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A Case Study in a Superintendent's Leadership Under Duress

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A CASE STUDY IN A SUPERINTENDENT'S LEADERSHIP UNDER DURESS

By

Anders Hill

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

A CASE STUDY IN A SUPERINTENDENT'S LEADERSHIP UNDER DURESS

By

Anders Hill

This case study explores a superintendent's leadership during financial crisis. It is imperative that new superintendents have a body of research and specific case studies to review to see how other superintendents were able to manage and mitigate crises in similar areas they may face. In the particular case studied, a superintendent took over a district with a newly identified deficit, an expired teacher contract and a poor reputation with stakeholders. The qualitative study allowed for an analysis of the superintendent's leadership traits and actions that are needed in crisis. Data included interviews, memos and primary source documents. Findings showed a need for a leader with high competency and integrity. New leaders can learn that while it may appear directive decision-making is required in crisis, in this case successful changes came through soliciting feedback and a level of collaboration and compromise. It is evident further research is needed to validate findings of this case study to help shed light on what superintendents can do to mitigate crisis.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), Sixth Edition and the Educational Leadership Department.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Through qualitative research this study focused on the leadership of superintendents during budget crisis. Many school administrators have lived through the process of deficit elimination plans, painful cuts and, the downward spiral that comes with fiscal emergency. A failing budget affects stakeholders in the district and negatively impacts students. It is likely that superintendents in Michigan will face budgetary challenges. From 2012 to 2014, about 10% of all school districts in Michigan faced operating deficits (Arsen, DeLuca, Ni, & Bates, 2015). Also, most schools in Michigan are facing depleted fund balances and financial problems due to State policies, unfunded special education mandates, declining enrollment and school of choice issues (Arsen et al., 2015). It would be unusual to spend a career as a superintendent in Michigan and avoid major leadership challenges related to money. It is almost inevitable that schools nationwide will be placed in situations where they will deal with funding and staffing cuts (Starrett, Casey, & Dunlap, 2014). In these situations most cuts have negative ramifications. Superintendent decisions will affect students in some way. It is unlikely that the State of Michigan will find significant extra funds needed to help solve budget problems as they look at allocating up to 50 million dollars to Detroit Public Schools (Livengood, 2016).

RESEARCH TOPIC

Through case study methodology this study investigates a specific superintendent's leadership under crisis and what strategies and behaviors were beneficial. The term crisis is used throughout the research. We used the operational

definition of crisis as an event that threatens an organizations normal function, reputation and ability to keep operating (Meisler, Vigoda-Gadot, & Drory 2013).

In the fall of 2012 an interim superintendent took over a rural school district for a superintendent who was relieved from his position the day after students started school. As a high school principal at the district studied, the researcher saw firsthand how crucial of a time period was for the district's leadership. The board of education then appointed an interim superintendent who took over a district with an about to be discovered budget deficit and a teaching staff that was in its fourth year without a contract. Staff morale was very low, and the school board, teaching staff, administrators, and parents lacked trust in the district and its leadership. In a crisis situation a retired superintendent took over and helped begin the process of repairing relationships and district operations. The case study looked at the leadership traits and actions employed by a superintendent. With contacts established, the researcher had the unique opportunity to study this period of time and get many views to gain perspective in leadership under duress.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND JUSTIFICATIONS

In situations like the one described, a new or inexperienced superintendent may lack the experience to adequately manage crisis. Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) explained that the average tenure of a superintendent is six to seven years and one of the greatest concerns of superintendents is the lack of qualified candidates to replace them. Boyland and Ellis (2015) found that 21% of the superintendents in a state bordering Michigan retired in 2013, which is indicative of an impending national trend. Early retirement of superintendents is attributed to the increased stress and pressure of the job (Boyland & Ellis, 2015). These problems become further exasperated by the rural

settings of many districts served in Michigan. Superintendents who lead rural districts, like those in the Upper Peninsula, have fewer support systems and feelings of isolation (Hill, 2015). It is imperative that new superintendents have a body of research and specific case studies to review to see how other superintendents were able to manage and mitigate crisis in similar areas.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this work is to provide wisdom and experiences from a former superintendent and various stakeholders to analyze a situation where a superintendent managed a crisis, and to convey these learned lessons to beginning district leaders who will be faced with difficult circumstances. By looking at a crisis through the perspective of the superintendent and a diverse group of educators, this study should yield an understanding and learn lessons in leadership during crisis. It is unlikely that any school superintendent will be able to pass through their career without managing a crisis. As mentioned earlier, it is likely that this crisis will occur based on budget concerns in Michigan.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question is specific to this case: What actions and behaviors did the interim superintendent use in the face of taking over a school district in a budget crisis?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is from Schumpeter (1942), who explained that in a stressful financial period leadership and reform involves creative destruction where old structures must be destroyed before new ones can be implemented. In the situation of an interim superintendent taking over during budget crisis we studied

how new structures were created for communication, negotiations, the budget process, and board, teacher, and community relations. In budget and financial crisis, creative destruction has a purging effect where ineffective systems and outdated procedures are eliminated (Ahmed, Kristal, & Pagell, 2014). Disruptive and crisis events related to finances can give leaders opportunities for innovation and to change the way things have been done (Carson, 2013). In many ways the interim superintendent had to be inventive in his approach by changing the ways things had been done in the district previously. Leadership in crisis cannot be a repeat of past practices, as many times these are the very mistakes and strategies that created the crisis (Probert & James, 2011). The budget crisis was the event in this case that allowed the interim superintendent to make changes and the past practices needed to be revamped. Abernathy and Clark (1985) saw that time of crisis and also positive innovation can create subsequent creative destruction and its innovation and changed ways of operating in many circumstances. A superintendent's ability to recognize impending changes in governance and advancements in other areas of education that may establish a cycle of crisis is imperative. The key qualities of management in times of creating new models of operation are having the right timing to take advantage of innovations and the ability to gain consensus from their teams to keep focused on long-term goals (Abernathy & Clark, 1985).

Turbulence theory offered another lens to help focus the events of the interim superintendent and how he dealt with a crisis. By using this as a framework, turbulence theory helps us to relate the levels of emotional stress to a rating scale. Turbulence theory is a school leaders ability to comprehend what level of danger and risk they are at and make decisions to move the organization to a calmer situation (Gross & Shapiro,

2008). Cameron, Ken and Whetten (1987) explained that turbulence is found in organizations when problems that threatens normal and everyday function comes in unpredictable intervals. Gross and Shapiro (2008) laid out the four levels of turbulence in an educational setting. The first level is called “light” and is marked by, “little or no disruption in normal work environment; subtle signs of stress” (p. 21). In “moderate” turbulence the entire organization is aware of the problem. The school and community having a sense of crisis is the mark of “severe” turbulence. The last stage Gross and Shapiro labeled “extreme” and is damaging to the function of the school and is expected that any reforms that have begun will fail (Gross & Shapiro). In the case study of an interim superintendent taking over a district in crisis, it is the researcher’s opinion that the turbulence levels fluctuated between “severe” and “extreme”. The framework of the turbulence theory added to this study as it looked at it through an emotional and ethical lens (Gross & Shapiro). Building on this idea of turbulent times, Lane and Down (2010) explained to us that during turbulence relationships become the most important factor and the higher the uncertainty, the greater the need for collaboration and discussion. Managing turbulence becomes more about creating systems for ways to gain employees perspective and creative ideas (Lane & Down).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the leadership of a superintendent under financial stress, we first need to look at research on the way leadership changes in crisis or in high stress situations. Experience tells us times of stress are where people learn to trust a leader and leaders gain legitimacy to drive change. Bonin and Hart (2003) stated, “Crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena” (p. 544). When we look at a crisis, we are talking about an event that threatens an organizations normal function, reputation and ability to keep operating (Meisler, Vigoda-Gadot, & Drory, 2013). For example, a high school principal may receive a series of bomb threats and school safety issues brought on by a school shooting in the region. These situations could have threatened the reputation of a school and could have had negative impact on the mission of educating students. Bonin, Hart, McConnell and Preston (2010) introduced some important lessons that should be learned from past managements of crisis. First, leaders in crisis situations need to understand what structures or policies need to be reformed and which are worth keeping (Bonin et al., 2010). Crisis allows and often demands that we make change, although some policies or structures are important to the identity of an organization and its future success. Second, leaders overstep their abilities to make changes by ignoring opposing ideas and give critics a chance to undermine them (Bonin et al.). In time of emergency the lens of public opinion is already on every decision a leader makes. Change to help mitigate the situation is good, but going after sweeping initiatives from a personal agenda can be an area of downfall. Last, reforms began due to crisis can have lasting challenges (Bonin et al.). Reforms that have lasting success are the product of well thought out plans with time for stakeholder input and buy-in. While decisions in

crisis are made quickly and do not allow for this process, leaders should not expect that decisions made in crisis would not need a lot of attention and future work.

Meisler et al. (2013) advocated for emotional intelligence in the management of crisis. Salovey and Mayer (1990) introduced emotional intelligence as, “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (p. 189). Anyone who has lead through or been through crisis knows that it likely induced great emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. It makes sense that successful leaders in these situations can read and make decisions while perceiving emotions of others. Meisler et al. (2013) argued that leaders with a high emotional intelligence could regulate their own moods and read and predict the emotions of others making it more likely that what they do in crisis situations will be successful. A leader's emotional intelligence helps reduce the fear and anxiety felt by stakeholders in the midst of crisis. The greater level of emotional intelligence a leader had, the more likely the stakeholders will reduce negative feelings (Meisler et al.). We admire great leaders who handle stressful situations and speak to stakeholders calmly and in an articulate manner only to share how anxious they felt.

Wooten and James (2008) shared some core leadership competencies that apply to the navigation of five individual phases of a crisis. In the beginning phase of a crisis or signaling point, an effective leader needs to make sense of the situation. Leaders need to be able to make sense of the many factors and events that lead them to this point (Wooten & James). In this beginning phase, effective leaders also need to envision everyone's perspective. Leaders need to see the unique needs and challenges that the crisis will

create for stakeholders (Wooten & James). In the next phase a leader makes preparations to deal with the problem. Wooten and James (2008) expressed that effective leaders in this phase of a crisis are able to sell the importance of the issue facing the organization, have the “organizational agility” to understand all the working parts of the organization and creativity to come up with new innovative ideas. After a plan is made the crisis needs to be contained. In this period, leaders need to make decisions under pressure and communicate them effectively in the face of great emotion and anxiety. Wooten and James (2008) wrote, “the ability to make sound and rapid decisions under pressure becomes a core competency to effective crisis handling” (p. 367). In the recovery stage the organization makes positive steps and is dealing with the crisis. In this state it is emphasized that a leader promotes the resiliency of the organization to overcome obstacles and focus on acting with integrity and regain trust of stakeholders (Wooten & James). In the frenzy of managing a crisis some groups may be disenfranchised and in this time an effective leader needs to step out to build bridges of trust. Rebuilding trust with employees seems especially applicable in school budget crisis situations, as many times painful cuts were made and people lost their jobs. In the last stage a leader learns and reflects on the crisis. They referred to this as learning orientation stating, “crisis can be a catalyst that produces individual and organizational learning” (p. 371). It is important that leaders are not wrapped up in the emotion of situations, but are able to step back and look at the process of leadership in crisis. Through this leaders can gain perspective and learn lessons on what worked and what did not.

Now more specifically we looked at research on superintendents’ dealing with the crisis of budget issues. Starrett et al. (2014) looked specifically at how public school

superintendents dealt with managing tough economic conditions. Their research came in light of deep funding cuts in Texas. Funding cuts were so deep that the state legislature passed emergency policy that allowed superintendents to reduce salaries, freeze wages and dismiss teachers even if it was contractually obligated to keep them (Starrett et al.). Their findings showed some interesting applications for superintendents dealing with a budget crisis. Districts that began planning cuts early, which about 80% of districts was realized through a reduction in staff, and responded early fared much better (Starrett et al.). These are difficult situations and affect many stakeholders, but decisive decision-making is needed in the face of these problems. Starrett et al. (2014) also noted that a strategic plan for the district was essential to the success in the face of cutting a budget. The greatest challenge noted by a majority of responding superintendents was that the state mandated learning targets and achievement requirements from standardized testing did not slow down in this crisis. One superintendent noted, “43 positions were eliminated...resulted in a loss of over 1,000 years of experience” (Starrett et al., 2014, p. 38). Doing more with less is an unbelievably hard task, but one superintendents have been asked to do regularly in education over the past decade.

Crisis management in the educational setting can come from a broad range of factors. These could be from financial, natural disasters or violence (Ganney, 2009). Lack of financial funding has been in the top three of reasons behind crisis in public schools since 1985 (Ganney). Crisis attributed to finances is a problem that has been plagued schools for a long time, and it is unlikely to go away. School districts and superintendents need to plan for crises, including financial ones, taking into consideration specific problems, opportunities during crisis, leadership style of the superintendent and

the school, and community climate and culture (Ganney). It is key that superintendents realize that communication is vital. Exchange of ideas and dialogue are a nonnegotiable part of the job and needs to occur regularly both to and from key pre-identified community leaders (Ganney). Ganney (2009) suggested four steps for superintendents as they prepare to deal with crisis. First they should evaluate their current public relations. Second, they should take stock of the culture of the district in relations to communication. Third, superintendents should examine how regional media in their area is and has affected their school to plan for the future. Last, superintendents should establish a committee from outside the school to help advise them in times of crisis (Ganney).

In crisis leaders can be attributed as having charisma if certain situational factors align (Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). Charismatic leaders are those that do not accept “business as usual” and are willing to lead with change at the forefront of their message. Halverson et al. (2004) noted that there are eight behaviors that lead others to perceive you as a charismatic leader: leading radical change, breaking the model of what is generally accepted, realistic about the constraints affecting change, understanding and sensitivity to their followers needs and desires, lays out a vision of an ideal situation, articulate, puts their own reputation at risk and unconventional in behavior. While researchers have differing opinions on what makes up charismatic leadership, it is generally accepted that crisis is the where leaders get labeled charismatic. Halverson et al. (2004) stated, “crisis provides charismatic leaders with the opportunity to display charismatic behaviors” (p. 498). Halverson et al. found that levels of stress in crisis situations did not produce a linear model where charismatic leaders were able to perform better. They found that when stress levels were at their highest point, charismatic leaders

were rated as showing their lowest performance (Halverson et al.). Halverson et al. also pointed to research about the attribution of having charisma and wrote, “The mere existence of a crisis causes followers to attribute greater levels of charisma to their leaders regardless of leader behavior” (p. 509). In summing up this research it may not be the best approach in crisis to use attributes of charismatic leadership and may be detrimental to success in especially stressful situations. In the case of a school superintendent it is likely that they will be attributed as being charismatic after managing a stressful financial situation, but they may not display the traits of a radical charismatic leader in their management and decision making process.

In crisis situations, many times the leader is only able to make changes that can be “stomached” by the collective culture of the organization. Probert and James (2011) proposed that in crisis, “organizations need to focus on the unconscious and collective assumptions about leadership” (p. 138). In doing this leaders are able to change leadership practices to reflect the new challenge. The old leadership practices have likely been the reason for the crisis, even though they are rooted in sound practice and judgment (Probert & James, 2011). Probert and James (2011) proposed that leadership is really a concept that is very different to individuals in the organization, and it is important that leaders have a realistic idea of what the organization views the leadership as being and changing this perception in the face of crisis to represent the needed changes to avert the crisis (Probert & James). It is theorized that the addition of crisis through the addition of a time of anxiety may be the way that leaders are able to change the way leadership is thought of by the organization (Probert & James). They argue that if the organizations view of leadership is not changed the initiatives started by a leader in crisis will be short

lived, as it will not be sustainable because of the existing culture (Probert & James). In school situations it is doubtful if change brought on as a result of budget crisis will be successful if the stakeholders viewed it through the lens of radical and poor leadership.

While schools have historically functioned as insulated entities, it is important that superintendents realize that regional, national, and global events and economies have impacts on their leadership in crisis. Ivananescu (2011) pointed out that recent global uncertainty and crisis creates an environment of sustained budgetary related crisis where most leaders are unaware of the challenge and leadership through crisis should be changed. In this first phase of a crisis a leader buys time, and in the second phase leaders in today's economic reality need to build new systems to take advantage of new possibilities (Ivananescu). The problem facing leaders today who are in a budget crisis is that many leaders will act incorrectly. They will try to resolve the issues with short-term fixes because they are in uncharted territory (Ivananescu). In today's global economy leadership in crisis is more of an art and more specifically getting an organization to adapt to change (Ivananescu). The hallmarks of leaders who are successful in an interconnected global economy in managing crisis is to depersonalize conflict, as it will occur as you look for creative solutions, and distribute leadership and responsibility for coming up with alternative and creative solutions (Ivananescu). It has become apparent that using old models of top-down and bureaucratic leadership are destined to fail, as they cannot change quickly and will recycle stagnant ideas (Ivananescu, 2011). In application to the position of a school superintendent in Michigan, it would be short sighted to not recognize that events in the national economy, Flint and, with Detroit Public Schools will

have impact on their school budgets until they are resolved even though these places are far away.

The first important takeaway in summing up leadership in crisis is leaders often over step their abilities to make changes in crisis situations by ignoring opposing ideas and gives critics a chance to undermine them (Bonin et al., 2010). Change does need to happen in many places in education, but it should not be pushed through disguised as a cost saving measure. Second, in crisis we need to be aware of emotions that we project as they will affect the mood and emotions of the students, staff and parents (Meisler et al., 2013). It is especially important in times of high stress to be mindful of what we project to others. The third key to apply to superintendents is that after a crisis you will need to actively regain trust as a superintendent managing a budget shortfall and making cuts, and disenfranchising one or more of the stakeholder groups (Wooten & James, 2008). They will need to make a concentrated effort to act in away that rebuilds relationships. When a superintendent realizes that the district is facing a budget deficit making cuts early can help bring stability and future success (Starrett et al., 2014). This is where it is important to be decisive in the face of pressure and anxiety. Any cuts will be unpopular, but they are needed.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

INTRODUCTION

The methods section in the case study of exploring what leadership traits are needed in crisis encompassed an explanation of the how the participants were selected. The researcher noted his role as an instrument in qualitative investigation and bias. Triangulation is discussed to give the reader an idea of what data was used and methods applied to increase validity. The three data sources examined for triangulation were interview transcripts, interview memos and primary sources. The coding process is also discussed, detailing how open, axial and selective coding was applied to the data. The section is ended with an explanation of the questions and interview procedures are discussed to give the reader background on how qualitative data was gathered.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The case study methodology allowed the researcher to examine a complicated situation in its natural settings through qualitative research (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Through case studies and its in-depth look into a narrative story researchers are able to gain a specific insight into complex situations (Creswell et al., 2003). Baxter and Jack (2008) stated of case studies, “This approach has the potential to deal with simple through complex situations...to answer how and why questions” (p. 556). In the situation studied, where so many factors converge on a new leader, researchers are able to look at how leadership changed the systems of the school. Using the case study format allows the researcher to look at the story and gain key insight. The case study process also allows researchers to get data from many sources using numerous strategies to gain understanding that upholds data trustworthiness (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Having interviewed a diverse group of educators, including the primary leader in this

case; the researcher hoped to gain a true understanding of what occurred. The case study process also helped provide understanding of the ethical reasons choices that are made and helps future leaders form a leadership moral compass (Smith, 2010). Using case study for professional learning to improve practice as an educator connected real-world application and theory in meaningful ways that supports the development of experience and an open-minded ethical lens through which to view situations (Smith, 2010). It is likely that ethical practice will be woven into the understanding of the decisions made by the superintendent.

PARTICIPANTS

The case study took place through interviews and investigation of various data sources in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The group consisted of former and current staff and board members from Midwest Area Public Schools. Eight people were interviewed. All were in key positions during the 2012 – 2013 school year to give their perspectives on the leadership in the district. They were: the superintendent’s secretary, the co-union presidents (who were a high school teacher and elementary school teacher), the middle school principal, the elementary principal, the interim-superintendent, and the board of education vice president and secretary. The names that follow are pseudonyms.

The following is a brief synopsis of the characteristics of each participant and their unique perspective that was known by the researcher. Randy North was the interim superintendent who took over for another superintendent days after school started in September of 2012. He is the principle focus of this case study. Shawna Smith is a lifelong resident of Midwest and served as the board of education vice-president during

the time studied. Marge Nowack is known to Midwest residents as one of the strongest advocates for Midwest Schools, having served on the school board for over thirty years and is the only president the Midwest Schools Athletic Booster Club has ever known. Joan Hughs was the superintendent's executive secretary at this time and had great insight into what happened in the district. She also served in the same role for sixteen years and had worked with five different superintendents. Brenda Furmon served as a fourth-grade teacher and teacher's union co-president during this time. She resigned from her position due to conflicts of interest when Mr. North took over as superintendent as she is his daughter. Her insight is from both the inner workings of administration in personal discussions with her father and the teachers. Jamie Fornier served as the other union co-president during this time and continues to be employed at Midwest Area Public Schools and teaches high school English. She remains a leader among her peers in union matters. Patty Thomas acted as Barnes elementary principal during this time period. She served Midwest Area Public Schools for many years as an administrator and teacher. The building she was charged with also contained the superintendent's office and was frequented by many board members. Her building also had a reputation for strong and vocal union leaders as teachers. Mark Cashman was the middle school principal during the time studied. He is a beloved member of the community and spoken highly of by those in the community. He also took over for Mr. North as an interim superintendent and was mentored by Mr. North. In June of this past year he retired from Midwest Area Public Schools.

We completed most interviews in person, and two interviews were completed over the telephone due to distance and time constraints. All interviews were recorded

and information and further clarification was obtained through the use of email for follow-up questioning. Participants were asked to engage in half hour interviews and some follow-up interviews. Board reports, meeting minutes, and budgets from June 2012 through July 2013 were also analyzed to gain a better perspective of the many facets involved. Board reports obtained included the agendas and minutes that were on file in the Midwest Area Public Schools district office. The meeting minutes also contained adjunct committee minutes. The budgets contained line items containing district expenditures proposed and these were also obtained from the Midwest district.

RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT

Due to the nature of qualitative research, the researcher became an instrument, helping make sense of interviews and recording observations during interviews. This along with primary source documents and the responses of educators through interviews helped get a full view of the events and implications of decisions made. Due to the researcher being so integral in the creation of conclusions, the researcher admits a lack of experience interviewing, and also recognize the strength of the researcher gained by observing in classrooms as a principal for the past ten years to gain quantitative and qualitative data. Data collected through the researchers observation can deliver important research data which can help deepen understanding of data collected through interviews and primary sources (Xu & Storr, 2012).

TRIANGULATION

The researcher used triangulation to help validate conclusions by corroborating evidence from three different sources (Creswell, 2002). Triangulation helped draw on the strengths of different types of data, which helped counterbalance the weakness of the

others (Creswell). The first data sources were interviews, recorded and transcribed. The second were observations recorded through the memo process right after the interview, with attention paid to body language, tone of voice, environment and other cues. The last data source included primary sources from Midwest Area Public Schools and contained fourteen months of board of education meeting agendas and minutes, budgets and adjunct committee minutes. Through the triangulation process the researcher gained reliable insights and conclusions.

ETHICAL BIAS

It is important to mention at the outset of this research that the researcher noticed his bias in this study. The researcher was the principal at Midwest High School during this time period studied. The stress caused by a budget deficit, replaced superintendent and non-existent teacher contract made a difficult position much harder. Midwest High School struggled with low test scores, poor staff morale, and the effects from a community drug problem. The researcher had and still has a favorable view of Mr. North and wanted to study this point in time and leadership because he had great respect for him and his work during this period. The researcher worked diligently to keep bias from being reflected in conclusions. The sampling of board members, teachers, staff, and administrators to interview were purposely picked so that those sampled would have a positive and less positive view of his tenure and leadership. The goal was to get accurate and unbiased conclusions to the research question to find out what this superintendent did in the face of taking over a school in a budget crisis.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data were analyzed iteratively throughout the case study process as it was being collected. Observation data from interviews were analyzed through the use of memos. The use of memos allowed the researcher to become totally immersed in the world and lives of the subjects being studied, enhancing the quality in qualitative inquiry (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). The researcher focused on tone, feeling, body language, facial expression, and environment. All interviews were transcribed and the researcher read through the interviews and became immersed in the information before beginning to sort the raw data into themes. In the process of open coding, the researcher let the data naturally guide itself into themes and categories. Because the case study is full of unknown events, attitudes and decisions, the researcher avoided preconceived notions and categories (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). After reading the transcripts, the researcher worked to condense the interviews to five to seven categories (Creswell, 2002).

The next stage involved axial coding. In this process the researcher took open coding themes and put them together in new ways by making links between categories. The researcher recognized that much of the open coding process was predetermined by the structuring of the categories into themes with participants. This connection of data into central themes allowed the researcher to make connections between the time and place of the events and the conditions that lead to events (Kendall, 1999). During this stage the researcher tried to gain understanding on the meaning of the data. The researcher worked to develop two to three themes under which the data is coded.

The last phase of the coding process was selective coding. In the selective coding phase the researcher looked to condense themes to an overarching theory to give meaning

and relevance to the research. This permitted the researcher to select the central theme while systematically linking it to other categories, and giving meaning to the data (Bowen, 2008).

When the coding process was completed, the researcher took the information from memos, interviews, and primary sources to write a narrative of the events. The overarching theme from the selective coding was evident in the narrative and help the reader to understand the events through the lens of the overarching theory. After its completion, the narrative was referred for member checks to gain validation and check for accuracy (Creswell, 2002). Validation was an imperative step in ensuring accuracy and removing researcher bias. Upon receipt of validation from participating member, the data were discussed and conclusions were drawn. Validation was received from two members, Mr. North and Mr. Cashman. It was imperative to receive a stamp of approval from Mr. North as he is the principle person being studied. To receive validation, members were sent the narrative to read and give feedback both shared that the story was accurate.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below is a copy of the questions, which were developed to focus the results through the lens of Schumpeter (1942) who explained that in a stressful financial period leadership and reform involves creative destruction where old structures must be destroyed before new ones can be implemented. The researcher wanted to delve into what structures existed and what new ones were created as a result of the crisis. Participants were sent the demographic information below to be filled out prior to the interviews by email, and included name, years of experience in education, years of

service at Midwest Area Public Schools, and position and areas of service at Midwest Area Public Schools (MAPS) during the 2012-2013 school year. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order.

- How would you describe the communication process at MAPS in 2012 before Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the communication process at MAPS in 2012 - 2013 after Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the budget process at MAPS in 2012 before Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the budget process at MAPS in 2012 - 2013 after Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the negotiations process at MAPS in 2012 before Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the negotiations process at MAPS in 2012 - 2013 after Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the staff and community relations' process at MAPS in 2012 before Mr. North arrived?
- How would you describe the staff and community relations' process at MAPS in 2012 – 2013 after Mr. North arrived?
- What events or circumstances do you remember that Mr. North did or said when he took over as the interim superintendent?
- How would you describe Mr. North's leadership style during this time period?

- After Mr. North served eight months as interim superintendent, what changed at MAPS?

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The results section in the case study of leadership under duress began with a narrative of the events of an interim superintendent's leadership through crisis. Themes were then developed through open, axial and selective coding. These themes included honesty, competence, trust, and consistency of message. In developing an overarching theme for the research, authentic leadership was explored.

NARRATIVE

Midwest sits located in the southern coast of Michigan's Upper Peninsula on the shores of Lake Michigan. It has been changing in demographics from a blue-collar community with paper mills and manufacturing, to relying on tourism and attracting a demographic at the retirement age. Recent government contracts in a neighboring town had brought hope for growth and the return of industry, although the limited years of contract bring itinerant skilled workers and not the families that would boost enrollment. Midwest Area Public Schools had realized significant declining enrollment due to diminishing birth rate and a changing population. To help illustrate the change, Midwest High School served close to 1000 students in the early and mid-1990's and by the 2012-2013 school year had about half the number of students at 530. This loss of students created a need for high competency and vision in the leadership of the superintendent. The loss of students over this time created the need in the district to close buildings, reduce staff and restructure programs. During this time period the district had instability at the position of superintendent. In the late 1990's a superintendent passed away unexpectedly and the next superintendent was bought out of her contract due to poor relationships with the school board. An interim superintendent Mr. Stephan Patchan

bridged the gap and Mr. Daniel Boxer filled the superintendent position permanently in 2007. He did not have experience as a superintendent, but brought a successful record as a high school principal in Lansing Michigan. During his time the fund balance or school savings account continued to decline, but the consistency of a business manager with history in the district helped give stability to the creation of the budget and managing of finances. The business manager when Mr. Boxer had arrived had been working in the Midwest Area Public Schools finance office for twenty years and helped track spending and prepare and explain budgets.

The 2011 – 2012 school year started and ended in controversy. The year started with outsourcing of the business office staff to the Midwest Intermediate School District's finance department. This included eliminating a business manager and three administrative assistants. Outsourcing did save money, but many in the community and school district saw this as an unpopular move. Having a business and financial services handled outside the district proved cumbersome and Midwest Area Public Schools decided to bring back financial services to the district at the end of the year. A new business manager was hired to help with creating and monitoring the budget. He had experience from working with school budgets in Illinois. He struggled to understand school funding in Michigan and about a month into accepting the position was diagnosed with brain cancer.

Due to recently enacted legislation, 2011 was the first year of the new teacher tenure and evaluation laws in Michigan and due to declining enrollment Midwest Area Public Schools was reducing staff and planned on following the provisions set forth in this law. The latest laws allowed districts to make reductions based on teacher

effectiveness ratings and not on seniority. At the July regular board of education meeting 11 teachers were reduced to less than full time or laid off. Thirty-four community members and teachers made public comment, all expressing outrage on behalf of the teachers and pointing fingers at the school board and superintendent for their negligence with budgeting and planning marked the meeting. Many teachers spoke passionately about the lack of reliability of teacher effectiveness ratings used to decide reductions in staff. Compounding staff cuts, the teachers were finishing their fourth year with an expired teachers' contract, which furthered the mistrust and animosity between the teachers union and administration.

It was starting to become apparent that the district was in crisis heading for greater turbulence. With the budget being housed at the intermediate school district and now moving back to the district office it was still unclear what money was really spent and how much was remaining. This proved especially problematic as Mr. Boxer and the new business manager needed to build a budget for the upcoming school year. The school board and superintendent relations were beginning to breakdown and trust was being lost. At a special board meeting at the end of July, Mr. Boxer submitted his resignation effective December 31, 2012. The school board also lost a board member in the midst of the turmoil and Mr. Randy North filled the new board member seat at the same meeting. Mr. North was a former superintendent at Midwest Area Public Schools from 1988 to 1999 and experienced great trust and approval from community and staff.

The 2012-2013 school year started and students returned on September 3, 2012. The school board had lost faith in the former leadership and still had trepidation about the upcoming audit and the adopted budget. On September 4, 2012 the school board held a

special board meeting and approved a settlement agreement to end his tenure before December 31, 2012 with Mr. Boxer and relieved him of his duties immediately. At the same board meeting Mr. North resigned as a member of the school board and was voted in as interim superintendent effective immediately. Board members recalled him saying he was willing to take over temporarily because he wanted the kids of Midwest to be kept at heart in the midst of everything going on.

Mr. North taking over as interim superintendent was the best news to come from Midwest Area Schools in several years in the eyes of staff and the community. Mr. North's first action was to meet with administrators. Administrators recalled that the tone of the meeting was much different from past meetings. Expectations were clear on what he expected from principals. He expected them to run their buildings efficiently and building principals were empowered to be professionals. Mr. North stated he trusted them to run their buildings without his intervention. He wanted to be kept in the loop of things going on and was willing to help, but made it clear he did not want to micromanage the buildings. He was clear that he could not change the past but would be here to help principals stabilize the district. Administrators recall the clarity and confidence of his message in an uncertain time.

The next day Mr. North met with district staff in the high school lecture hall. All district staff were invited and most attended. Mr. North started by telling staff that he was here and really didn't want to be. He was clear that the budget was a mess and he was unsure how bad it really was. Mr. North also recognized that staff relations were poor and pledged to sit down at anytime with anyone at talk. Most new leaders use the words "open door policy" but many in attendance that day felt it was true. Some of the

most contentious teachers' union leaders offered support for Mr. North and referenced his character from his previous service in the district. A younger teacher put Mr. North on the spot with a comment about his extreme displeasure with the board and lack of a contract going on the fifth year. Mr. North's response was, "I understand where you're coming from. You didn't create this mess and neither did I, but we will all get through this together." This meeting was marked by empathy, confidence, and openness. Mr. North's words created a great sense of hope in the district.

While it appeared that the school district was beginning to heal and things were getting better, the crisis in the district was about to reach its pinnacle. At the October regular board of education meeting the board received the results of its annual financial audit. The uncertainty and lack of attention to the financials became reality. Mr. North recalled the auditor told him, "You know what, we hate to tell you this but last year's budget that the board approved, they approved an \$800,000 deficit budget, which basically was going to wipe out your entire fund balance. Well it not only wiped out your fund balance, but it actually put you in the hole slightly. Okay, so they ended up spending like \$900,000 more than they had."

At that point the district was \$100,000 in deficit. Mr. North was already several months into analyzing the past years budget and the new budget approved in June 2012 that was put together by the previous superintendent and business manager. He knew that the new budget was just a slightly increased version of the last budget, meaning if executed and not corrected, the district would be about \$1,000,000 in deficit. At this point his first step came in sitting down the administrators, school board and staff and letting them know the gravity of the situation. His second step was to sit down and go

through every line item of the budget, looking at every salary and benefit to understand what the district was accountable to pay and what needed to be cut. It became apparent that the problem could not be fixed with an amended budget, but would require filing a deficit elimination plan with the state.

At the December regular board of education meeting one staff member was laid off. At the January meeting a deficit elimination plan was approved by the board and filed with the State of Michigan with the budget amended to reflect reductions in spending. Mr. North recalls of this time, “Well I think what I did, at first, I put together a budget that was realistic and it’s easy to do because most of it is based on salary and health insurance; I mean 80 % of it. So you got 80 % of your budget, which is basically adding, subtracting and, multiplying. You don’t have to be a genius to figure that out... I just had to say we have to stop spending.” At the February board meeting the business manager position was eliminated. Mr. North’s secretary recalls of him laying out the plan and budget, “He had meetings upon meetings. He met with teachers. He met with administrators. He met with our business office. I mean whether you like it or not, everything comes through our office and so you have to put communication there and you have to have that open door policy. Which most of them do, but Randy (Mr. North) actually lived it.” She goes on to tell of how he diligently kept tabs on the budget, “He had a number and he would say anything over that number, he wanted to know about it. So nothing went through without his eyes seeing it.”

By March of 2013 the budget began to come under control and the district had a plan moving forward. The issue of the teachers working without a contract for over four years still remained. Mr. North helped in this process as he was able to give a realistic

target for the school board to negotiate, and he knew what the numbers of the budget were and what implications contract changes would have on the budget. The board employed an outside negotiator to come to meet with the teacher's union leadership committee to handle negotiations and was the direct communicator on behalf of the school board. The relationship between the negotiator and the teachers union was extremely hostile. Few in the district look back on the use of an outsider coming in to negotiate the contract as a good move. Mr. North recalled of this time, "The teachers despised the board negotiator and so, nothing was getting done. It just was dead in the water, before it ever got started." Mr. North's daughter was a 4th grade teacher in the district at this time and co-union president. She resigned her position with the union when Mr. North took over as interim superintendent. She shared, "He (Mr. North) says, to this day, that if the board would have given him the same leverage they gave the current superintendent (the ability to negotiate on behalf of the board) he could have settled that contract, no problem." This process went on to the next year and as Mr. North proposed to the school board before he left, the board imposed a contract that included a 5 % pay cut, which many in union leadership still feel mars Mr. North's short tenure. A former teacher's union leader states, "We had five years to balance the budget and by them giving us the five percent pay cut, they balanced it in a year and a half. And people were resentful and we're still paying for that. People have been really resentful about that because they didn't have to. They were on a good track, that if they had kept on their plan for five years, people wouldn't have been hurt financially the way we were, but they did it anyway." The board members saw the 5% cut differently. They felt the

quick elimination of the deficit allowed the district to move forward in a positive direction and laid the groundwork for stability in all areas of the district.

Another interim superintendent replaced Mr. North in April of 2013. North served about eight months and led Midwest Area Public Schools out of crisis to a less turbulent place. All stakeholders interviewed agreed that he left the district in a better place than it started. While his decisions on imposing a pay cut, eliminating staff, and freezing spending were popular he started being “dealt a bad hand”. He stayed on and mentored the next interim superintendent formally and informally for the next year. Mr. North lives in California at this time.

THEMES

During the open coding process several categories emerged. Much information was gained as participants shared their stories and memories intertwined in answering the questions. Special attention was paid to stay focused on the research question: What superintendent leadership traits and actions were used in this crisis? The researcher also kept looking at the data through the theoretical lens of creative destruction and the turbulence theory to zero in on what systems were created and which were destroyed and looking at events to determine the stress levels they induced. Questions were structured in a way to look at communication, budgeting, contract negotiations, community relations, particular actions and leadership style. All seven of these areas had a hand in creating the budget crisis and severe turbulence.

In the area of communication, for most participants the topics that emerged were honesty and truthful expectations. The outgoing superintendent, while well-liked and a good person, was a first-time superintendent and lacked the background knowledge

needed to develop and understand budgets. Many participants used the language to back up their views of poor communication and bad information as the previous superintendent was “in over his head.” It was also the feeling of many of those interviewed that the previous district leader many times did not pass along accurately the dire situation the district was in. Mr. North was perceived as having been able to give an accurate picture of what was occurring and had the competence to know that the information regarding the budget was accurate. The school board members interviewed stated that they trusted what he said even with bad news. Many participants used the phrase, “he told it like it is.”

Questions regarding teacher contract negotiations, budgeting, and the budget process produced the category of competency. This more than any other category came through to the researcher as a main reason that Mr. North was successful in helping deal with crisis. While it was the perception of all the participants that lack of competency by the previous superintendent, especially relating to the budget and finances was what caused the crisis. Mr. North was attributed with the knowledge of the budget and ability to analyze financial data were what averted further crisis and turbulence. Participants acknowledged that he knew where the problems were in the budget. Those that worked closest with him, board members and the executive secretary, all shared that he was in the budget daily. Participants shared that Mr. North had knowledge of how purchases and personal decisions affected the budget. His secretary shared that purchases or outgoing payments over a minimal amount had to pass his scrutiny.

In analyzing data regarding staff and community relations the category of trust was brought to the forefront by those interviewed. The trust in Mr. North came from two

areas. First, Mr. North had history. He was a successful superintendent in Midwest for eleven years (1988 – 1999) prior to taking over as the interim superintendent in 2012. He had been able to pass a millage, build new buildings, balance budgets and grow the fund balance and when he departed for the same position at a larger district in Lower Michigan. He left a record of fiscal responsibility, strong leadership and collaboration with stakeholders. The second part of trust is from his consistency in messaging during this particular time. He had the same message to the school board, teachers' union and administrators. Mr. North shared that he had to bring forward quite a bit of bad news about salaries and the budget. He stated that most of the responses from stakeholders were, "We don't like it, but we know you're right." The combination of the previously mentioned honesty and competency also added to the trust from those Mr. North was charged with leading.

In the area of leadership style and dissecting participant's answers, it was noted that Mr. North solicited feedback, listened and compromised with stakeholders. As was mentioned throughout this paper, the researcher was a building principal in Midwest during the time studied and expected to hear stories of decisiveness and directive leadership, as this was his perspective as a young principal watching this unfold at the district level. Instead the idea of collaboration and stories of empowering stakeholders to have a level of voice in decisions came to the forefront. Mr. North shared leadership and solicited feedback. His goal was to create a team. Shared power and decision-making came through with board members, administrators and union leaders. He gave strong direction, and as mentioned earlier, was competent. He would share his idea and invited discussion, input and ultimately compromised. His leadership was not top-down

and he did not micromanage. Collaboration with stakeholders was critical in crisis. Mr. North had vision of what needed to be done and then invited others to contribute, giving stakeholders some control and buy-in during an uncertain and tumultuous time period.

In the next phase of axial coding the themes of competence and honesty came through as major themes in all areas of what had helped create the crisis and when applied in the positive sense by Mr. North. In reflecting on the leadership of Mr. North, axial coding results, and overarching themes, a concept that tied the entire body of research together in the selective coding process is authentic leadership. Evans (2000) wrote that authentic leaders as have integrity and a practical competence he calls savvy. While it is difficult to quantify all that Mr. North did in taking over a school district in crisis, this idea of being honest and genuine while having the wisdom to solve problems fits perfectly with what he did (Evans, 2000). These traits seem especially suited for times of crisis, anxiety and uncertainty.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

In this section the researcher discussed specific recommendations for superintendents drawn from the analysis of Mr. North's leadership during crisis. These included gathering feedback from stakeholders, being decisive, savvy and honesty. Authentic leadership is applied in the conclusions sections. This section is finished by reflecting on the limitations of the researcher and future areas of research relating to this case study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

In analyzing what superintendent leadership traits and actions are needed in crisis, new and practicing superintendents can gain a great deal of insight by examining case studies and real-world examples. New or beginning superintendents have some important lessons that can be learned from Mr. North as he managed a school district in financial crisis. It is important to realize that the positive traits and actions from this example may not apply in every situation and Mr. North's wisdom and experience gave him insight into his correct course of action. Mr. North exhibited four qualities in leading through crisis that helped him bring stability in crisis: sharing leadership, being decisive, savvy and honesty.

Superintendents need to use collaboration to build consensus and compromise during financial crisis. Shared leadership and soliciting feedback on decision-making were not what is expected to find during crisis. Directive leadership is often thought essential during crisis. By including stakeholder groups and especially compromising with the school board on specific budget cuts, a superintendent is able to gauge what the stakeholders can handle and not overstep opportunities for change created by crisis

(Probert & James, 2011). A board member stated that during Mr. North's time, "He was respectful of the board, and if there was something that they really felt strongly about, he might say, 'I don't necessarily agree with this, but if this is something you wanted to do.' We were able to work things through and maybe come to a compromise. I didn't find him directive at all." By building consensus and giving stakeholders a voice you do not disenfranchise groups within the district, even though the cuts are hard (Bonin et al., 2010). A leader in crisis must leave past practices and preconceived notions behind and create a climate and process where the creativity and wisdom of the organization can be leveraged (Lane & Down, 2010).

By showing decisiveness in decision-making after they are worked out with the school board, teachers, and administrators collaboratively, a superintendent is able to maintain integrity and advance the mission of the district out of crisis. It was the researcher's sense many of the issues that led to the financial crisis were created due to the lack of ability to execute plans and follow through on decisions made. By having the confidence to follow through on knowledge of the budget and make cuts early, a superintendent is able to help the district come out crisis faster (Starrett et al., 2014). A principal during this time stated of Mr. North, "When he made a decision, he thought of it first, but he made decision he did not back track. When he made a decision, he did all the pre-thinking before and it stayed. That decision stayed." In a budget crisis it is likely that solutions will involve cutting programs or positions and if Mr. North would have waffled or backtracked on his decisions, he would have lost credibility with stakeholders (Wooten & James, 2008).

In describing authentic leadership, Evans (2000) called savvy, “a practical, problem-solving wisdom that enables leaders to make things happen” (p. 141). Superintendents need a competence in budgeting and finances that allow them to have great insight into diagnosing the problems (Wooten & James, 2008). By being able to clearly see where changes are needed, a district is able to focus resources and time to the real issues. A building principal stated, “That’s the thing that sticks in my mind... telling everybody exactly how much money we had and which direction we were going from there.” Mr. North knew where to go because he recognized the problems. The competence to diagnosis the problem and develop the solution came with great experience and savvy. A teacher and union president shared, “we had more confidence that he knew how to manage the finances of the school. We felt like he was doing everything he could to get things in order and I believe he did.”

Honesty is a key factor in maintaining trust needed to lead (Evans, 2000). Superintendents need to be honest in what they say. Sugar coating the message to soften the blow to stakeholders is dishonest and may undermine trust. Several of the stakeholders used the phrase to describe Mr. North’s communication, “he told to like it was.” Honesty gave stakeholders the confidence to trust what Mr. North told them. Mr. North gave the same message to all stakeholders, which spoke again to his honesty in the consistency of messages. He was especially clear with problems. Effective leaders in crisis are able to sell the importance of the issue facing the organization (Wooten & James, 2008). With those involved in the school district understanding the gravity of the situation, Mr. North was able to gain trust and legitimacy to make changes and help calm the storm of financial crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

In analyzing Mr. North's actions in leadership during financial crisis the researcher gained insight into the leadership practice of authentic leadership. He showed high degree of integrity and competency (Evans, 2000). He knew what to do and how to include people to get shared leadership and acceptance for what needed to be done. Wisdom in dealing with both people and the process of budgeting and analyzing financials gave him the ability to make changes. It cannot be overlooked that his experience had a great deal to do with this. Mr. North had 38 years of experience in public education with 22 years of experience as a superintendent. By showing his true and authentic self, Mr. North promoted a transparent, trusting environment that made it possible for others to give input as they looked to find solutions (Novicevic, Harvey, Ronald, & Brown-Radford, 2006). Mr. North stated of his mentor, "So I think I had a very good role model, as far as what a superintendent should be like. I always felt that you had to be totally upright and totally forthright in dealing with whoever. You always had to tell it like it is, but you had to do it in a compassionate way and you had to be as honest and truthful as you possibly could at all times." Mr. North had a role model who helped him see integrity in action, which may be the best way for superintendents to gain authentic leadership traits (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005). It is further recommended that leaders find mentors with integrity to help provide examples and guidance.

More research, particularly using case studies, is needed to help new or beginning superintendent's develop real world application of leadership in particular situations. By analyzing situations, new leaders can get mentoring from departing, successful,

practicing superintendents with authentic leadership traits to drive change. Evans (2000) stated, “School leaders seeking change need to begin by thinking of what will inspire trust among their constituents. The answer is direct: we admire leaders who are honest, fair, competent, and forward-looking” (p. 136).

LIMITATIONS

Throughout this process the researcher gained great examples of moral and ethical decision-making, competence, hard work and have grown in admiration for Mr. North’s work. He also recognized his limitations and bias throughout this process. Mr. North was an excellent leader and nearly all feedback from participants was positive and questions about his management were noted in the narrative. The researcher acknowledged the need to get more teacher participants and community members to validate these results. Time and resource constraints played into the selectiveness of participants for this case study.

It is also recognized that the researcher came into this research with a favorable view of Mr. North and his work. Throughout the case study methodology a concerted effort was made to remove bias and triangulate the data. The sources used were the participant’s stories, memos and primary sources to come to conclusions. While two participants gave support for the narrative written, having more participants participate in validation would have added to the level of certainty of conclusions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

After completing the case study of Mr. North and leadership under duress the researcher still does not know the lasting implications of these leadership strategies. It was noted by the participants in the study that there continues to be cycles of turbulence

at Midwest Area Public Schools. They continue to struggle with financial, staff and public perception issues. Leadership comes from many areas in a school district formally and informally. It is recommended that research be done on the school board and teachers' union leadership and their effect on the cycle of crisis that appears to be reemerging. It is further recommended that study be done on what external factors can cause continued bouts of crisis. These could include state funding, changing demographics and social pressures.

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