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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ANALYZING THE CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS, AND PRACTICES OF SUPERINTENDENT-PRINCIPALS IN RURAL UPPER PENINSULA OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ANALYZING THE CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS, AND
PRACTICES OF SUPERINTENDENT-PRINCIPALS IN RURAL UPPER PENINSULA OF
MICHIGAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

By

Alan R. Tulppo

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ANALYZING THE CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS, AND PRACTICES OF SUPERINTENDENT-PRINCIPALS IN RURAL UPPER PENINSULA OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

This thesis by Alan R. Tulppo is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of Education and by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research.

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ANALYZING THE CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS, AND PRACTICES OF SUPERINTENDENT-PRINCIPALS IN RURAL UPPER PENINSULA OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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The purpose of this study was to analyze and provide insight into the complexities of the dual role superintendent-principal position from individuals currently serving in this position. The study focused on the challenges and conflicts individuals who serve in this dual role face and highlighted practices that have made them successful in their position. This study also sought to provide insight into the reasons why local school boards decide to employ a dual role superintendent-principal rather than having separate positions and the expectations of boards of education for individuals serving in the dual role.

As I conducted my research, numerous themes emerged related to the challenges and successful practices of superintendent-principals. Some of the themes common among participants in the study include the importance of relationships in the school community. The challenge of role ambiguity was also consistent among the individuals participating in the study. The overall complexity of the dual administrative role and the lack of time to dedicate to any one aspect of the position was a frustration shared by each participant of my study. These themes will be further presented and analyzed throughout this thesis.

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2022

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the administrators and staff who are committed to the education of students in rural schools and communities across our state. Your passion, dedication, and commitment are inspiring.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The thesis follows the format prescribed by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Seventh Edition)* and the Department of Education, Leadership, and Public Service.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A Case Study Analyzing the Challenges, Conflicts, and Practices of Superintendent-Principals in Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts

Combined or dual administrative positions, such as superintendent-principal are not a new school leadership trend. Rural school districts have been utilizing combined positions for decades in different regions of the country. The dual role of superintendent-principal is becoming more common throughout rural Michigan, particularly across the Upper Peninsula. There are sixty-one school districts in the Upper Peninsula and thirty districts (49%) employ a superintendent-principal (Center for Educational Performance and Information [CEPI], 2021). Individuals who are hired to serve as dual-role administrators are responsible for completing the work of both the superintendent and the building principal. The expectations for both positions are vastly different and the result may be a situation that is impossible to be successfully filled by one individual. While the districts using dual administrative positions tend to be rural, the same administrative tasks and reporting done by larger, more urban districts, must also be completed by rural districts. Individuals serving in the superintendent-principal role are responsible for reporting, management functions, school board, and community relations (Canales et al., 2010). Additionally, unlike their counterparts in larger districts, superintendent-principals do not have the ability to delegate administrative duties to other members of an administrative team, as there is not an administrative division of labor.

Purpose of the Study

This research study will determine why rural school districts in Michigan continue to turn to the superintendent-principal model; the advantages and disadvantages of the position; and

perceptions of the effectiveness of the position from the point of view of individuals serving in the role, school board members, teachers, and school staff.

Theoretical Framework

Sluss et.al, (2011) defines role theory as a set of behavioral expectations attached to a position in an organized set of social relationships. The behavioral expectations specify the meaning and character of the role. The role is attached to a position (i.e. superintendent) and the role identity is how the individual (i.e. person serving as the superintendent) interprets and makes sense of that role. Role Theory as it is applied to organizational leadership is based on how leaders and followers in an organization define their roles and the roles of others, as well as how people expect them to act in their roles. Using role theory, leaders often define their own roles within an organization based on how stakeholders see the leader's role (Lorette, 2021).

According to role theory, role conflict is a possible experience for leaders within an organization. When the stakeholders have a set of expectations on the role of the leader that is different from what the leader accepts as their role, role conflict can occur. Role conflict can also occur when a leader feels they should be performing a certain role, but employees expect the leader to fill a different role.

Since this research focused on the various roles that an individual serving as a superintendent-principal must play, I applied role theory to develop a greater understanding of the challenges and conflicts that exist in the dual role of superintendent-principal. I also used role theory to address the challenge of role ambiguity and how individuals serving as superintendent-principals and their boards of education can more clearly define expectations.

Definition of Important Terms

Throughout this thesis, the following terms will be referred to as a part of the research study.

Superintendent-Principal: A dual role administrative position developed by school districts that combines the duties of the superintendent and principal into a single position.

Rural: A non-urban area with low population density.

Successful School Districts: As defined by David Kirk and Terry Jones (2004), school districts with high graduation rates, a fund balance above 5% of annual expenditures, high student performance on standardized tests, low staff turnover, a clear mission, a safe and orderly environment, and positive community relations.

Research Question

How do successful rural Michigan superintendent–principals describe their leadership roles and professional challenges, and what shared experiences are common with their counterparts in similar roles?

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Educational research about rural schools conducted over the last two decades has highlighted factors that are isolated to the leadership of rural school districts and the education these districts are able to provide to students. This review of literature examines the roles of superintendents, principals, and boards of education in providing leadership to rural school districts and will focus on the emergence of the dual administrative role of the superintendent-principal.

Education has changed substantially in the last 15 years, especially recently as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic; however, education was being shaped by the use of instructional technologies such as iPads, Chromebooks, virtual reality, and student cell phones. Additionally, schools have faced ever-increasing accountability measures and pressures to market themselves to prospective schools of choice families. School safety initiatives that have occurred as a result of tragic school shootings have placed an additional layer of security and subsequent policies and procedures on school leaders and staff (American University School of Education, 2020). The rapid change has necessitated a pivot in instructional methodologies, communication with stakeholders, and leadership of schools and school districts. The definition of what it means to have a successful school is not easy to articulate. A school can have a successful fine arts program, top-rated athletic teams, or high community satisfaction. Does that make it successful? To be sure, arts, athletics, and community support all play a role in making a school successful and contribute to the key factor in defining school success: student achievement. Leithwood and Jones (2017) identified student achievement as the best indicator of school effectiveness.

The quality of leadership of a school district and a school is a key factor in driving student achievement. The extent to which students experience success is the best indicator of the effectiveness of a superintendent and school principals. David Kirk and Terry Jones (2004) identified seven common indicators of successful schools:

- Clear school mission
- High expectations for success
- Instructional leadership
- Opportunity to learn and time on task
- A safe and orderly environment
- Positive home-school relations
- Frequent monitoring of student progress

Kirk and Jones (2004) found that effective school leaders consistently reinforce the school's mission and thereby create a shared sense of purpose and values among the instructional staff. Having common core values and a shared purpose guides all members of the instructional team and focuses energy on achieving the school's goals. The importance of establishing shared purpose, values, and trust between the instructional staff and school leaders cannot be understated. Trust is a significant factor in successful schools. Schools that have a culture of trust are likely to benefit from members of the school community willingly working together and going beyond the minimum requirements of their positions (Moran, 2013, p. 51). It takes time for leaders to develop trust through establishing a presence in their buildings and meaningful relationships with staff.

School leadership has evolved rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century due to the changing nature of schools and education. A school district no longer consists of only brick and

mortar buildings and the very nature of schools has shifted from traditional teacher-led instructional practices to involve project-based learning, blended learning, and entirely remote or virtual learning. The result is that the role of school district superintendents and building principals has changed.

The Rural School District Superintendent

The typical functions associated with the superintendency include chief executive officer, financial officer, public relations director, community liaison, visionary, politician, human resources director, and educational expert. Each of these roles involves a great deal of time and effort to do them well for the benefit of the school district. In order to perform each of these responsibilities effectively, superintendents need time and the ability to focus on the work of their position. Rural superintendents face a myriad of challenges that distinguish them from their urban counterparts in effectively performing the typical functions associated with the superintendency. In a study conducted in 2010, Mark Forner identified four major challenges rural superintendents encounter. These include (a) rural communities defined by poverty and therefore a lack of resources for schools, (b) a small or non-existent administrative team resulting in the superintendent being overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities, (c) rural school superintendents serve in a highly public role, and (d) rural culture is rooted in tradition and resistant to change (Forner, 2010). Perhaps the most significant challenge faced by a rural superintendent is the lack of financial resources available to operate a district. Inadequate finances impact the ability to hire enough staff, properly maintain district buildings, and provide a rigorous curriculum. Rural superintendents often find themselves involved in every operational decision that takes place in their district because of the absence of an administrative team to share in a division of labor (Arnold, 2000). In the smallest rural districts, a

superintendent serves in additional administrative positions such as building principal, athletic director, transportation director, and curriculum and instruction director. Each of these roles impacts the overall effectiveness of the superintendent in the primary functions of the modern superintendency, namely the roles of chief executive officer, financial officer, public relations director, community liaison, visionary, politician, human resources director, and educational expert (Plath, 2017). The superintendency is a stressful position regardless of the size of a district. Rural superintendents often find it difficult to find time to engage in renewing activities, as the position of superintendent in small communities is a very public position. Rural school superintendents have little privacy, as life in rural communities is personal and complex. Rural superintendents are usually the highest-paid and most visible members of their community and lead a life that is on public display (Arnold, 2004). A final challenge for rural superintendents is the fact the small communities tend to be resistant to change. Superintendents of small school districts are often responsible for driving educational reform efforts. Communities and in particular, parents of students in small, rural schools are not keen on major reform. Instead of major changes to curriculum or the school, Seal and Harmon (1995) found that parents would much rather have the curriculum added to instead of dramatically changed.

While there are certainly a plethora of challenges facing rural superintendents, individuals serving in these roles do experience success. Successful rural superintendents tend to focus on three common leadership priorities, according to Forner (2010). These include the belief that all students can and will achieve academic success, focusing on having a high-quality teacher in each classroom, and finally working to create resources for their districts. In addition to these priorities, Plath (2017) identified the need for transparency, constructive confrontation (taking a stand for what students and schools need and deserve), making hard choices, and

celebration of success. Both Forner (2010) and Plath (2017) found that rural superintendents must place a priority on advocacy at the regional and state level for fair funding and allocation of resources for their districts. The ability for rural superintendents to experience success hinges on the support of their boards of education and the level to which their board of education is functional. Superintendents who work with boards that understand and respect the role of the superintendent and support her or his efforts to advocate for the district are more successful, despite the numerous challenges facing them (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). Another factor contributing to the success of rural school superintendents is their willingness to collaborate with other superintendents to advocate for common rural funding and educational issues (Tobin, 2019).

The factors challenging rural superintendents create leadership positions that are difficult to cultivate success professionally and for the school and larger community. The job of a rural school district superintendent and the requirement to balance so many roles and competing priorities results in higher levels of turnover and fewer applicants seeking positions in small districts (Arnold, 2004).

Building Principals in Small Schools

The function of a building principal has changed to become more of a mid-level management role. The building principal has become much more than the building manager and disciplinarian. 21st-century principals coordinate, direct, and support the work of others by defining objectives, evaluating performance, providing resources, building a supportive climate, planning, scheduling, resolving conflicts, managing student behavior, meeting with parents, and leading school improvement initiatives (Curry & Wolf, 2017).

Every student deserves a high-quality school regardless of their zip code. Rural students deserve the same opportunities as urban students, and it takes strong school leadership to ensure that happens. A study conducted by Pierson (2014) shared that effective school principals are characterized by three qualities: (1) the ability to make improving student achievement the primary focus of the school, (2) the ability to initiate and maintain impactful reform measures in their schools, and the ability to build the capacity of school staff through buy-in and shared leadership. A study conducted by Grissom et.al, (2021), reinforces the qualities of effective principals reported by Pierson (2014). The Grissom study reported that effective principals are able to coach their teachers to use high-quality pedagogical practices by spending time in classrooms. Grissom, et.al. (2021) also found that cultivating a sense of caring for the teachers in a building is a factor that impacts the quality of the education students receive. They reported that a principal that demonstrates caring leadership is associated with increased student support and teachers' sense of collective responsibility. Effective communication and cultivating trust were skills that Grissom, et.al, (2021) also found to be key in the effectiveness of building principals. Principals that took steps to improve their communication with stakeholders and demonstrated behaviors that built trust were more successful in their leadership and their schools had greater student outcomes.

In order for building principals to experience success, they must confront multiple and complex challenges. Among the hurdles to success are increased legislated expectations, parental demands, and the ever-expanding things schools are expected to do, increasing the responsibilities that are assigned to principals. School improvement, annual reports, accountability, implementing curriculum, student safety, gender and equality issues, staff development, state, and federal testing, educator evaluation are key functions of the modern

principal (Cusick, 2003). Special Education is a challenge for many rural principals. Cusick (2003) found that principals with limited resources were frustrated with the volume of special education regulations which need to be followed. Of the principals he interviewed, many indicated that implementing and overseeing special education was overwhelming. The schools that rural school principals lead often struggle with persistent poverty, lack of resources, low participation in higher education by graduates, and disparities in student outcomes based on race (Preston, 2018).

Aside from the various regulatory, compliance, and accountability measures principals now face, Cusick (2003) also found that principals are fatigued by the rigors of their daily schedule and the lack of time to do the meaningful work of instructional leadership. Participants interviewed by Cusick reported fifteen-hour days, responsibilities at student events (athletics, music concerts, and art programs), new student management issues such as cell phones, and porn on the internet, weapons, and zero-tolerance policies. The principals participating in the Cusick study also stated that community members have become more critical of their schools and have expectations that are not realistic for building principals. The end result is that the principal has to choose between keeping the school running smoothly, spending time on instruction, or dealing with student issues (Cusick, 2003). Both Cusick (2003) and Pierson (2014) found that effective school leadership by a dedicated, skilled principal is a key element in creating and maintaining high-quality schools. Rural school principals have some of the most challenging and complex positions in education. They also have the highest turnover. Half of all new principals quit their jobs within three years (Preston, 2018). Cusick (2003) reported that the number of people willing to serve as principals is declining, and fewer

teachers, who are the typical pool of candidates for principal positions are stepping forward to assume the role of building principal.

The Superintendent-Principal Model

The two educational administrative leadership roles that are the most enduring are the district-level superintendent and the building-level principal. Each of these roles serves school districts in distinct ways. The roles most commonly performed by modern superintendents include CFO, public relations, community liaison, politician, facilities manager, human resources director, and educational expert (Curry & Wolf, 2017). The superintendent also operates in concert with the board of education, implementing policy and financial decisions made by the board (Lynn, 2019). Building principals are involved in instructional leadership, leading school improvement and reform, curriculum development, staff evaluation, student behavioral management, developing and delivering professional development, meeting with parents, and supervising extra-curricular activities (Curry & Wolf, 2017). The list of duties for superintendents and principals is not all-inclusive, though they are not similar to one another.

The Superintendent-Principal position is complex. The development of this position is not clear. Clark (2015) found that the combined administrative superintendent-principal role appears to have been created in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. The combined position of superintendent-principals places the duties of two separate and unique administrative positions on one person. The individual in this role must focus on the responsibilities associated with the district chief executive officer (superintendent) and the building level leader (principal). The complexities of this role require one individual to handle almost every leadership role in the district while attempting to provide students with the most meaningful educational experience possible. Given the challenges faced by individuals serving solely as a superintendent or

building principal, it is difficult to understand why a board of education would opt to develop such a position.

The Rationale for a Dual Administrator Model

Superintendent-Principals are most commonly found in rural school districts. These districts face declining enrollment, coupled with decreased state funding and a community desire to maintain local schools. These factors force boards of education to continually look for ways to economize on expenditures and maximize revenues. The largest portion of a school district's operational budget is personnel. Studies conducted by Lynn (2019), Clark (2015), and Rasmussen et.al, (2018) found that the primary reason for combining the two administrative positions is financial. However, Lynn (2019) also found that additional benefits such as closer connections to stakeholders, teachers, students, and a holistic perspective on PK-12 needs are also factors in some districts, though financial constraints were still the primary factor of consideration. Lynn (2019) found that as of 2017-2018, fifty-seven Michigan rural school districts employed a dual-role administrator.

Professional Leadership Challenges

The individual leadership roles of the district superintendent and building principal are challenging. Both roles become more complex when one person serves as a dual-role administrator. Curry and Wolf (2017) reported that the obligations and expectations of one individual fulfilling both roles may result in a position that is difficult to be successfully filled by one individual. The dual-role administrator must find a way to balance the duties of fiscal management and governance placed upon them by the school board, while at the same time handling the unpredictable daily schedule of being a school principal. The responsibilities and expectations of dual-role administrators are often conflicting, requiring the individual serving in

this role to prioritize one role over the other. Combining the duties and responsibilities of these leadership positions results in an administrative role with expectations and duties unmatched by any other administrative position.

Rasmussen et.al, (2018) and Lynn (2019) found that dual-role administrators reported the highest rates of stress as compared to single role administrators. They also reported that managing funding and budget were the most challenging aspects of the position. The most consistent challenge was the complexity and work overload associated with the position. Work overload was also accompanied by role ambiguity, lower compensation rates for superintendent-principals. Lynn (2019) further reported that superintendent-principals shared multiple roles and responsibilities were overwhelming and there was a lack of time to do all the tasks adequately. Time management was reported as the most common stressor. Clark (2015) further explained the frustration regarding role ambiguity shared by superintendent-principals. The position blurs the job description and results in the administrator questioning their true role. The ambiguity of the position creates conflict that makes it difficult for the superintendent-principal to perform their roles effectively. Lynn (2019) also reported that the desire of administrators to spend time on curriculum development, instructional leadership, and accomplishing board goals and policy formation was in conflict with board presidents, who wanted greater emphasis placed on staff development, student discipline, and attendance, and supervising student activities.

In a study conducted by Colby James Smart (2019), dual-role administrators shared frustration that their roles were held to the same fiscal, instructional, policy, and reporting requirements as districts with multiple administrators. Superintendent-principals are not able to delegate tasks to other administrators. Smart also reported on the very different challenges that exist for rural schools compared to suburban districts. Rural districts are more likely to have

difficulty attracting and retaining properly certified staff, resulting in districts having to navigate bureaucracy at the state level to get uncertified staff licensed. The challenges reported by Smart (2019) caused superintendent-principals to prioritize what gets done and what goes unattended or gets done poorly. Participants in the study also reported a feeling of professional isolation and a lack of meaningful professional development opportunities. The pressures and frustration of the combined position led to high turnover and stress. Canales et.al, (2010) reported that the superintendent-principal position also creates a great deal of stress for administrators and as a result, contributes to a high degree of burnout and job turnover. Few administrators take this type of position with the intention of staying there for the remainder of their careers, which contributes to the high rate of turnover in the small school superintendency.

The complexity of the position and the challenges faced by individuals serving in a combined administrative role, lead to higher rates of turnover. Yet, despite the complexities and challenges of the position, there are examples of success and longevity.

Defining Success for Superintendent-Principals

Clark (2015) found that superintendent-principals who found satisfaction and success in their positions shared similar general and intrinsic commonalities. These include (1) the chance to do things for other people, (2) the freedom to use their own judgment, and (3) the freedom to try their own methods. Successful individuals serving in the dual role enjoyed the lack of administrative bureaucracy that existed when making decisions. Canales, et.al (2010) shared that a dual-role administrator eliminates dissension within the administrative staff, thus allowing the superintendent to implement decisions and programming just as they envision them. Rasmussen et.al, (2018) shared that superintendent-principals who had a supportive staff, support of other administrators in similar roles, and an awareness by the board of education that

some duties will be impacted by the structure of the dual role position also experienced greater success and satisfaction with the position. Forner et.al, (2012) studied seven rural superintendents, some of whom served in a dual superintendent-principal role. The superintendent-principals who participated in the study shared the same successful leadership practices as single-role superintendents. Each was forced to “wear multiple hats” and had to be the public face of the district in their communities in addition to completing the day-to-day management of a school. They operated in a transparent manner and engaged directly with the different constituencies of their districts: teachers, support staff, parents, and the general public. Their effort was focused on a limited number of priorities, rather than an aggressively broad agenda. They focused on all students achieving academic success, high-quality teachers, and creating resources to support needed academic reform (Forner et al., 2012). The administrators in this study were described by Forner as disciplined and thick-skinned individuals who were focused on the district’s interests over the long run. Canales et.al, (2010) shared that superintendent-principals who had strong interpersonal skills experienced the greatest success. Personal communication, being a good listener, and displaying empathy were key to the success of the superintendent-principals who participated in their study.

Conclusion

Serving in any school administrative leadership role is challenging and comes with its own frustrations and satisfactions. When deciding to utilize a dual-role administrative position, boards of education should use care in selecting the person to serve in the role of superintendent-principal. The person selected to serve in this position should not be the first person who volunteers to do so, or the teacher who is most senior on staff and would like to try their hand at administration. Before moving in the direction of a dual-role administrative structure, boards of

education must consider if that structure will best serve students and the greater school community. Board members also need to understand that one person cannot do the job of two administrators without some sacrifice on the part of the district. Canales et.al, (2010) stated, “Superintendent/principal positions would be very beneficial to small schools if there were no negative consequences on the educational system. Unfortunately, small school superintendent/principals are not superhuman. They are not able to do twice the work of their counterparts in large schools” (p.2).

Boards of education should not expect the same outcomes from one person serving as a dual-role administrator. To do so sets the stage for failure. The findings of this study will assist individuals currently serving as dual-role administrators experience a greater level of success. The findings will also serve as a guide to local boards of education when determining whether or not a dual-role administrative model is a right fit for their district.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The methodological design for this research project is outlined in detail including the districts and why they were chosen, as well as a description of the collection and analysis of qualitative data for the research question used in this study.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of four superintendent-principals serving rural districts in two Intermediate School Districts located Michigan's Upper Peninsula (Table 1). When using qualitative inquiry, the goal is not to develop a generalized view of a population, but rather to develop a detailed exploration of a central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). When conducting qualitative research, it is typical to study a few individuals or a few cases because studying a large number of cases diminishes the ability of the researcher to provide an in-depth analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019,). Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling occurs when researchers intentionally select individuals or sites based on criteria to better understand the central phenomenon they are researching (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A range of two to seven superintendent-principals was established using a maximal variation sampling approach. Maximal variation sampling is a strategy that involves the research studying cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The characteristic or trait researched in this study is successful Michigan superintendent-principals serving rural districts in the Upper Peninsula. The criteria used to select participants include high graduation rates, high attendance rates, consistently high student performance on state assessments, stable district finances, and staff retention. An effort was made, based on the selection criteria, to interview individuals at various points in their careers as administrators (beginning, middle of career, and nearing

retirement) to gain multiple perspectives on the role of dual administrators. Confidentiality of the superintendent-principals and their school districts was maintained in the research study.

Participants were contacted via email and phone to invite them to participate in the study, upon which their consent was secured through a prepared consent document (Appendix A).

Participants who agreed to participate were interviewed using an interview question protocol (Appendix B). Additionally school board presidents from each district were also contacted via email and phone to invite them to participate in the study, upon which consent was also secured through a prepared consent document (Appendix C). Each board president who participated completed a survey regarding their perceptions of the superintendent-principal position. (Appendix D).

The participants of this study and their respective school districts were each assigned a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality. A brief description of the background of each participant is included.

Bill Daniels, Pleasant Pines School District:

Mr. Daniels is in his sixth year as the Superintendent-Principal of Pleasant Pines School District. Pleasant Pines School District has a five-year graduation rate of 84% and a fund balance in excess of 30% of the district's revenues. He had no prior experience as an administrator before being hired at Pleasant Pines, but always had a goal of becoming an administrator, sitting in the chair making the decisions.

Stan Lincoln, Arbor Grove School District:

Mr. Lincoln is in his fifth year years as the Superintendent-Principal at Arbor Grove School District. Prior to his time there, he was a principal in a southern Michigan high school

for 14 years. The Arbor Grove School District has a five-year graduation rate of 100% and a fund balance of approximately 20% of revenues.

Gina Lewis, Lakeview School District:

Ms. Lewis has served as the Superintendent-Principal at Lakeview School District for six years. The Lakeview School District has a five-year graduation rate of 97% and a fund balance of approximately 12% of revenues. Ms. Lewis served as an elementary principal prior to becoming a superintendent-principal.

Milton “Milt” Bremer, Maple Ridge School District:

Mr. Bremer has served five years as the Superintendent-Principal of the Maple Ridge School District. Prior to that, he was an assistant principal for 1 year in a previous district and principal at Maple Ridge before the district combined positions. The Maple Ridge School District currently has a 20% fund balance as a percentage of revenues and a 100% five-year graduation rate.

Table 1: Research Locations: Rural Upper Peninsula K-12 Districts (Assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality) and their Intermediate School District

School District	Intermediate School District
Pleasant Pines School District	Eastern Upper Peninsula ISD
Arbor Grove School District	Eastern Upper Peninsula ISD
Lakeview School District	Eastern Upper Peninsula ISD
Maple Ridge School District	Delta-Schoolcraft ISD

Methodological Frame and Analysis Procedures

The methodology used for this study is a qualitative phenomenological approach. Using a phenomenological approach enables the researcher to identify phenomena based on how they are perceived by the actors in a situation (Lester, 1999). The research in which I engaged involves focusing on the story of the participants. The phenomenological methodology allows the researcher to gain insight through close analysis of the story. In this research study, I used a selective sampling technique to identify potential participants. Individuals serving as superintendent-principals from each Intermediate School District in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan were asked to participate in the study. Participants were selected based on the criteria used to determine successful schools, namely high attendance rates, strong student performance on state assessments, high graduation rates, low suspension or expulsion rates, low staff turnover, and a strong fund balance. I sent an email invitation to identified superintendent-principals and followed up with a phone call to discuss and confirm their participation in the study. A selective sampling technique was used in this process because it ensured that all participants had relevant experiences related to the issue being researched: the role of the Superintendent-principal in rural school districts who have had success in the position.

The phenomenological methodology enabled the researcher to gather data in a variety of manners. The primary method for gathering data was through interviews with the participants, either in person or via Zoom, Google Meet, or another virtual meeting platform. Interviews consisted of a series of questions (Appendix D) that were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using phenomenological analysis and coding (Lester, 1999).

The information gathered through the research process was prepared by following a modified version of Moussakas' (1994) recommendations of data analysis. The procedures

involved in this process first included transcribing and analyzing the interviews. The transcribed and analyzed data was further analyzed using Moussakas' (1994) procedures. These procedures included engaging in horizontalizing the data and regarding every horizon, or statement, relevant to the topic, and question, as having equal value. From the horizontalized statements, the data was organized into common categories or themes. Overlapping or redundant ideas were removed (Moustakas, 1994). A thematic coding design was used because it allowed for the data to be condensed and placed into more meaningful categories.

Results of this student can be used by practicing superintendent-principals to strengthen their current professional practices and by boards of education to determine if a dual-administrator structure will best meet the needs of their district and students.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated and analyzed the challenges and successes of superintendent-principals in rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan school districts. The participants in the study, four superintendent-principals, and three school board presidents provided the researcher with data that led to the development of categories, and themes related to the challenges of the dual-role position and the factors leading to their success in the role. The themes that emerged from the research related to superintendent-principals include leadership style, the establishment of trusting relationships, and role ambiguity. The responses to the open-ended survey administered to school board presidents revealed categories and themes that were somewhat consistent, but mostly inconsistent with the superintendent-principals' perceptions of their respective positions.

Table 2 lists the categories of the leadership theme that was identified and excerpts from participants.

Table 2: Categories of Leadership Identified by Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan Superintendent-Principals

Leadership Style	Participant Interview Notes
Servant Leadership	<i>“I seek to be there for everyone and it is a hard balance act to perform. I roll up my sleeves and work alongside everybody. I find ways to support the staff when I can.”</i>

Transformative/Collaborative Leadership	<i>“I used to be more of an authoritative leader but found that to be less productive than I wanted to be, especially in a dual-role position. I seek feedback and information from the staff with the understanding that I need to make the final decision.”</i>
Collaborative Leadership	<i>“I am very much a team person. I don’t believe in being an authoritative leader because I don’t think that is productive to get positive results for students. I want my team to think openly and freely to work together to address barriers and achieve success.”</i>
Collaborative Team Approach	<i>“I have a team-oriented leadership style and view myself as more of a coach to staff.” I encourage staff to come to the table with any problems, but also to have solutions in mind.”</i>

Establishing trusting relationships was the second theme that emerged as a part of the study. According to Megan Tschannen-Moran (2013), Trust is a significant factor in successful schools. Schools that have a culture of trust are likely to benefit from members of the school community willingly working together and going beyond the minimum requirements of their positions (Tschannen-Moran, 2013). Table 3 lists the categories of trusting relationships and selected participant excerpts.

Table 3

Criteria Needed for the Establishment of Trusting Relationships Identified by Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan Superintendent-Principals

Relationship Criteria	Participant Interview Excerpts
Honesty and Transparency	<p><i>“I have been successful in this role because my board has supported me. I am open and upfront with them and they appreciate that. The staff is mostly supportive and understands that I may not always have an immediate answer for them but that I will follow through. I walk the walk. I have made it a point to develop and maintain relationships. When people feel respected, valued, and wanted, they will be there for you.”</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes being brutally honest is tough, but people know where I stand.”</i></p>
Visibility	<p><i>“Being visible in the school as much as I can has helped immensely in the dual role. I believe I am seen as approachable and I think the staff feels that I understand what is going on in the building.”</i></p>
Open Communication	<p><i>“One of the factors contributing to my success has been that I have been open with communication with staff, the community, and the board.”</i></p>
Follow-Through	<p><i>“I have been the longest-serving Superintendent-Principal in the district and one of the factors that I believe have contributed to is that I do what I say I will do.”</i></p>
Work-Ethic	<p><i>“Work ethic and leadership style have allowed me to be successful. Building relationships with staff and the community is important. I am dedicated and vested in the system and community. I have never asked anyone to do something that she would not do myself.”</i></p>

The final theme that emerged as a part of the study was role ambiguity. The responses I received from the study participants align with Clark’s (2015) research in which he wrote that “the position of superintendent-principal can often blur the job description leaving the administrator to question their true role”(Clark, 2015, p. 57). Table 4 lists the categories of role ambiguity and selected participant excerpts.

Table 4

Examples of Role Ambiguity Identified by Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan Superintendent-Principals

Example of Role Ambiguity	Participant Interview Excerpts
Student Discipline	<p><i>“Student discipline is challenging because of the balance of positive relationships with parents, grandparents, and children from the superintendent role, and then having to discipline from the principal role is a delicate balance.”</i></p> <p><i>“Disciplining students is tough in this role. On one hand, I have to nurture and guide them and on the other hand, I have to hold them accountable. I feel like I am a father to the whole community. It can be very exhausting.”</i></p> <p><i>“I love the students and interacting with them is one of the benefits of the dual position because I do get to develop relationships with them as a superintendent. This makes it difficult to discipline them.”</i></p>

Decision Making: Principal vs.
Superintendent

“You have to make decisions that you don’t fully believe in as a principal but you have to as the superintendent. It’s like having a split personality and can be very unsettling.”

“Making budget decisions is the hardest part of my job. The impact on individuals weighs heavily on me. I see the need as the principal and see the dollars and cents as the superintendent.”

“The umbrella of the superintendency is always there and is all-encompassing. I would like to be able to think and make decisions without the superintendent barrier.”

“An average day is really hard to distinguish between roles. Could be on a legislative meeting one moment, and another can be helping with a kindergarten student who had an accident. Each day is a balancing act.”

“You can never just focus on one aspect of the position. You have to be able to pivot on a moment’s notice constantly throughout the day.”

Constant Pressure to Meet All Needs

“There are a lot of sleepless nights in this role. I have a desire to do the job well and there is never enough time to do everything the way I would like to.”

“Our community is small and I am often stopped when I am in public and asked to be a part of different community groups or am asked about getting the school more involved in the community. There really is no separation of work life and personal life. I often feel like I am at the community’s beck and call.”

“There is a general feeling of anxiety all of the time because you are always “on” and there is not a lot of time to just sit and think through things.”

“The community doesn’t understand the position. They think I am just a principal and often don’t understand when I don’t participate in civic groups. My board also doesn’t fully understand the time constraints of the position.”

Another aspect of this study was to gain an understanding of why each district created a dual-administrative position and what the board of education understood the position to be in regards to leadership of the district. When the study participants were asked if they believed their board of education fully understood the complexities of the role, the responses were universal that their boards did not fully understand the challenges and complexities of serving as a rural superintendent-principal. Table 5 provides excerpts from each participant in the study by district related to the level of board member appreciation of the challenges of the dual role of superintendent-principal.

Table 5

Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan Superintendent-Principal Perceptions of Board Member Understanding of the Dual Administrative Role

School District	Superintendent-Principal Perception
Pleasant Pines School District	<i>“The board does not understand the complexities of the role. I get marked down for not being visible in the public promoting the school. They (the board) still live in a time where school finances were different, school employment is different, and mandates</i>

	<p><i>are different. There are no clearly defined expectations by the board. I plow the snow during the winter and cuts the grass during the summer because it needs to be done and there aren't enough staff members to do it."</i></p>
<p>Arbor Grove School District</p>	<p><i>"The Board of Education does not understand the complexities of the role and doesn't have clearly defined expectations established. The board is a diverse group of people who mean well, but they really don't understand the complexities of having to pivot between the two roles throughout the day."</i></p>
<p>Lakeview School District</p>	<p><i>"The Board does not understand the complexities of the combined position or the day-to-day challenges. People can't really understand until they live it. Some are starting to understand. I use my weekly Board Brief to outline the increasing challenges and complexities of the position. COVID has made it extremely difficult to get the work done. When I take a day off, I'm really not taking a day off. I'm using it to get work done away from the building. The Board questions why I am emailing them at 4:30 am. It is very hard to help them understand the duties and responsibilities."</i></p>
<p>Maple Ridge School District</p>	<p><i>"I think the board understands the very surface level of the position in terms of the amount of time spent at work. They do not understand the complexities of all the duties and how I need to pivot from one role to another constantly throughout the day."</i></p>

The data presented in Table 5 is representative of the current research available on districts throughout the United States that employ dual-role administrators. While the board members in such districts might think they understand the complexities of the position, research

has shown that individuals serving as superintendent-principals do not think their respective boards of education have a true understanding of the position (Canales et al., 2010).

The researcher surveyed the board presidents of each district to gain an understanding of why each district employs a dual-role administrator. The questions focused on perceptions of the position, the strengths, and the weaknesses of the dual role administrative position, as well as factors that would cause the district to consider a different administrative structure. Table 6 lists and describes the responses to selected questions from the survey by the district.

Table 6

Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Board President Perceptions of the Superintendent-Principal Position

School District	Survey Question	Response
Pleasant Pines	Why did the board decide to use the Superintendent-Principal Model?	<i>No response provided</i>
Arbor Grove	Why did the board decide to use the Superintendent-Principal Model?	<i>Financial justification due to student and staff population.</i>
Lakeview	Why did the board decide to use the Superintendent-Principal Model?	<i>Cost savings due to declining enrollment and it was offered by the superintendent candidate.</i>
Maple Ridge	Why did the board decide to use the Superintendent-Principal Model?	<i>As a small district in order to save money, we had to go to this model. Especially if we could find the right person.</i>
Pleasant Pines	What do you perceive as the strengths of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>No response provided</i>
Arbor Grove	What do you perceive as the strengths of the	<i>Intimate working knowledge of the required daily</i>

	Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>happenings at school (principal role) provides valuable insight into the “bigger” picture as it relates to the role of superintendent.</i>
Lakeview	What do you perceive as the strengths of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>Cost savings and knowledge of day to day activities of the school are known to the superintendent through principal duties.</i>
Maple Ridge	What do you perceive as the strengths of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>Cost savings. The model fits well, especially with the person we have. The individual gets to know the staff and students better by having so many different hats.</i>
Pleasant Pines	What do you perceive as the challenges of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>No response provided</i>
Arbor Grove	What do you perceive as the challenges of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>One must wear many hats in this role and it takes time and energy from any individual.</i>
Lakeview	What do you perceive as the challenges of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>Too much on the plate for one person to manage; not able to focus energy.</i>
Maple Ridge	What do you perceive as the challenges of the Superintendent-Principal model?	<i>A person can get overloaded.</i>
Pleasant Pines	What factors would lead your board to move to an administrative model with a superintendent and a principal?	<i>No response provided</i>
Arbor Grove	What factors would lead your board to move to an administrative model with a superintendent and a principal?	<i>A significant increase in student/staff population would directly impact the role</i>

		<i>of the Superintendent/Principal.</i>
Lakeview	What factors would lead your board to move to an administrative model with a superintendent and a principal?	<i>The observed stress level of super/principal. The knowledge that the superintendent's duties do not take place during hours. High volumes of issues that need to be addressed at the principal level.</i>
Maple Ridge	What factors would lead your board to move to an administrative model with a superintendent and a principal?	<i>If our student count went high enough, that would force us to hire more staff and then possibly move to a different administrative model.</i>

The results from the survey administered to Board of Education Presidents of districts that employ a superintendent-principal are consistent with research collected as a part of this study. According to Curry and Wolf (2017), districts that employ a dual-role administrator often do so because of financial constraints, not because they believe that such a position will result in greater student achievement or school performance. As indicated from the survey results, the primary factor for employing a superintendent-principal is not related to student achievement, but rather focuses solidly on the need to realize financial efficiencies. The need to focus on finding financial efficiencies to remain solvent has forced rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts to eliminate or combine key positions to the detriment of what educators know to be in the best interests of students. It is difficult to fault rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan Boards of Education for these decisions, as they likely have little choice but to combine positions or further reduce instructional staff and services for students. The rural districts selected to participate in this study would, if student count increased, and they had greater financial

resources employ a superintendent and a principal, rather than keeping the combined position. At the current time, the funding structure in the State of Michigan, which uses a foundation grant based on a district's student population as the most significant source of revenue for school districts, is not designed to allow that to happen. There have been multiple studies conducted in the last decade, most notably the School Finance Research Collaborative (SFRC) study that have found the state's funding structure for public education to be inadequate.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Limitations

This study did have limitations that must be considered when applying the results and conclusions to other districts in different regions and states. The researcher attempted to include districts from each Intermediate School District throughout the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Unfortunately, due to various reasons, that did not happen. Had districts from Intermediate School districts in the Western and Northern Upper Peninsula participated in the study, the results may have yielded a more global view of the challenges and successes of superintendent-principals. The results of this study may not apply to all regions of the State of Michigan or other states in the nation. The socio-economic conditions of the Upper Peninsula may not be replicated in other parts of the state or country. Additionally, the lack of resources (financial, human resources, student support services, etc.) faced by rural Upper Peninsula School Districts might not be as acute in other regions.

Discussion

Successfully leading rural school districts as a dual role administrator requires a special set of skills. The research question for this study focused on the challenges and practices of rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan superintendent-principals that led to success in the dual role position. Four individuals currently serving as superintendent-principals in districts located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan agreed to participate in this study.

The challenges of serving as a superintendent-principal are numerous and often overwhelming. Unlike single role administrative positions, there is not a hierarchy of administrative positions and the rural superintendent-principal must handle the duties of a superintendent, special education director, principal, curriculum coordinator, human resources

director, and community liaison all while providing leadership and support to a building of students and staff. The plethora of duties that must be managed by one individual results in long days, high levels of stress, and little time for self-care. The individuals who participated in this study all cited these factors as challenges facing them in their current positions and reasons why they would potentially leave their districts to seek a single administrative role.

The practices of rural superintendent-principals that have resulted in success include being visible, transparent, a collaborative leadership style, and clear communication to stakeholders, taking time to develop relationships, and cultivating a sense of community within the school. All of these practices take time and none are easily achieved. The participants in the study all cited that being visible in their schools greatly assists with the development of relationships, improves communication with their staff, and led staff to have greater buy-in to initiatives introduced because they felt that the administration had an understanding of what was happening in the building.

Transparency was another practice cited by all of the participants in the study that was a factor in their success. One of the participants, in referring to the importance of transparency, stated that “his word was his bond” and that remembering he is the only administrator in the building is important because if he loses the trust of the staff because he is not being transparent, he would fail as a leader (B. Daniels, personal communication, October 5, 2021). Another participant, in discussing the importance of transparency stated, “I am open and upfront with them and they appreciate that. The staff is mostly supportive and understands that I may not always have an immediate answer for them but that I will follow through. I walk the walk” (S. Lincoln, personal communication, October 27, 2021). All participants in the study indicated that

practicing transparency is not only a must for working with the school staff and board of education, but it is also essential when interacting with the community.

The most important element that contributes to the success of rural superintendent-principals appears to be the individual's leadership style. All participants in the study referred to building a collaborative team approach to leadership. This approach is most commonly associated with the servant leadership model, in which the leader has an innate desire to provide leadership through service to the individual which she or he leads. This type of leadership requires the individual to invest in the organization through developing relationships, listening and communicating, and developing a shared mission and vision of what the organization can and will be. The servant leadership approach to school leadership is time-consuming and must be done purposefully. In his book, *The Servant as Leader*, Robert Greenleaf (2015) identifies the importance of listening, empathy, awareness, foresight, stewardship, persuasion, and conceptualization as key elements of the servant leader. Successful superintendent-principals demonstrate these characteristics and embody them in their daily work and interaction with school stakeholders.

Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that serving as a superintendent-principal in rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan school districts requires individuals to possess a leadership style that embraces collaboration, transparency, the ability to pivot almost seamlessly from the role of the principal to the role of the superintendent constantly, and elements of the servant-leadership model, such as a willingness to work alongside school staff when there is a need if they are to be successful in their role. It also requires boards of education to carefully consider whether a dual-administrative role is right for their district and the needs of students, staff, and the community.

It is recommended that boards of education carefully consider the impact of moving to a dual-role administrative structure and weigh the benefits (cost savings) against the drawbacks of combining administrative responsibilities, namely the impact on students, staff, and the community.

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Appendix A: Superintendent-Principal Consent Form

Northern Michigan University
School of Education, Leadership and Public Service
PROJECT TITLE: A Phenomenological Study Analyzing the Challenges, Conflicts, and Practices of Superintendent-Principals in Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts
IRB Approval Number: HS-21-1214

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to analyze and provide insight into the complexities of the dual role superintendent-principal position from individuals currently serving in this position. The study will focus on the challenges and conflicts individuals who serve in this dual role face and highlight practices that have made them successful in their position. This study will also seek to provide insight into the reasons why local school boards decided to employ a dual role superintendent-principal rather than having separate positions and the expectations of boards of education for individuals serving in the dual role.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked an interview series of questions about your experience as a Superintendent-Principal.

Time required:

Approximately 1 hour

Risks and Benefits:

The risks of the study are minimal; however, there is a chance you could experience professional consequences if your colleagues or supervisors became aware of your responses and objected to what you said. All reasonable efforts will be made to keep your responses confidential.

The potential benefits of the study include providing you with a safe, non-judgmental outlet for you to express your honest views.

Incentive or Compensation:

There is no other incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law (the extent of the law is reached in situations that require mandatory reporting). The unique nature and small number of schools in the Upper Peninsula that are led by principal-superintendents heighten the need for confidentiality. During data analysis, you will be de-identified through an assigned code number. In any published or unpublished writings, your name, as well as your school or district, will be de-identified through the use of a pseudonym. Additionally, the researcher will make all efforts to remove any details that might lead to the identification of yourself or your school/district.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

If you have any further questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project you may contact Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee of Northern Michigan University (906-227-1828) leckert@nmu.edu. Any questions you have regarding the nature of this research project will be answered by the principal researcher who can be contacted as follows: Dr. Bethney Bergh (906-227-1864) bbergh@nmu.edu.

Agreement:

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

Participant's Name: (Print) _____

Signature _____(Date) _____

I understand that I will be [*audio or video recorded digitally*] by the researcher(s). These files will be kept by the researcher(s) on a password-protected computer. I understand that only the researcher(s) will have access to these files.

Audio Recording of Study Activities

Interviews may be using audio recorded to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording: Yes ____ No _____

Appendix B: Superintendent-Principal Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. How long have you served in the capacity of superintendent-principal? Did you have any previous administrative experience?
2. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. What were the factors that led the board of education to combine administrative positions?
4. On which part of the role do you spend the most time; duties related to the superintendent or duties related to the principal?
 - a. Please provide examples of these duties.
5. Do you think your board of education understands the complexities of your role and has established realistic expectations for you? Please explain.
6. How do you think the community perceives your position and how you spend your time?
7. What type of administrative support structure exists in your district (i.e., business manager, curriculum coordinator, head teacher, food service director, transportation director, etc.)?
8. Who do you tend to reach out to with questions or feedback for ideas outside of your organization?
9. What do you consider to be the most significant challenges in your current role?
10. What do you consider to be the most significant rewards in your current role?
11. What factors do you think contribute to you experiencing success in your current role?
12. Is / are there area(s) on which you wish you could dedicate more time? Why?

13. Are there times when you felt conflicted in your role? If so, are you able to describe the situation and how you worked through it?
14. What are the benefits (other than financial for the district) to having a superintendent-principal, rather than separate administrative roles?
15. How were you able to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic? How did that experience impact you personally and professionally?
16. If the opportunity arose, would you pursue a single role administrative position in another district?

Appendix C: Board President Consent Form

Northern Michigan University
School of Education, Leadership and Public Service
PROJECT TITLE: A Phenomenological Study Analyzing the Challenges, Conflicts, and Practices of Superintendent-Principals in Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts
IRB Approval Number: HS21-1214

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to analyze and provide insight into the complexities of the dual role superintendent-principal position from individuals currently serving in this position. The study will focus on the challenges and conflicts individuals who serve in this dual role face and highlight practices that have made them successful in their position. This study will also seek to provide insight into the reasons why local school boards decided to employ a dual role superintendent-principal rather than having separate positions and the expectations of boards of education for individuals serving in the dual role.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked a series of open-ended questions using a survey format about your experience as a School Board President who works with a Superintendent-Principal.

Time required:

Approximately 1 hour

Risks and Benefits:

The risks of the study are minimal; however, there is a chance you could experience professional consequences if your fellow board members became aware of your responses and objected to what you said. All reasonable efforts will be made to keep your responses confidential.

The potential benefits of the study include providing you with a safe, non-judgmental outlet for you to express your honest views.

Incentive or Compensation:

There is no other incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law (the extent of the law is reached in situations that require mandatory reporting). The unique nature and small number of schools in the Upper Peninsula that are led by principal-superintendents heighten the need for confidentiality. During data analysis, you will be de-identified through an assigned code number. In any published or unpublished writings, your name, as well as your school or district, will be de-identified through the use of a pseudonym. Additionally, the researcher will make all efforts to remove any details that might lead to the identification of yourself or your school/district.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

If you have any further questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project you may contact Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee of Northern Michigan University (906-227-1828) leckert@nmu.edu. Any questions you have regarding the nature of this research project will be answered by the principal researcher who can be contacted as follows: Dr. Bethney Bergh (906-227-1864) bbergh@nmu.edu.

Agreement:

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

Participant's Name: (Print) _____

Signature _____(Date) _____

Appendix D: Board President Survey

School Board President Perceptions of the Superintendent-Principal Position

This survey is being administered as a part of a research study of rural school districts that employ a Superintendent-Principal. Your responses are confidential. Thank you for your participation in this study!

1. How long have you been a member of the Board of Education? How long have you served as board president?

2. Why did the board decide to use the Superintendent-Principal Model rather than employing a separate superintendent and principal?

3. Does the board have shared expectations of the duties for the Superintendent-Principal? If so, how are these expectations communicated to the administrator, staff, and community?

4. What do you perceive as the strengths of the Superintendent-Principal model?

5. What do you perceive as the challenges of the Superintendent-Principal model?

6. What factors would lead your board to move to an administrative model with a superintendent and a principal?

Done

Powered by
 SurveyMonkey
[See how easy it is to create a survey.](#)

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



Graduate Studies and Research
Marquette, MI 49855-5301
906-227-2300
www.nmu.edu/graduatestudies/

Memorandum

TO: Bethney Bergh
Alan Tulppo
School of Education, Leadership, & Public Service
Northern Michigan University

DATE: March 27, 2022

FROM: Lisa Schade Eckert
Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

SUBJECT: **IRB Proposal HS21-1214**

IRB Approval Date 8/26/2021

Proposed Project Dates: **8/15/2021 – 8/15/2022**

“A Phenomenological Study Analyzing the Challenges, Conflicts, and Practices of Superintendent-Principals in Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts”

I. Your proposal “A Phenomenological Study Analyzing the Challenges, Conflicts, and Practices of Superintendent-Principals in Rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan School Districts” has been approved by the NMU Institutional Review Board. Include your proposal number (HS21-1214) on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

- A. If a subject suffers an injury during research, or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB chair (dereande@nmu.edu) and NMU’s IRB administrator (leckert@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Unanticipated Problem or Adverse Event Form for Research Involving Human Subjects.
- B. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.
- C. If you find that modifications of investigators, methods, or procedures are necessary, you must submit a Project Modification Form for Research Involving Human Subjects before collecting data. Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Until further guidance, per CDC guidelines, the PI is responsible for obtaining signatures on the COVID-19 Researcher Agreement and Release and COVID-19 Research Participant Agreement and Release forms for any in person research and following any COVID guidelines in their research location.

All forms can be found at the NMU Grants and Research website:
<http://www.nmu.edu/grantsandresearch/node/102>