

A qualitative researcher must take time out from the investigation and observation phase for reflection and rumination. “Reflection, whether it consists of thought directed to oneself, discussed with another, or privately written, is the act of pondering various components of the research project to make sense of and gain personal understanding about their meanings” (Saldana, 2015, p. 8). Reflexivity in the case of this study involved taking time to reflect, with the researcher asking herself questions to clarify understanding and follow-through, as well as, allowing data to stew, and giving the researcher time to review notes or creating new journal entries while they were fresh in her mind. The researcher also utilized analytic memoing per Saldana (2016) who described them as, “comparable to researcher journal entries or blogs – a place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing even more about them” (p. 44).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Role and Perspective of the Researcher**

In this natural setting for study, the researcher chose to designate the primary data gathering instrument as self (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the researcher as ‘self’ being the

primary data instrument gatherer, this afforded a human appreciation of the data. It also allowed for reflection on the researcher's part (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Similar to Lincoln & Guba (1985) who emphasized the use of tacit knowledge (p. 40), the researcher's own experiences provided the context in analyzing data based on hunches and oppressive feedback she had received in her own quest to ascend in leadership roles.

### **Participant Experience and Engagement**

In order to gain a better understanding of the participant's life experience, the researcher immersed herself in the fieldwork and sought to connect to the participants' way of life. As a principal, and lifelong educator herself, she fluidly interacted with participants. As suggested by Saldana (2016), the researcher sought to establish connections between herself, the participants, and the social world being studied. "Social life is made up of people with radically different interests, priorities, and agendas" (Saldana, 2016, p. 96). Working to ensure openness to the data bolstered by the researcher's commitment to the methodology afforded enhanced data collection.

The researcher was able to utilize her personal experiences in leadership to inform the study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted, "One's personal biography is often a source, an inspiration, and an initial way of framing a research question" (p. 71). Using one's personal experience as a source of inspiration, as a source of familiarity, may prove advantageous when navigating question development researching literature. As a current school principal, the researcher relied on her own insider knowledge to better inform the study (Patton, 2015).

### **Participant Sampling**

The sampling was purposeful (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40) as opposed to random sampling. The researcher identified the sample size and population for this qualitative research study, with intent and purpose. Marshall and Rossman (2016) affirm, "Sample sizes are small,

as qualitative studies aim at depth and crafting relationships with participants rather than at studies with large-scale randomly selected participants” (p. 44). The researcher used an identified approach to how the sample population was selected. Marshall and Rossman (2016) advise, “Decisions about sampling people and events are made concurrently with decisions about the specific data collection methods to be used and should be thought through in advance” (p. 110).

Thus, the researcher selected participants thoughtfully and with intention including three (3) principals, three (3) superintendents, and three (3) school board presidents. Additionally, these members of the educational community were required to be currently employed in rural school districts. While the participants in this study possessed some similar characteristics, such as educational credentials, certifications, or occupations, in order to conduct the interview on the research topic, the interviews provided emergent data through qualitative conversation.

Initially, the purposeful sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) included three participants; one participant from each subgroup. These initial participants were selected by researching the Texas Education Agency’s website and locating and downloading the ‘district type’ file. This file provides the names of all districts in the state of Texas, as well as categorizes the districts by rural remote, rural fringe, rural distant, as well as city, suburb, or town. After identifying possible initial rural districts, the researcher called a principal, a superintendent, and a school board president by locating the contact information from the identified school district’s website.

Additional participants were selected through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). Thus, of the nine participants, three were purposefully selected while the remaining six participants were interviewed after utilizing a snowball sampling strategy and being recommended. The participant’s verbal, then written consent was obtained prior to interviews. Analyzing the



location of the participants' district rural classification, six were located in a rural fringe area, one was located in a rural remote area, and the remaining two were located in a rural distant area.

During the snowball sampling, additional participants were recommended by colleagues to participate in this study. Upon initial contact between the lead researcher and the potential participants, many superintendents and school board presidents declined to participate. While many stated they were interested in the findings, they apologized that they would not be willing to participate. Another stated, "I appreciate the consideration, but would rather not provide comment." After the initial phone conversation between the lead researcher and 12 potential participants, several superintendents and school board presidents declined to participate; including five superintendents and seven school board presidents. These recommended superintendents and school board presidents stated they were interested in the findings, they apologized that they would not be willing to participate. In essence, by opting out, these participants essentially chose to remain *silent* on this topic of 'grow your own.'

### **Site Selection**

The participants were educational leaders located in rural districts. While the open-ended interviews and behavior observations were conducted in natural real-world settings to allow for comfortability (Patton, 2015), the interviews were conducted at a site selected by the participant. This was done intentionally in an effort to have the participant feel more relaxed. The goal was to have the participant feel comfortable enough to be willing to share as much as possible, and perhaps even lead the conversation (Bernard, 2006). The initial conversations took place via a phone call, where a date, time, and location were selected by each participant. Prior to the interview date, the informed consent forms were emailed to each participant. The participants each emailed the sign forms to the researcher and submitted the original document during the

face-to-face interview. In the case of rejection of participation, the researcher also recorded that data in analytic memo form.

### **Participant Interviews**

The nine participants were each interviewed separately. The interviews were semi-structured with 12 pre-determined questions as an interview guide. The outline of questions served as a guide while the researcher allows for emergent data through the unfolding of life experiences in the naturalistic interviews (Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2015). The semi-structured interview approach in order to get the participants to talk and allow flexibility for the conversations to shift to unanticipated directions as the participant offered (Bernard, 2006). Each interview was audio-taped, with permission. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed by the researcher beginning with the first interview and throughout the collection. Saldana (2015) makes an interesting contribution to the qualitative research realm when he states, “Analytic induction is the process by which answers to research questions are emergently constructed as more and more data are collected and systematically examined” (p. 26). The lead researcher listened to the audiotapes multiple times so as to allow the data ‘to cook’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40) and ‘soak in the culture’ through the researcher’s pores (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). The intention of this is the processing of the data multiple times was to catch any themes in the participants’ tones in the conversations. Coding of the data was implemented in an effort to identify patterns (Saldana, 2016), however, the researcher also used reflection and analytic memoing to assist in processing and theming the data.

## **Transcribing**

The transcription was then coded by researcher-generated themes, as a way of analyzing the qualitative data (Saldana, 2016) and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further examination. The data was chunked by questions and participant responses. The spreadsheet was designed to allow for the entry, and later coding, of the question, interviewee, response, and identified theme. After all the data was entered in the spreadsheet, each response entry was reviewed and coded for the keywords or short phrases. Included in the verbatim transcribed responses, were the notations of pauses, body language, silence, and change of tone when the participants were speaking. These added observations aided in creating a theme for the response to a question. The spreadsheet allows for the data to be sorted by theme, category, question, or participant. This analysis process was helpful, aligning with efforts at the reflection on the emergent patterns resulting in the re-coding and reshuffling of themes in order to present a coherent display of the data in the findings of the study (Saldana, 2016).

While researchers may code data differently, Saldana (2016) does make note that the implementation of coding is merely one method used to analyze data. Due to the intricate process which entails reflective thinking, this researcher used coding after transcribing. During the procedure, the researcher searched for patterns and essentially grouped data into categories (Saldana, 2016). ‘Themeing the data’ was conducted once all codes had been categorized. This consisted of finding the common words and phrases in the themes, to create an overall theme category. Efforts were made to present a manageable final number of themes to keep the data analysis logical and consistent (Saldana, 2016).

## **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) describe the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as essential strategies of triangulation to increase trustworthiness. The participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity. The purpose of the interview was explained prior to the interview date, therefore providing transparency about the purpose of the interview (Patton, 2015) and building trustworthiness for the interview session (Erlandson et al., 1993). Participants' names and identifying school districts and towns were not be used. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants, as a means for respect for privacy (Patton, 2015); however, to combat what Seeling (2021) has problematized and that is anonymization of rural places through making rural identities, the researcher sought to select pseudonyms for district names that were as true as possible to the nature of the identity of the district.

Furthermore, the use of prolonged engagement in the study provided unbiased observations for the researcher to understand the various participant's opinions and feelings (Erlandson et al., 1993) and build trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The lead researcher sought to maintain the integrity of the study by "handling the practical, political, and disciplinary activities" that are required to be able to find solutions to, in this case, the research problem, while being "grounded in ethical, moral, and professional principles" (Levin, 2012, p. 140).

Additionally, in order to maintain the validity and reliability of the data, the researcher carefully transcribed each interview from the audio recording. The verbatim transcribing was ensured by using a 'stop-and-playback' method to capture every word by the participants. This was done in an effort to confirm to the readers of this study that measures were taken to capture

exactly what the participants were expressing regarding this study. Participants were asked to member check and clarify data throughout the interviews (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Chapter Summary**

This methodology chapter has provided insight on the research design intended for this qualitative study on ‘grow your own’ approaches in rural school districts. The purpose of the methodological approach for the study was to identify the perceptions of various stakeholders, including administrators and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. The research design of the study was also presented. A thorough review of the research methodology, including the role of the researcher, sampling, participant selection, site selection, and data collection, was reviewed. This chapter on methodology concluded with an exploration of the study’s data analysis, as well as a section on trustworthiness and credibility.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

*I'm already looking for superintendent positions outside the district. I'm looking for positions in big districts. Bigger districts won't have the 'good 'ole boy system'.*

*Sean*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discern and analyze the perceptions of various educational stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around 'grow your own' hiring practices. From the moment data collection began, via interviews with the various stakeholder participants, data analysis began (Stake, 1995) and it became clear to the researcher that her own experience and tacit knowledge or hunches that "something is going on here," resonated as a counter-narrative clearly emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ginsburg, 1989).

After analyzing the data collected in the interview transcriptions including the researcher-generated coding, as well as being open to the unanticipated emergence of data (Stake, 1995) several overarching themes, as well as sub-themes, were revealed (Saldana, 2016). Participants acknowledged the unique context of rurality and the unique needs of their communities. Moreover, most participants were surprisingly familiar with the term GYO, recognizing some advantages as well as disadvantages when hiring GYO or internally groomed candidates. Unexpectedly, participants clearly problematized the use of GYO as a mask ultimately limiting applicant pools and evidencing gender bias.

Participant selection, then acquisition, proved to be a challenge. Five superintendents declined to participate and seven school board presidents declined to participate. Many of these were recommended by initial participants. Although several who declined to participate

indicated, “they were interested in the results.” comments declining participation included “appreciation for being asked to participate,” or “I don’t think I can be helpful,” or “I choose to decline at this time.” One school board president stated, “I appreciate the consideration, but would rather not provide comment.” A superintendent stated, “Thank you. I appreciate you reaching out. However, I am going to have to decline.” All three principals who were initially asked consented. The researcher herself is currently a campus principal.

Thus, while twelve professionals declined and in essence chose to be silent upon the topic of GYO, ultimately, nine participants, from the three subgroups were interviewed. The participants were all located in different areas in South Texas, with all participants who were invited (including those who declined) geographically located within about a 150-mile radius of one another. Despite the differences in location, there were similarities in responses. The major themes that were presented among the data include: GYO approach and implications; GYO approaches in rural areas, including familiarity and uniqueness; multi-faceted leadership; and internal applicant advantages. Throughout the course of the interview, time spent with the interviewee, and observations made, the researcher learned each participant’s story (Erlandson et al., 1993), which contributed to this research insight on Grow Your Own approaches.

### **Participants**

After a review of the literature, a list of 12 pre-determined open-ended questions was developed and asked of the interview participants (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted individually with nine (9) participants, three (3) of whom were all school principals and possess their superintendent certificate, three (3) were active superintendents, and three (3) were school board presidents all of whom currently worked in rural school districts, as of the interview dates. As a means of introduction, Table 2 depicts participant data using pseudonyms

for both participants and districts as well as providing rural categorization, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience in their current role. The selection of these district pseudonyms was intentional in an effort to ameliorate anonymization of these rural places and spaces which has been problematized by Seelig (2021).

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics, District, Rural Category, and Years of Experience*

| <b>Pseudonym</b>       | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>District</b>  | <b>Rural<br/>Category</b> | <b>Years of<br/>Experience</b>         |
|------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------------|--|
| <i>Principal</i>       |               |                  |                  |                           |  |
| Karen                  | Female        | Hispanic         | Boulder ISD      | Distant                   | 7 years                                |
| Liz                    | Female        | White            | Adams ISD        | Fringe                    | 2 years                                |
| Sean                   | Male          | White            | West River ISD   | Fringe                    | 5 years                                |
| <i>Superintendent</i>  |               |                  |                  |                           |  |
| Toby                   | Male          | White            | Wellington ISD   | Fringe                    | 16 years                               |
| Bill                   | Male          | Hispanic         | Two Trees ISD    | Fringe                    | 7 years                                |
| Mike                   | Male          | White            | Johnsonville ISD | Fringe                    | 18 years                               |
| <i>Board President</i> |               |                  |                  |                           |  |
| Leanne                 | Female        | Hispanic         | North Arrow ISD  | Fringe                    | 22 yrs. total; 10<br>yrs. as President |
| Fred                   | Male          | White            | Wildcat ISD      | Distant                   | 22 yrs. as<br>President                |
| Joe                    | Male          | Hispanic         | Waverly ISD      | Remote                    | 8 yrs. total; 2<br>yrs. as President   |



## Principal Participants

### *Karen*

*I feel that they [internal applicants] are dedicated. I feel like they are, um, willing to do whatever it takes so that our students are successful. Um, me taking a superintendent job if it opened up, would kind of take me out of just the elementary piece, and focus more on operations and custodial staff, the library, the nurse, the technology, and the business office. And, so, that would definitely broaden my horizons as far as what would be expected of me, versus what are my experiences in. - Karen*

Karen is a principal at Boulder ISD. She is a Hispanic female located in a rural district with the school population identified with Hispanics as the majority. She has been in her current role at her district for seven years. Karen earned her superintendent certification in 2012. However, she has chosen to not pursue that route for the time being. She stated she loves spending time with students, and feels moving up would prevent her from spending valuable time with students. In addition to earning her superintendent certification, Karen has also recently completed the doctoral program in educational leadership. She states she is content in her current role as a school principal and enjoys the staff, students, and parents with whom she works.

### *Liz*

*While I have advanced from within a couple of times, I don't see that as a possibility for superintendency. - Liz*

Liz is a principal at Adams ISD. She is a White female employed in a rural school district with the majority of the school population identified as White. She stated that it is her second

year in her current role at her district, and enjoys being a principal. Despite her short reign as a campus principal, Liz has been employed in her district for nearly eleven (11) years, in various leadership roles. She has spent the majority of her twenty (20) years in education at the secondary level. She recently completed the superintendency program last year; however, has not completed any applications for a superintendent position.

***Sean***

*Well, (laughs) I don't even know they (the district) go through the applications. I think they have an idea, I guess, of who they want. Then, you know they plant the seed for that person to apply or move up. It seems like . . . 'Ok, I have been in this district for four years. And, um, well, it seems like the past three years it has been more prevalent that they are just moving people up. They don't even post the positions on all the websites like they used to. I think this is just common in smaller districts.'* – Sean

Sean is currently a principal at West River ISD. He is a White male who had a career in the military prior to joining the public-school system arena. At his current district, Sean has been the campus principal for five (5) years. The population of the campus at which he works is predominately White. Sean states he believes his time spent in the military has given him the necessary leadership skills to be successful in the various leadership roles he has had and continues to seek. Sean has earned his superintendent certificate and is currently seeking a role in the superintendency.

## **Superintendent Participants**

### ***Toby***

*School districts are becoming less independent and are now not able to make decisions that would be best for their particular school district. Decisions made by TEA to try and make all districts the same. This is a problem for smaller school districts, it makes them lose the items that make every district unique. - Toby*

Toby has been school superintendent of Wellington ISD for sixteen (16) years. He is a White male who has been employed within his district for twenty-three (23) years, as he was a campus principal prior to becoming the district superintendent. The demographics of his student and staff population is predominately White. He states he does not see himself in any other role, nor any other school district. He expressed his loyalty to the district.

### ***Bill***

*The one concern I have [about the superintendent role] that I have is that although being a campus principal is sometimes required [as a pre-requisite for superintendent], it is not mandatory. Being a campus principal for an extensive amount of time is what I feel truly prepares a person for the superintendency. - Bill*

Bill explained he, like Sean, has a background in the military as he spent six years in the US Navy. Bill has a total of 26 years in education with seven (7) years in the superintendent role at Two Trees ISD. He is currently employed in a school district with the majority of the school population identified as Hispanic. Bill has retired once from education, yet found his passion for learning and teaching continues. Therefore, he has returned to the education realm wishing to share his knowledge and learn from others.

***Mike***

*Do I have concerns about the superintendent role, yes! Definitely the political component of the position. More so now than ever. Now, we must juggle safety, student performance, direction, vision, physical plant maintenance, and even the politics of the school board.*

*- Mike*

Mike is currently a superintendent at Johnsonville ISD. He is a White male with 18 years of experience in his current role as superintendent. He has 38 total years in education and has no plans for seeking employment in another role or district. The school demographics are comprised of a mixture of ethnicity, with the main subgroups being White and Hispanic.

**School Board President Participants**

***Leanne***

*Switching superintendents frequently can put a strain on the school district. . . frequent superintendent changes may also affect staff retention. - Leanne*

Leanne has served on the school board for North Arrow ISD for a total of 22 years. She has served in the capacity of president for ten (10) years. Other positions she has held include secretary and vice-president. Leanne is a White female serving as School Board President in a district that is identified as having a predominately White student and staff population. She states she is privileged to serve in her current capacity.

***Fred***

*I choose to serve this district because I am a member of this community. - Fred*

Fred may be considered an outlier when observing his years served on the school board. He has served as school board president for a total of 22 years in a small rural school district,

Wildcat ISD. Fred is a White male who was recently reelected as board president. He states he chooses to serve in his current role because he is a member of the community. He added that he was originally driven to serve because he had children in the school district, yet has stayed in the running because he wants to serve others and make a positive impact.

***Joe***

*I have had the honor of serving this amazing district for over eight years. I also enjoy being a member of several community organizations and staying active in community projects. - Joe*

Joe has spent a total of eight (8) years on the school board of Waverly ISD, with two (2) of those years in the school board president role. He is seeking to continue with his role as board president as he enjoys being active in the school area and has a vision of supporting programs and policies that produce a high achievement of the entire school community. Joe is a Hispanic male in a school district with demographics comprised of an almost even split of White and Hispanics.

### **Findings and Analysis of Results**

After analyzing the data collected in the interview transcriptions as well as the researcher-generated coding, as well as being open to the unanticipated emergence of data (Stake, 1995), several overarching themes, as well as sub-themes, were revealed (Saldana, 2016). First, participants acknowledged the unique context of rurality and the unique needs of their communities. Additionally, participants were surprisingly familiar with the term GYO, and, they recognized some advantages as well as disadvantages when hiring internal candidates. Finally,

emergent data revealed that participants clearly problematized the use of GYO as a mask ultimately limiting applicant pools and evidencing gender bias.

### **Uniqueness of Rural Areas and Districts**

When it comes to rural school districts and communities, there is undoubtedly a uniqueness to the needs and challenges faced. Many of the participants expressed the challenges and needs they have encountered. Further, many of the participants have a wealth of experience residing in or working at rural school districts and communities. For instance, Liz has spent her entire educational career in rural districts. She states she has moved around a bit; however, each new rural district is a learning experience. Additionally, Karen was born and raised in a rural fringe district. Once obtaining her teaching credentials, she moved off to a larger city. She stated that she was there for a few years and realized she needed to return home. She is now residing and working in a rural distant community.

With regards to the perception of rural areas, Bill discussed how relationships are important in rural communities, for they can help or hinder a collaborative environment. He stated:

Relationships are important, especially in a very small and rural district such as this. Not only relationships with your staff, parents, and students, but also with the school board. They are your bosses. Most board members have a pet peeve they run on. They sometimes come out during your interview process. It is a good time for the superintendent candidate to evaluate whether they really want to work for this particular group of seven. One must remember, you are also interviewing them. If you take the wrong district, it can ruin your career.

On the other end of the spectrum, Leanne, as a board president, also expresses that there are particular characteristics needed of a rural superintendent. When asked what type of candidate the interviewing committee, the team of school board members, are looking to interview, she stated:

Board members look for candidates with the characteristics and personality traits to fit into your district and the community's priorities. It is important that an incoming superintendent understand the intricacies of the community, the people, the traditions, and the needs of our school community. They look for individuals who can relate to the students, teachers, administrators, community members, and parents to engage them to participate in meeting the district's personalized goals.

Karen, as previously stated, has spent the majority of her life in rural communities. She has repeatedly stated during the course of her interview that she sees herself continuing her career in smaller districts. As she named a few surrounding districts she would prefer to work in, and possibly even be a superintendent, it became evident that she named rural districts. During the conversation, she stated:

I would prefer to be in a small, and yes remote, district, versus a large one. A 5A school is just not me. I think I'm a personable, approachable person and I would like to get to know everyone in my district. It is very difficult to do that when you live in a city with 20,000 people. So, yes, my preference right now is to work in a small district where I can know, um, our staff and our students well. Also, small districts are great districts. The students are great and do well, the parents are supportive. And, should an opening come up, I would definitely consider it and think long and hard. I don't have a decision right now . . . whether I would apply or not, but I would definitely consider it.

Karen also recognized the unique needs of rural districts when it comes to the hiring process. In a small and rural district, the staff are aware of the candidates interviewing, as well as if there are any relationships or ‘connections’ to current administrators. Karen shared a personal experience. She remembered:

When I was first hired here, my friend had reached out to the superintendent because they were good friends. My friend told the superintendent I was looking for a job, and I wanted to move back to the area, so . . . well, here I am. But, I will say that hiring friends of friends does have advantages such as having a reference before the application process to vouch for qualifications and stability. At the same time, the major disadvantage is that the staff in the district is upset because someone was hired just because they were a “friend” regardless of how highly qualified they may be. For some reason, it is upsetting to them that people know the interviewing committee members and end up getting the job.

Each interview participant was asked to share longevity data about their current superintendents. In investigating the years of service of the superintendents, each of the principal interviewees communicated that their current superintendent has been in the role for a number of years. Karen said that she believes her superintendent has been in the role for 15 years. Liz stated in her district, the superintendent was hired over ten years ago. Sean noted the same findings, as the superintendent in his district has had the role for eleven years.

The superintendent subgroup had similar results regarding longevity in the role. Toby affirmed he has been the superintendent for 16 years and does not plan to relocate or retire. Bill has had the shortest tenure, which is eight years in the role, while Mike has the longest consisting of 18 years.



The findings of the school board president subgroup also aligned. Leanne explained that her district’s superintendent has been successfully leading their district for 17 years. Fred voiced his district’s superintendent has been in the position for 10 years, and the previous superintendent was in the role for 12 years. Lastly, Joe described his superintendent as loyal and dedicated as she has been in the role for 19 years and counting. This data on the longevity of these rural superintendents causes the researcher to wonder whether these sorts of lengthy terms are typical or again, tacit knowledge about “what is going on here” becomes part of the data puzzle in this study.

### **‘Grow Your Own’ Approaches Among Rural Districts**

Eight of the nine participants each had some personal experiences with GYO hiring practices. Their personal stories will follow. Table 3 shows a brief overview of the participants and their experiences.

**Table 3**

*Participant Personal Experience with GYO Hiring Practices*

| <b>Pseudonym</b>      | <b>Personal Experience with GYO Hiring Practices</b> |
|-----------------------|--|
| <i>Principal</i>      |  |
| Karen                 | N/A  |
| Liz                   | Product of GYO                                       |
| Sean                  | Product of GYO                                       |
| <i>Superintendent</i> |  |
| Toby                  | Product of GYO                                       |
| Bill                  | Considers internal hires first                       |
| Mike                  | Product of GYO                                       |

---

*Board President*

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Leanne | Superintendent is a GYO; Superintendent is mentoring others, this offers a pool of qualified applicants |
| Fred   | Board prefers to hire outside the district; prefers a large pool of applicants                          |
| Joe    | District believes in, and practices, mentoring and GYO  |

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***Familiarity with GYO Term***

The intention of this study was to identify whether GYO was a formalized process implemented or a means of gender stratification and even marginalization in the hiring practices for superintendent vacancies. To explore this further, each participant was asked whether he or she had any familiarity with the ‘GYO’ term and process. Some had more knowledge and experience than others.

Karen had not had personal experience, nor observed the GYO practice in her district, yet she is somewhat familiar with the term as she responded, “Yes, I know what it is. It is when teachers are selected to be mentored to become leaders or administrators.” While Karen does not have experience with a ‘GYO’ program or approach, Sean expressed he had a one-time experience with his previous administrator, and mentor, who encouraged him to go into school administration while he was a classroom teacher. Sean mentioned he felt confident to enter the administrative leadership program with the support of his supervisor and mentor. Liz, on the other hand, had multiple personal experiences with the GYO process. She describes her recollection:

I have experienced it [GYO] quite a few times. I was a teacher who was promoted to counselor in my same district. Then, after several conversations with my principal about

continued education, I was persuaded . . . he calls it ‘encouraged’ . . . to look into the principal certification. After several inquiries, I did. I looked into it and then completed the program and obtained the certification. I was surprised when an opening came up for an assistant principal I was asked if I wanted it. Of course, I said, ‘YES.’ I didn’t even complete an application or interview. I always wondered if it was just ‘given’ to me because he [principal] coached and mentored me, or if I truly earned it. I don’t know. Maybe I overthink things.

Superintendent Bill described it as a “grooming” process of leaders. He stated:

Grow your own? Yes, I have heard of it. It is a term used to describe the grooming of your own district personnel or even H.S. graduates to enter the field of education.

Although administration is very important, one must be a standout educator before we start to consider them as future administrative leaders.

Superintendents also had a range of personal GYO experiences. Bill stated he himself did not go through a formal program; however, as an administrator charged with hiring employees, he “always considers internal candidates first.” These findings are in contrast to the earlier reporting of Mike, who is a product of GYO, and implements such approaches, yet does not fully support the approaches’ effectiveness. Toby also shared his story of being a product of GYO, and how commitment to the district was exactly what the district was seeking. Toby explained:

I was a product of grow your own. I moved from an elementary principal to the superintendency role at my district here. The district had gone through two superintendents who came from other districts and each superintendent only stayed for two and half years. The district was not used to that and wanted a superintendent that was willing to stay for a longer period of time, which is how I feel I got my opportunity.

Mike also described his personal experience with the GYO hiring process. He mentioned that all administrators (district, assistant principals, and principals) had created a network together. They had monthly district meetings to congregate and discuss district and campus activities. He reminisced about the meetings, stating they were not only beneficial to new administrators who are now able to collaborate with a support group, but it was also a way to further one's experiences by learning from colleagues. He further described that all administrators were "exposed to central office staff for meetings and such. They gave us a leg up on administrative vacancies."

As previously stated, school board presidents were also among the participants who had experiences, either as a candidate or observed, with GYO practices. Leanne describes her experiences:

In my district, I have observed this type of scenario multiple times. Most often, it has been the opportunity for a teacher to be promoted to an administrative position. Our superintendent has also mentored several who are pursuing their superintendent certification. We have not experienced a superintendent vacancy in over 15 years, but if that should occur, there are several potential candidates who now have the qualifications to apply.

While Leanne has observed the GYO process and appears to be supportive of the implementation, Fred is at the opposite end of the spectrum. His district is similar to Leanne's in that they do not need to hire superintendents often. However, he did specify that his district prefers to "look to hire administrators and even superintendents from a large source. We want a nice large pool to select from." School board president Joe has similar beliefs and experiences to Leanne. He shared:

We are encouraging our educators to continue their education and career goals. Our administrators are always ready to lend a helping hand any way they can. They serve as mentors and help provide our teachers with hands-on experience to help them when a position becomes available. I believe this shows two things. One, we have a strong team of educators with potential. And two, our administrative team does well with mentoring new upcoming administrators.

The process of hiring a superintendent was also a topic discussed. The superintendent subgroup was asked about the hiring practices utilized when they were hired for their current role. Two of the three superintendents discussed the process consisted of search firms hired by the district. Mike recounts how he was narrowed down as a finalist using a search firm selection process about five years ago. He stated that he remembers the events clearly, as they were not that long ago. He stated:

I am very pleased with the process the search firm took, and feel that it was a very thorough process. The search firm initially narrowed it down to three candidates, you know, with me included. Then, the board took over and did the interviews. I feel confident that the process was conducted fairly and I am the right man for the job.

Interestingly, Mike referred to himself as the “right man” for the job. (The researcher wonders whether there would have been a “right woman.”)

Likewise, Bill was also very familiar with the superintendent hiring process consisting of a search firm conducting the candidate selection process. Bill, however, had a very different experience. He is currently serving as a superintendent after returning from retirement. He shared his experience:

I went through the application and hiring process as recent as two years ago. The district hired a search firm to conduct the initial interviews. It is their way of weeding out applicants. Sometimes, they are looking for the best candidate, sometimes it is someone they already know. Just depends on the search firm. And, you know, sometimes the search firms are looking for a dog-and-pony show. I weighed my options, and also considered the amount of candidates applying. However, I want to acknowledge that I did decide to pull my name out of the process because I wanted to go back into retirement. Being a superintendent kept me busy. Retirement allows me to spend more time with my family.

Bill continued with his concerns about the superintendent search process. He expressed the search process is not a fair selection process. He stated:

Most, if not all, superintendent search firms use the same cookie-cutter model.

Ultimately, it is a board decision and I think all the current processes and often times miss out on great candidates that are not polished in producing a dog-and-pony show if that makes sense.

Toby, on the other hand, revealed he only had one instance with the superintendent hiring process. He also relayed that his experiences with the hiring process did not involve a search firm, instead, it was a series of interviews with the school board. He recollects the process, from 16 years ago, as:

I still remember the interview process I went through. Well, let's see. I turned in my application on a Thursday, I believe, and by that Monday I was called for an interview. I was excited, but then nervous. I wasn't sure how many people would be on the interview panel. At the same time, I had worked in the district for already seven years as a Principal

and I knew everyone at central office that I was so gosh darn nervous. My school board was going to be interviewing me. It was nerve-wracking. I remember thinking, 'How do I sell myself to a room full of people who already know who I am and how I work.' I mean, it crossed my mind all that weekend that other people interviewing have the advantage of mystery and being able to sell themselves without the school board members truly knowing their limitations. So, I interviewed on Monday. It was a full interviewing committee of seven board members. I felt I did a fine job. And, I must have, because they called me back for a second interview by the end of the week. I was less nervous by then. My school board knows what I have to offer, my dedication, and my leadership abilities. They know me and I know them. I remember thinking I needed to answer in a way to promote their strong beliefs.

It is interesting that the results of this research find that each of the three superintendents interviewed had a unique perspective and experience of the superintendent hiring process. It appears that the application and interview process is tailored to the individual district and its needs.

Another subgroup also had varying experiences and outlooks when it came to the application and hiring process. As a board president, Leanne discussed her views about the pros and cons of the superintendent hiring process:

If followed correctly, the superintendent application process is very lengthy and time consuming. Districts usually have the option of hiring a search consultant or conducting the search on their own. Utilizing a consultant also adds another expenditure to your budget. I believe that even if you have groomed someone and they are waiting in the wings, they should still be expected to interview and go through the process. Interviews

can be very misleading. I have learned that it is very difficult to determine how an applicant will fit into your district before you actually have the opportunity to see them functioning in the role. The confidentiality that must be adhered to is also a detriment. You are limited to researching references, as the last thing you want to do is put an applicant's current position in jeopardy and then not hire them.

Fred had an alternate perspective on the superintendent hiring regime. He reported his concerns from the perspective of his current role as school board president. He expressed:

What concerns do I have about the application process? Well, there is one that comes to mind. Again, we have not had a need to advertise or hire a superintendent in several years. We have been fortunate. But, if I had to list a concern, I would say that the board needs to be unanimous when selecting the lone finalist. The opposite sends the wrong message to everyone. *(Researcher asked for elaboration.)* Ok, say for example the lone finalist is selected on a split vote. What message does that send during the 21-day waiting period? I can say for one, it tells the staff and community that we [the school board] are not a united front. Two, it lets everyone know that there were concerns with the individual that led to some board members not in favor of the hiring. Heck, it can even send the message that there are problems with the functioning of school board, and the district is not a stable place to work in. Ultimately, think about the message it sends to the candidate who was named lone finalist. It let that person know that some of the board members preferred another candidate. Oftentimes, I have seen candidates work harder to impress the school board members when something this occurs. And, let me tell you, oftentimes when there is a split vote, the candidate who becomes superintendent does not last long. Usually, during the contract renewal phase, the new superintendent is voted out.



These research findings conclude that the board members have concerns when it comes to hiring a new superintendent to lead the district. It was evident that this subgroup understood the magnitude of the hiring decisions, as it impacts multiple facets of district operations. As they stated, there are options available to the district when conducting a superintendent search. It was also evident that the school community's perceptions are viewed as impactful when considering the board's hiring decision.

### **Advantages of Hiring Internal Applicants**

The theme of *advantages of hiring internal applicants* was also remarkably present. The question was posed to each participant if they believed internal candidates had an advantage during the hiring process. It was interesting that the superintendent subgroup had more to share on this topic, as opposed to the other two subgroups. Sharing principal Sean's response, he stated:

Yes, I think so. (thinking) Yes. Internal candidates have a definite advantage. Because. Well, they have already been in the district. They know all the policies, procedures, programs, and personnel. Think about it. There is little to no training involved. And, they know the students, the parents. It would be such an easy transition.

The superintendent subgroup also shared the same sentiment. When posed with the same question, Bill added to the above opinion by including the support of the school community. Bill asserted:

Yes, a major advantage is that you should have a good idea whether the position is worth applying for. The advantage is two-fold. Yes, this feels right. I seem to have the entire community backing me on this venture. And, no this does not feel right, the stars are not

aligned and I'm getting negative vibes. In which case, I would just go through the process as an exercise for the experience of getting better with the interview process.

A thought-provoking outlook was made by superintendent Toby. The same question was posed to Toby, and his response included a standpoint that there is a specific advantage when it comes to elementary principals over secondary principals and being selected for superintendent roles. He reverted to previous experiences when he shared:

Internal applicants have a background and a history that can either help or hurt them as they try to move up into this position. I think it is harder for secondary administrators than elementary administrators from within because they have had the harder discipline decisions that may be considered negative and on the opposite side. Outside applicants that do have secondary experience would have a harder time coming into a new district and might not even make the second interview.

The third superintendent participant, Mike also believed there was an advantage for internal applicants. He communicated that the internal applicants would be able to use current organizational knowledge to their advantage during the hiring/interview process. Specifically, Mike stated:

Yes. Oh, yes, they do. They know the organization. They know the strengths and weaknesses and are able to speak to that during the interview process. They know the characteristics of the board. And because of all this, they also know how to present themselves to the board. It definitely gives an advantage.

Once again, school board president Leanne has a different perspective when asked the same question as the other interviewees. Her responses are a 'whole-picture' and open-mind

approach. Her reply to this specific question addressed how an internal candidate's strengths and weaknesses can be both positive and negative during the hiring process. She stated:

Internal candidates may have an advantage or disadvantage at the same time. While working through the GYO program, the candidate's strengths and weaknesses have been exposed. This may work for them, or against them. There also may be historical knowledge about the candidate and their family that could sway the decision to hire one way or another. It would be to their advantage to know the personality of the school district and the community and to also have some historical knowledge of their own. The board will probably have had the opportunity to see the applicant in action and observed how they handled a particular issue. Again, if handled well, it could work to their advantage, if not handled well, it could be a disadvantage. It is incumbent on the school board to show that any applicant has earned the promotion and that the new position was not just handed to them.

The theme of *advantages of hiring internal applicants* was persistently portrayed during the interviews. The same question was posed to each participant if they believed internal candidates had an advantage during the hiring process. An interesting finding included that the superintendent subgroup had more to share on this topic, as opposed to the other two subgroups.

### **Disadvantages of Hiring Internal Candidates**

Participants recognized the importance of the multi-faceted leadership characteristics needed in an administrative, particularly superintendent role. However, there was also concern and caution that as a GYO candidate, the newly appointed administrator may not be perceived as a 'leader', and instead continued to be viewed as a peer. While as a principal, Karen described the GYO process as a "leadership pipeline" in which teachers are "selected to be mentored to

become leaders or administrators”, superintendent Bill described it as a “grooming” process of leaders. He stated:

Grow your own? Yes, I have heard of it. It is a term used to describe the grooming of your own district personnel or even H.S. graduates to enter the field of education.

Although administration is very important, one must be a standout educator before we start to consider them as future administrative leaders.

Superintendent Toby and school board president Joe also described the GYO process as a leadership program. Toby stated it is moving teachers from “the classroom to leadership positions.” Joe adds to this sentiment by stating GYO is the process of “growing your own leaders.” He further adds, “the process is creating a culture of loyalty and leadership.” Not all participants shared this outlook. Karen described a leadership drawback of GYO as:

Trying to advance within the same district can be hard. Moving up from a principal to a superintendent. Everyone in the district will still view you as a principal . . . of one campus, not a district leader. Can you imagine trying to go from classroom teacher to campus leader?

As a superintendent, Bill also identified a leadership shortcoming within the GYO approach. He asserted, “Without the proper training and, or mindset, an internal district candidate may not be perceived by their peers as the leader in charge that the upper-level administration requires.” Interestingly, school board president Leanne contributed a perspective beyond the mere surface level of the grow your own hiring practices. Leanne described what kind of leadership qualities a school board team would be interested in discovering in a superintendent applicant. She stated:

There are various characteristics an employer may seek in an applicant, depending on the position. For the position of a superintendent, characteristics that are sought include honesty, integrity, professionalism, clear background check, excellent communication skills, a focus on advocacy, and the ability to work with people successfully.

The theme of *internal hiring challenges* was unanticipated. However, the data collected provided an insight into the participants' point of view on the importance of the leadership qualities needed in an administrative role. However, there was also apprehension that as a GYO candidate, the newly appointed administrator may not be perceived as a 'leader', and instead continued to be viewed as a peer. As indicated by the participants' interviews, an internal applicant should remain vigilant if accepting a leadership role as a GYO candidate.

### ***Limiting the Pool of Qualified Applicants***

The notion of school districts having an adequate pool of qualified applicants for superintendency has been on the radar for years. The findings of this study confirm that having a notable pool of superintendent applicants is still a concern, and implementing a GYO hiring approach may be a contributing factor to the limitations of qualified applicants. The researcher posed this question to the principals *'What do you perceive might be the contributing factors of a limited pool of qualified applicants as they relate to GYO programs?'*

Sean responded:

I think GYO is more of a buddy-buddy type of approach. I have seen it too many times, more and more often. It's all about who you know . . . having friends in high places. You know, fishing buddies and all. If you know the right people, have the right connections, then you have a 99% chance of getting the job . . . qualifications or not. And, that's a shame.

Sean additionally shared his viewpoint on the disadvantages of GYO approaches, as he stated, “Disadvantages? Well, it’s a huge disadvantage for the qualified ‘outsider’ who hasn’t lived in this town all his life.” The same question was posed to Liz. Her response also included previous experiences. She responded:

Is it just assumed that an internal applicant has the job? Or does the internal applicant have to interview alongside the external applicants? In the past, I have seen where the people in the district appear to get ‘promoted.’ There is always the question in everyone’s mind, ‘Was this person the best-qualified . . . or was it because they were friends with the central office people?’

The experiences have had an impact on the principals as they reflected and internalized the previous occurrences to find meaning. An important notion Liz voiced was that, “We need the best leaders for our district, even if it is applicants from other cities. We should be doing what’s best for our district, staff, and students.”

There were also concerns expressed by superintendents about the GYO hiring process having a limiting effect on qualified applicants. Toby conveyed concerns regarding a district’s lack of growth and being closed-minded. The superintendent stated:

Opportunities for new ideas are sometimes missed because outside applicants bring ideas from other districts from different regions of the state, and a small-town culture like ‘this is the way we do it here’ can take over and stifle a district from growth.

It is evident through Toby’s interpretation that the GYO hiring process can have an adverse impact on growing a district in a positive direction with regard to innovation. Additionally, Mike described that the GYO process can be portrayed as a ‘lazy’ approach to hiring. He explained:

There can be disadvantages to GYO, sure. The organization can get lazy. It's just too easy to get lazy. They can settle for the internal applicant and not cast a wide enough net. It is important that highly-qualified schools and organizations have a balance of the type of applicants; thus employees. Outside applicants can provide a fresh perspective. Small rural districts are not big enough to implement a successful GYO program . . . if they did, it would be very difficult to sustain.

It is surprising, however, to compare Mike's view on the GYO approach in comparison to his personal experiences with GYO programs. He states that he promotes the use of GYO programs and approaches, as he is currently utilizing a "GYO grant and implementing a grow your own academy at our high school. This is for students who are wishing to become future educators." In essence, he promotes the implementation of GYO approaches to build future educators, and at the same time, he also believes that the GYO *leadership* approach is a 'lazy' approach to identifying new campus and district administrators.

When school board presidents were asked the same question about potential limitations on the pool of qualified applicants, Fred responded:

Yes, I am familiar with GYO programs. It is basically looking at internal employees to fill openings or even potential openings in the future. (Researcher asked for elaboration.)

Well, sometimes positions are created for internal applicants, you know . . . so, they can move up. I just feel there might be better applicants out there that the district needs to be looking for.

Leanne provided another perspective, while still offering contributing factors which limit the qualified applicant pool of superintendents in rural school districts. Through this school

board president's viewpoint, she shared the disadvantages of the GYO hiring process and the impact it has on the potential internal hire. She shared:

Through the GYO hiring process, it can include premature hiring of the individuals before they may be fully qualified or before they have acquired ample experience for the position. Promoting on the same campus may also cause some hardship on the individual as that individual will have already developed relationships with many of the individuals whom they will now be supervising. That may become a challenge in itself as those who were considered friends previously may not take the supervisor capacity of their friend seriously or may expect different treatment than others.

Furthermore, Leanne recognizes that the internal applicant "will have to prove themselves much quicker to overcome the opinion by some that they were selected based on their skill and not their relationship to their supervisor." This 'qualified/skills versus friends/relationship' has been the resounding theme throughout the interviews.

### ***Gender-bias Impact***

Another impressionable theme was that of the *gender-bias impact* on the applicant pool. It appears that the principals have more experience with gender stratification with regard to superintendent hiring in rural districts. Participants were asked, *'What practices have you observed with GYO programs as they relate to identifying quality characteristics of candidates?'* Sean responded:

You know, it kinda seems like most districts look to hire a male superintendent. I mean, who has not had some sort of experience with this? I have seen this happen too many times to count. You would like to think when a district looks to hire someone, even if it is



internally, they should look to hire the best. More often than not, it's all about the 'good ol' boy' system. Honestly, it's an insult to the profession.

Liz also had similar contributions towards this question. While Liz stated she is not a product of a GYO formal program, she has seen colleagues go through these leadership hiring approaches. She added:

Everyone knew there was going to be an opening. We all, we were all assistant principals in the district at the time and were excited and thinking this was our shot at moving up. There was a bit of competition between everyone who was interested in that position, but it was a healthy-type of competition. It soon became real clear who the frontrunner was. He was clearly friends with the superintendent. We all knew it. The superintendent would call him on his cell phone! The superintendent never called the other two of us on our cell phones. If he ever had a question for us, he would call our office extension. That's when things changed and friendships ended. Long story, so I will give you the short version. I'm sure you can guess who ended up with the principal position. Yep. (sigh) Yeah, it's all about who you know. Of course, it was explained to the rest of us that he, "his friend," was the 'better qualified' candidate. We all wondered if it was a coincidence that the other two applicants, myself and my colleague, were both female and if that had any bearing on the decision.

One additional observation made by superintendent Bill in response to the same question, he also based his response on previous experiences. Unlike Liz who spoke of her experiences regarding an administrative opening within her district, Bill described the differences in skills and characteristics in men and women and how that impacts employment at the superintendent level. He stated:

School board members are looking to hire someone who has experience, and hopefully expertise, at all levels. And let's face it, are they going to find the perfect person who knows everything in all facets of the position? Probably not. So, they are going to look for someone who is strong in school finance and has the ability to relate to their teachers and community. Please don't take this wrong, but typically men are stronger in the areas of finance and building and maintenance. And women, they are stronger with building relationships. So, when you put yourself in the school board's position . . . well, who would you hire?

When implementing leadership approaches such as a GYO approach in an organization, the impacts can be undesirable and have adverse ripple effects on the organization's personnel. Utilizing a GYO approach to fill leadership position vacancies within rural school districts is no exception. This study's findings have indicated that implementing a GYO approach in a rural school district leads to *limiting the pool of qualified applicants* as well as having a *gender-bias impact on applicants*. Moreover, the unwillingness of five (5) rural superintendents (including 3 male and 2 female) and seven (7) (including 6 male and 1 female) rural school board presidents choosing to decline to participate in the study within a 150-mile radius within South Texas, is indicative of cultural practices that appear exclusionary.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter on findings has provided insight and awareness based on the perceptions of nine (9) research participants who met the criteria for one of the following subgroups: principal, superintendent, or school board president all of whom were located in a rural school district. This chapter also included an examination of the analysis of the themes that emerged throughout the

research, as well as their connection to the research question, as it pertains to this qualitative study on ‘grow your own’ approaches in rural school districts.

Emerging and recurring themes consist of, *limiting the pool of qualified applicants using GYO* as well as the theme of *the gender bias aspect of the GYO process* among the three subgroups. Furthermore, both advantages, as well as disadvantages of hiring internal candidates, were shared. A significant and unforeseen theme was how all nine participants were undeniably *familiar with the term grow your own (GYO)*. Participants also shared their insight about the unique needs of rural school districts. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the perceptions of various stakeholders, including administrators and school board presidents from rural school districts with consideration to their perception around ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. Conducting individual interviews allowed the researcher was able to determine whether they are familiar with GYO programs or approaches, have experienced an internal promotion, and what their views are on a GYO internal hiring approach. This ethnographic study also viably problematized the verbiage of GYO and found that participant data revealed the term is often used as a means of gender marginalization or oppression in hiring practices for these positions which are limiting highly qualified superintendent hiring pools.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.*

*– Albert Einstein*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover and analyze the perceptions of various stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around ‘grow your own’ hiring practices. This ethnographic study also sought to problematize the verbiage of GYO regarding whether it is in fact a precise strategy to be implemented, or a means of gender marginalization or oppression in hiring practices for these positions, which are limiting highly qualified superintendent hiring pools. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as related to the literature on GYO programs and approaches. Also included in this conclusion chapter is a discussion on the connections to this study and its implications in the workplace. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations, areas for future research, and a brief summary.

This chapter consists of a thorough discussion of the findings led by the following research question:

What are the perceptions of stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents, about the benefits as well as challenges presented by ‘grow-your-own’ approaches to fill superintendent positions?

Examining the analysis conducted on the emergent concepts yielded several aligned themes among the nine participants. After analyzing the data collected in the interview transcriptions, including the researcher-generated coding, several overarching themes as well as sub-themes were revealed (Saldana, 2016). Participants acknowledged the unique context of rurality and the unique needs of their communities. Moreover, most participants were

surprisingly familiar with the term GYO, recognizing some advantages as well as disadvantages when hiring GYO or internally groomed candidates. Unexpectedly, participants clearly problematized the use of GYO as a mask ultimately limiting applicant pools and evidencing gender bias.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Examining the data across the nine participant interviews resulted in the emergence of several common threads. Upfront, participants shared the uniqueness of rural school districts. Additionally, a crucial and unexpected theme emerged during all nine participant interviews, as they were all indeed *familiar with the term grow your own (GYO)*. Finally, an emergent thread communicated across all participants included a general acknowledgment about the *disadvantages* as well as *advantages for hiring internal applicants*. Starkly emergent data highlighted that GYO approaches not only *limit the pool of qualified applicants* but also that *gender bias* was a problematic aspect of GYO approaches. These two threads were common across all participant groups which included principals, superintendents, and school board presidents. These prevailing themes have powerful aspects to them as they have an ultimate impact on potential applicants for rural superintendent positions.

### **Uniqueness of Rural Areas and Districts**

There is a uniqueness about rural school districts and communities (Budge, 2006; Eppley, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009; Wood et al., 2013). While research may state that rural children are often ignored and overlooked (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009), Karen states, “Small schools such as Boulder ISD are special.” She adds, “They get to know each and every student. Their strengths. Their weaknesses. It’s

kinda like each student has their own set of cheerleaders who will not let them slip through the cracks.” This aligns with Eppley’s (2006) research that rural people are connected.

Reviewing each of the other participants' interview transcriptions, Joe mentioned, “there is a certain charm about small communities.” Mike believes he is most successful in his role as superintendent because he ‘goes above and beyond’ for the students and parents to meet their individual needs. As Karen previously stated, this is difficult to accomplish in larger districts with the student population in the thousands.

Lamkin (2006) refers to the superintendent of a school district as a ‘jack of all trades.’ The findings of this research study affirm Lamkin’s (2006) outlook on the superintendent role. Due to the overwhelming duties a rural superintendent is tasked with, Sean expresses he would need support when taking on the role. He stated, “I was thinking that as a new superintendent, I would need guidance.” He explains his rationale by adding:

You know, as a new teacher, there are often support in the forms of mentors, other teachers, and even support from administrators. As a principal there is less guidance and support. My concern about moving up to a superintendent role, where would my support and guidance come from? Who do I bounce ideas off of? What if I have a question? How do I know what I don’t know?

The same sentiment of a rural superintendent needing to be well-versed in all aspects was expressed by Leanne when she stated that the school board is looking for someone who is strong in curriculum and finance, honest, professional, and able to work with the school community. Bill, in the superintendent role, also expressed that someone in his position needs to be ‘experienced at all levels, strong knowledge in school finance, and the ability to relate to their teachers and community.’ The principal subgroup participants all arrived at the same conclusion

of the rural superintendent role encompassing many tasks. Karen, Liz, and Sean all mentioned the stress of state testing accountability, relationships with the school board, and knowing how to run the entire district. Confirming their concerns, Mike mentioned he felt he needed to juggle multiple responsibilities as a rural superintendent. As Lamkin (2006) declares, rural superintendents are often the sole administrator of the district.

### **‘Grow Your Own’ Approaches Among Rural Districts**

The findings reveal that there is indeed a form of GYO leadership approaches within rural school districts. All nine participants were familiar with the GYO term. Although not all had personal experience with a GYO approach, eight of the nine participants had personal experience as either a candidate or observing an approach in their district. The findings also confirm the literature that there is a uniqueness of rural areas.

### ***Familiarity with GYO Term***

As previously presented, all nine participants, being from rural districts, were familiar with the GYO term. Versland (2013) identifies GYO programs as leadership preparation programs, how notes they are more familiar in large suburban and urban school districts. These research findings conclude the contrary, as many of the participants (five of six) were products of a GYO approach; however not necessarily a formal program. Additionally, in a quantitative study by Petersen (2002) concluded that there is a need to establish and maintain positive and professional relationships, including shared decision-making in the development and refinement of instructional leadership. When analyzing the data from this study, there is a strong correlation between the GYO process and leadership pipeline/qualities. For instance, when asked *how would you describe the GYO process*, several participants responded with a theme of leaders and leadership. Karen described the GYO process as one where “teachers are selected to be mentored

to become leaders or administrators.” Likewise, superintendent Toby communicated his views of the GYO process as a means “of moving up from the classroom to leadership positions.” School board president Joe also had similar insights. He stated that the GYO process is where districts “grow your own leaders.”

An additional area where this study aligned with the literature on leadership is in the area of educators choosing to pursue administrative roles due to being recruited (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). As previously discussed in Chapter 4, Sean revealed that he was encouraged by his current administrator to pursue school administration. Liz contributed that she was also a product of a GYO recruitment. In contrast, there are reasons as to why educators choose to abstain from leadership roles.

In a study by DeFeo and Tran (2019), the researchers identify a practice known as *place-conscious leadership* (PCL), in that there is intention in identifying personnel and placing them in specific environments to establish connectedness. While the participants did not explicitly use this term during the interviews, there was a connection of practice to this term. For instance, ‘Bill’ stated his preference for considering internal hires first, before looking at other applications. Mike and Toby both acknowledge the importance of GYO approaches to help facilitate the growth of internal talent.

### **Advantages of Hiring Internal Applicants**

There are several advantages for a district to hiring internal applicants. The majority of the participants, across all subgroups, described an advantage of hiring internal applicants as “a shorter learning curve.” As a study by Doyle et al. (2014) reveals, districts tend to focus on internal applicants when a vacancy occurs. Leanne adds by saying the applicant comes with “historical knowledge and awareness of the personality of the community and school district.”



Fred echoes this sentiment by saying the applicant “already knows the ins and outs of the district. Bill, as a superintendent identifies the major advantage as the “internal candidate should be very familiar with the mission, goals, and objectives of the district.” Within the principal subgroup, Karen and Liz both reiterated the advantage is that the internal applicant is familiar with the district, and the district is familiar with the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses, which is consistent with the findings of Sabina and Coldwell (2018). Sean had a different perspective on the advantages of internal applicants. He stated the applicant would have the benefit of knowing ‘the higher-ups’, as personal connections play a part in the hiring process (Doyle et al., 2014), thus making it easier for a vertical move. This aligns with the findings of Gronn and Lacey (2006) in that the selection process is not based on merit or ability.

### **GYO Approach: Implications**

According to the participant data in this study, implementing a GYO approach in rural school districts may have a negative impact relative to securing a pool of qualified applicants for the superintendent role. Moreover, participant perceptions reveal that an adverse consequence in the use of the GYO hiring process results in a gender-bias effect for the applicant pool. These undesirable outcomes will be explored in relation to the existing literature on GYO programs and approaches.

### ***Limiting the Pool of Qualified Applicants***

This current research study was an exploration of the nine participant’s attitudes and perceptions towards the GYO hiring process in rural school districts. Among the challenges identified in the common themes presented by the participants, the topic of a limited pool of highly qualified candidates to join the GYO leadership approaches (Versland, 2013) was evident. Additionally, Normore (2004) acknowledges this trend occurring and attributed the qualified-

applicant shortage at the time to the mass retirements of school administrators. Nevertheless, this troublesome trend continues (Benigni et al., 2020). While, Normore (2004) emphasizes the crucial objectives for a district to develop a leadership succession plan or GYO leadership approach, this research has identified the problematic undertones. With regards to the *limited pool of qualified applicants*, the principal subgroup expressed an advantage of internal applicants obtaining a position vacancy as opposed to the external applicants. Kamrath and Brunner (2014) recognize in rural communities there exists a bias against ‘outsiders’ coming into these districts. The analysis of this current research findings aligns with the previously mentioned research findings of Kamrath and Brunner (2014) and Versland (2013). Further, the GYO approach was described by the participants as a ‘lazy’ approach to hiring as a superintendent expressed his concerns regarding GYO causing a district’s lack of growth and being closed-minded.

Additionally, the research conducted by Steed et al. (2004) was confirmed by this study, in that the GYO process is subjective in nature. The participants stated the GYO process was a “buddy-buddy type of approach”, it is easy to “settle for the internal applicant”, and the GYO hiring process “can include premature hiring of individuals” before they are fully qualified. The findings bring to light the question of whether the ‘subjective employment is of best-fit’ (Palmer et al., 2016). Another correlation between literature and the findings of this study was that there are times when an internal candidate is primed by a member of the interview committee (Buckman et al., 2018). This was the case with Liz when her principal offered her an internal position for assistant principal without going through the interview process. This also resonates with the findings by Bengtson et al. (2013) when the researchers report that vacancies are anticipated ahead of time, and therefore administrators make plans ahead of time to fill the opening.

On the other hand, several of the participants stated that the GYO process helps to facilitate growing the local professional talent (Hammer et al., 2005). The majority of the participants acknowledged internal applicants have the advantage of knowing the district's procedures, policies, and culture. Joe stated that his district implements the GYO process and believes it contributes to "encouraging our educators to continue their education and career goals." He added that the implementation contributes two-fold as it shows: "one, we have a strong team of educators with potential, and two, our administrative team does well with mentoring new upcoming administrators."

### ***Gender-bias Impact***

The superintendent role has historically been occupied by males (Davis & Bowers, 2018), specifically White males who have made a long-term career in education (Jarrett et al., 2018). This study included three (3) superintendent participants. It is important to note that all three were males, with two of the three being White males. Additionally, the White male superintendents in this study had indeed made a long-term career in education, with their experience in the superintendent seat being 16 years and 18 years.

An interesting find, which aligns with the literature, is that the superintendent role is more fitting for males due to the various intricate responsibilities, such as experience with the political aspects (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011). For instance, Bill stated school boards are looking for candidates who have a strong background in finance and communication. He added, "typically men are stronger in the areas of finance, and building and maintenance." Additionally, Sean voiced that he believed most districts are seeking to hire males for the superintendent role. These views and practices can easily deter females from applying for the superintendent role (Glass, 2000). Of equal importance, Toby's observations included some districts look to hire

superintendents for longevity or even financial expertise. This can be a deterrent for women to apply for such leadership positions. Unlike the findings of Mason and Schroeder (2010) which stated that the personal attributes of a candidate have a greater influence on the hiring decision, it appears that Toby's observations insinuate that the superintendent role is more aligned with a male applicant, thus suggesting that women should seek lower-level administrative positions (Davis & Bowers, 2018; Glass, 2000; Howard et al., 2017).

### **Final Data Reflections**

While not presented formally in Chapter IV, this Chapter V reflective post-script lends itself to mention just a few comments from participants around the unique characteristics which superintendents must possess. Whitaker (2000) noted that leadership roles in the educational setting have evolved into consisting of increased expectations and responsibilities. More specifically, the role of district superintendent has grown to entail a position of teacher-scholar, instructional leader, business manager, political leader, and even applied social scientist (Bjork et al., 2014; Heron, 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2013). Mike confirmed the findings of the above-stated research. He asserted that the superintendent role does have a political component to it. He added, "Now, we must juggle safety, student performance, direction, vision, physical plant maintenance, and even the politics of the school board." Karen specified that school boards should look for superintendent candidates that have qualities including: "people-person, organized person, somebody that is approachable, visible, kind, and able to make relationships." Additionally, Bill asserted that a candidate needs experience at all levels of education. He added a superintendent should have a "strong knowledge in school finance, and the ability to relate to teachers and community."

In a study by Hewitt et al. (2011), the results concluded educators ranked the top reason for not pursuing a career in leadership is the overwhelming pressure of state-mandated testing and the accompanying accountability. Further, the second-ranked reason revealed was the overall stress of the administrative role. Karen expressed concerns about the superintendent's role to include collaboration and cohesiveness, as well as the concern of school boards having personal agendas and focusing solely on STAAR scores. Likewise, Sean had similar concerns about the top leadership role and also included the need for support and guidance. This aligns with research by Whitaker (2002) regarding why administrators abstain from administrative roles due to the stress generally as well as the stress of the hiring and selection process for the role as well as, work conditions and disproportionate work responsibilities. All of these challenges confront districts when seeking to have a good-sized pool of highly-qualified internal applicants (Wood et al., 2003).

### **Implications**

The results of this study have direct implications for the educational workplace. As this research revealed, a district which implements a GYO hiring process can experience negative outcomes, such as having a limited pool of highly-qualified applicant pool as well as leaving the impression on other applicants that there is a gender-bias to the identified approach. There were, however, also identified implications which illustrate there are educators who support the GYO process and are in favor of looking for internal applicants to fill leadership vacancies. Districts which choose to implement a GYO approach to filling leadership vacancies, such as the superintendent role, can also be at an advantage when hiring internal candidates. Therefore, it remains a debate whether the GYO approach has more advantages or more disadvantages to the workplace, as well as the candidates.

The predominant population of students in this region is Hispanic, with a high percentage of low-socioeconomic students served. Student achievement levels in South Texas are subpar per Texas Performance Assessment Results (TAPR) provided annually by the Texas Education Agency. As rural school districts in the region continue these exclusionary hiring practices, not finding the most highly qualified candidate and limiting applicant pools through their practices thus further compounds dismal student achievement and ultimately will impact the economy of Texas. Implications for inclusionary hiring practices are noted to ensure Texas has an educated populace as this minority/majority demographic shift occurs.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations, thus leading to recommendations for future research. An initial limitation is that this research study was designed to limit participants from South Texas. It was the intention of this study to include participants who all are associated with rural school districts, either employed or serving as a school board president.

An additional limitation of this study pertains to the superintendent subgroup. The superintendent subgroup consisted of only males. To expand on this, there were three males in the superintendent subgroup, with two of the three being identified as White. To clarify, there were female superintendents that were recommended, via snowball sampling; however, these female superintendents did not wish to participate in the study. Instead, they recommended superintendent colleagues to participate, which resulted into an all-male subgroup. Finally, twelve participants declined the opportunity for participation. Of these twelve participants, there were three (3) were male superintendents and two (2) female; and six (6) male school board presidents, and one (1) female superintendent. They recommended participants were cordial in their decline, stating they “did not feel they could contribute”, or “thank you, but at this time I

will have to decline.” It is the opinion of this researcher that the recommended participants declined for anticipation of the questions, and possibly exposing truths they were unwilling or uncomfortable with sharing. This is confirmed by a declination statement received, “Thank you. I appreciate you reaching out. However, I am going to have to decline.”

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Due to the limitations in this study, there are recommendations for future research in the areas of rural leadership in education, rurality as it relates to GYO programs and approaches, and the unique needs of rural districts. The researcher did not find any previous study conducted about GYO programs or approaches that problematized the terminology. A preliminary recommendation for research is the proposition to conduct a similar study of stakeholder perceptions regarding GYO approaches to hiring rural school superintendents across multiple states. A study such as this one conducted can be replicated across multiple states to determine whether the results are consistent across the subgroups in various states and to call out and problematize the term, GYO as exclusionary.

An additional direction for future research includes supplementing the participant subgroups with additional interviewees. This would serve to reduce the possibility of acquiring homogenous participants within a subgroup. In order to gain a better representation of a variety of stakeholders’ perspectives toward hiring practices using a GYO model, there is a need for a larger collection of participants.

A recommendation for additional research to be conducted is in the area of discovering the unique needs of rural school districts. Current research reveals rural school districts are unique (Budge, 2006; Eppley, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009; Wood et al., 2013). Uncovering the solutions to the challenges faced by rural school

districts and the superintendents who lead or would lead them, need further exploration. The findings of solutions to the challenges for rural school districts would prove to be beneficial to not only the educational leaders, but to the entire school community as well.

### **Conclusion**

The role of district superintendent can be cumbersome, yet for some leaders who embrace the myriad of challenges as well as rewards, it can be a role worth pursuing. Fink and Brayman (2006) emphasize that the recruitment and selection of administrative candidates have become a national dilemma for the educational domain. It is crucial to attract and employ high-quality applicants when hiring for this essential district role. This study revealed there are both advantages and disadvantages to implementing the GYO approach. Implications included limiting the pool of qualified applicants, and contributing to a gender-bias on the pool of potential candidates was the most stark and unexpected data participants were willing to share.

Schools in South Texas face challenges. Clearly, the participants in this study risked personal exposure for “speaking their truths” in problematizing hiring males over females or “fishing buddies,” rather than the best person for the job. It is the hope of this researcher that these true leaders, whatever their role and their voices represented here, make a difference in the lives of the communities they serve and among those who read this study. Our children and our world depend on leaders such as these who have shared their experiences in this study without concern for any potential personal cost.



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## APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter



**Date:** July 21, 2021  
**To:** Gerri Maxwell  
**CC:** Gerri Maxwell, Gina Vilches, Vedika Salunke  
**From:** Office of Research Compliance  
**Subject:** Exempt Determination

Dear Gerri Maxwell,

On 07/21/2021, the Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board reviewed the following submission:

**Type of Review:** Submission Response for Initial Review Submission Packet  
**Title of Study:** Perceptions of Stakeholders Regarding Grow Your Own Approaches to Hiring Rural School Superintendents  
**Principal Investigator:** Gerri Maxwell  
**IRB Number:** TAMU-CC-IRB-2021-0065

Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board has reviewed the above-referenced submission and has determined the project is exempt. This submission was approved by the review process in accordance with the policies and procedures of the Human Research Protection Program. **Therefore, this project has been determined to be exempt from IRB review under the following category:**

**Exempt Category:** Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).

**You may proceed with this project.**

This approval corresponds with the versions of the application and attachments in the electronic system most recently approved as of the date of this letter.

**A Reminder of Investigator Responsibilities:** As principal investigator, you must ensure:

1. **Informed Consent:** Ensure informed consent processes are followed and information presented enables individuals to voluntarily decide whether to participate in research.
2. **Amendments:** This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. **Any planned changes require an amendment** to be submitted to the IRB to ensure that the research continues to meet the criteria for exemption. The Amendment must be approved before being implemented.
3. **Completion Report:** Upon completion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Completion Report must be submitted.
4. **Records Retention:** All research-related records must be retained for three (3) years beyond the completion date of the study in a secure location. At a minimum, these documents include the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB or, and any other pertinent documents.
5. **Adverse Events:** Adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately.
6. **Post-approval monitoring:** Requested materials for post-approval monitoring must be provided by the dates requested.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact us at [irb@tamucc.edu](mailto:irb@tamucc.edu).

Sincerely,

Rebecca Ballard, JD  
Office of Research Compliance

## APPENDIX B: Informed Consent



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### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-CORPUS CHRISTI**

#### **Perceptions of Stakeholders Regarding Grow Your Own Approaches to Hiring Rural School Superintendents**

We are asking you to be a part of this research study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before you make a choice.

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#### **WHO IS DOING THIS STUDY?**

Gina Vilches, doctoral candidate led by Dr. Gerri M. Maxwell is conducting this research study. Other research professionals may help them.

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#### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The purpose of this research study is to glean and analyze the perceptions of various stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural and mid-sized school districts with regard to their perception around “grow your own” hiring practices. By listening to the stories of the participants, the researcher will be able to ascertain whether they are familiar with GYO programs, have experienced an internal promotion, and what their views are on a GYO program (internal promotion). The factors that impact the benefit of such practices will be explored to examine both the positive as well as the negative impacts of hiring “from within” on the long-term success of rural school districts. The study also seeks to potentially problematize the verbiage of GYO regarding whether it indeed is a formalized strategy or a means of gender stratification or marginalization in hiring practices for these positions which are limiting superintendent hiring pools.

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#### **WHO CAN BE IN THIS STUDY?**

We are asking you to be a part of this research study because you are members of the educational community.

To be eligible to be in this study, you must:

- A campus principal, superintendent, or school board president; and
- Located in a rural or mid-sized school district;



One-time in-person interviews lasting for an hour will be conducted with each participant individually. 9 participants will be in this study at 9 different places. Location will be chosen by the participant to ensure their complete privacy and confidentiality.

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### WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS STUDY?

Being in this study involves a qualitative study with each individual participant. The participant will select the time and location convenient for the interview. It will consist of answering open-ended interview questions during an interview by the lead researcher. The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete. The information collected will seek to obtain your observations, experiences, and perceptions about the GYO programs in regard to the superintendent role. The information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of the participants.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be in this study for a 60-minute session.

If you decide to be in this study, the following things will happen:

- Your participation will **involve collecting information about your observations, experiences, and perceptions**. See Appendix: Study Procedures- Collecting Information to learn more.
- You will be **asked to answer some questions** by a brief interview by the lead researcher, Gina Vilches. These questionnaires will take about 60 minutes to complete. See Appendix: Study Procedures- Questionnaire to learn more.

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### WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are certain risks in this study. The main risk may include:

- You will be asked about: general questions, such as your personal and professional background and familiarity with Grow Your Own Programs (GYO). Some questions may be embarrassing or uncomfortable to answer. Sample questions that you may be asked are: Have you had any personal experiences with GYO? (Either as a candidate or in your district) What concerns do you have about the superintendent role? You do not have to answer questions you do not want to. You can exit the survey and stop at any time.
- Your participation will involve collecting information about you. You do not have to give any information to the study that you do not want to give. There is a risk of loss of confidentiality. Your confidentiality will be protected to the greatest extent possible. See Appendix: Confidentiality Risks to learn how your information is protected.





- If you choose to participate in this study, your interview will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely in a password protected file. Any recordings will be kept until it has been transcribed and de-identified. After transcription, the recording will be permanently deleted.

If you have any of these problems or changes in the way you feel about being in the study, you should tell the study team as soon as possible.

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### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

There may be no direct benefit to you from being in this research study. By being in this study, you may help researchers and the educational community learn the impacts of GYO programs. This study is significant to the educational community for those educators who are seeking to advance in their career into leadership positions. It is also significant to school district leadership teams when assessing internal and external strategies to consider in order to find the best candidate to fill an administrative vacancy.

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### **PROTECTING MY INFORMATION**

This study is confidential.

When information collected about you includes identifiers like name, email, phone number, the study can involve confidential information.

Your information will be protected by:

- Restricting access to only authorized personnel, storing data in password-protected, secured location, etc. Some examples are provided below.
- The interview once transcribed will be anonymized (a process by which identifying information is removed) by using pseudonyms (a fictitious name). The interview recording will be deleted after transcription.
- Using de-identified information: All direct personal identifiers have been permanently removed from the data. No code or key exists to link the research information to your identifiable information.
- Using coded information: Your direct personal identifiers will be removed from the research record and replaced by a code. The key that links the code to your personal identifiers are stored separately from the research record under restricted access.
- All research records will be kept securely.
- A password protected research record will be created and kept in a personal hard drive owned by the researcher
- Research records will be seen only by authorized research team members.
- We will share your information only when we must, will only share the information that is needed, and will ask anyone who receives it from us to protect your privacy.



- No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any report that might be published or presentation.

Once data analysis is complete, your identifiers will be removed from the research data, after such removal, the de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject or the legally authorized representative.

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### **WHAT ABOUT EXTRA COSTS?**

Participation in this study will not result in any extra costs to you. You will not have to pay anything extra if you are in this study aside from the personal time and travel costs it will take to come to all of the study visits.

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### **WHAT WILL I RECEIVE FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any payment for participating in this study.

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### **WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

Instead of being in this study, you may choose not to participate.

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### **WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A STUDY PARTICIPANT?**

**Being in a research study is voluntary.** You do not have to be in this study. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **What if I change my mind?**

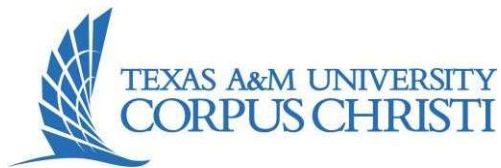
**You may withdraw from the study at any time** without penalty.

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### **WHO SHOULD I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

Dr. Gerri M. Maxwell is in charge of this research study. **You may call Dr. Maxwell at 361-825-6034 with questions at any time during the study.** You may also call Gina Vilches at 361-215-6379 with any questions you may have.

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### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The purposes, procedures, and risks of this research study have been explained to me. I have had a chance to read this form and ask questions about the study. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. A copy of this signed form will be given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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### STUDY PERSONNEL

I have explained the purposes, procedures, and risks involved in this study in detail to:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name of Participant

Any questions that have been raised have been answered to the individual's satisfaction.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person Obtaining Consent

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### Appendix: Study Procedures - Collecting Information

Your participation will involve collecting information. Being in this study involves answering questions in an interview with the researcher.

- You do not have to give any information to the study that you do not want to give. By signing this form, you are authorizing the collection and use of the information outlined in this form.
- We will ask for your contact information, including your telephone number, so that we can call you to get additional information that may be missing.

### Appendix: Study Procedures- Questionnaire

You will be asked about: your personal and professional background and familiarity with Grow Your Own Programs (GYO). Some questions may be embarrassing or uncomfortable to answer. Sample questions that you may be asked are:



- Have you had any personal experiences with GYO? (Either as a candidate or in your district)
- What concerns do you have about the superintendent role?

You do not have to answer questions you do not want to. You can exit the survey and stop at any time.

### **Appendix: Confidentiality**

When information collected about you includes identifiers like names, addresses, and phone numbers; the study can involve confidential information.

A research record will be created and kept in a personal hard drive owned by the researcher. The research record may include documents that have your name, assigned study ID number, home street address, telephone number, date of birth, dates of service, fax number, email address, certificate/license numbers, web or internet address, or lists of other unique personal identifier. All research records will be maintained in a confidential manner. We will share your information only when we must, will only share the information that is needed, and will ask anyone who receives it from us to protect your privacy.

### **Appendix: Withdraw**

If you withdraw from the study early for any reason, the information that already has been collected will be kept in the research study and included in the data analysis. No further information will be collected for the study.

The information that already has been collected will be de-identified (the information cannot be traced back to you individually). Because you cannot be identified from the information there is no further risk to your privacy. This information will continue to be used even after you withdraw.

## APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions Board President

1. Tell me a little about yourself personally and professionally depending on your comfort level in sharing that information, please.
2. Some school districts implement internal professional development to essentially grow their own administrators. Are you familiar with the term ‘Grow Your Own’? If so, how would you describe the process?
3. Have you had any personal experiences with GYO programs? (Perhaps observed in your district)?
4. What do you perceive might be the **advantages** or contributing aspects of GYO programs?
5. What do you perceive might be the **disadvantages** or limiting aspects of GYO program?
6. What concerns do you have about the superintendent role?
7. What concerns do you have about the application process of the superintendent role?
8. Generally, who would you suggest an interested candidate for a superintendent position use for references?
9. From your experience and observation, what are the characteristics search committees are seeking in a superintendent candidate?
10. In your opinion, what type of candidates are the interview committee members (board members such as yourself) looking for to fill superintendent roles?
11. From your experience and observation, do internal superintendent candidates have an advantage? If so, why? If not, why not?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?

### **Interview Questions - Superintendents**

1. Tell me a little about yourself personally and professionally depending on your comfort level in sharing that information, please.
2. Some school districts implement internal professional development to essentially grow their own administrators. Are you familiar with the term 'Grow Your Own'? If so, how would you describe the process?
3. Have you had any personal experiences with GYO? (either as a candidate or observed in your district).
4. What do you perceive might be the advantages or contributing aspects of GYO programs?
5. What do you perceive might be the disadvantages or limiting aspects of GYO program?
6. Based on experiences and observations, what concerns do you have about the superintendent role?
7. How long ago did you go through the application process for superintendency?
8. What concerns do you have about the application process of the superintendent role?
9. Generally, who would you suggest an interested candidate for a superintendent position use for references?
10. From your experience and observation, what are the characteristics search committees are seeking in a superintendent candidate?
11. In your opinion, what type of candidates are the interview committee members (search committee and/or board members) looking for to fill superintendent roles?
12. From your experience and observation, do internal superintendent candidates have an advantage? If so, why? If not, why not?

### **Interview Questions Principals**

1. Tell me a little about yourself personally and professionally depending on your comfort level in sharing that information, please.
2. Some school districts implement internal professional development to essentially grow their own administrators. Are you familiar with the term ‘Grow Your Own’? If so, how would you describe the process?
3. Have you had any personal experiences with GYO? (either as a candidate or observed in your district).
4. What do you perceive might be the advantages or contributing aspects of GYO programs?
5. What do you perceive might be the disadvantages or limiting aspects of GYO program?
6. Do you have aspirations to apply for a superintendent role?
7. Based on experiences and observations, what concerns do you have about the superintendent role?
8. Are you familiar with the superintendent application process in your district? What concerns do you have about the application process of the superintendent role?
9. Generally, who would you suggest an interested candidate for a superintendent position use for references?
10. From your experience and observation, what are the characteristics search committees are seeking in a superintendent candidate?
11. In your opinion, what type of candidates are the interview committee members (board members) looking for to fill superintendent roles?
12. From your experience and observation, do internal superintendent candidates have an advantage? If so, why? If not, why not?