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Arkansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Quality of Their Preparation Programs

Clinton Garry Jones
Arkansas Tech University

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ARKANSAS SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THEIR
PREPARATION PROGRAMS

A Dissertation Submitted
to the Graduate College
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in School Leadership

in the Center for Leadership and Learning
of the College of Education

May 2018

Clinton Garry Jones

Educational Specialist, Harding University, 2013
Master of Education, University of Houston-Victoria, 2001
Bachelor of Arts, Harding University, 1998

Dissertation Approval

This dissertation, “Arkansas Superintendents’ Perceptions of the Quality of Their Preparation Programs,” by Clinton Garry Jones, is approved by:

Dissertation Chair:

Christopher Trombly
Assistant Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Dissertation Committee:

Terry Nichols
Assistant Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Mary Ann Spears
Superintendent
Lincoln Consolidated School District

Program Director:

John Freeman
Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Interim Graduate College Dean:

Jeff Robertson
Professor, Department of Physical Sciences
Dean, College of Natural & Health Sciences

Permission

Title: Arkansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Quality of Their Preparation Programs

Program: Doctor of Education in School Leadership

Degree: Doctor of Education

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Dedication

To my wonderful and supportive family—my wife Lorie, my daughter Hannah, and my son Luke. Working through this process was one of the most challenging experiences I have faced in my educational career. I thank you for your understanding and patience, and dedicate this work to all of you.

Abstract

This qualitative research study, using survey research methods, examined the extent to which Arkansas school district superintendents believe that their university-based preparation programs adequately prepared them for the superintendency in Arkansas. An online survey containing a Likert scale was used to determine participants' perceptions of their programs. The survey instrument also included open-ended questions to enable participants to provide additional feedback related to their superintendent programs. The findings show that 80.7% of participants stated that they would recommend their superintendent preparation programs to aspiring superintendents. The participants did, however, indicate areas where additional focus was needed. Those areas included the Arkansas funding matrix, finance, budgeting, special education, and technology. Areas where participants felt the programs were sufficient were instructional leadership, community relations, board relations, and legal issues.

Keywords: superintendent; perception; certification; preparation

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I: Introduction

The position of school superintendent has grown into a complex and highly demanding position through the years (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Many aspiring superintendents, through past leadership experiences, have developed a variety of needed administrative leadership skills. However, the formal training and certification occurs in university-based preparation programs (Murphy, 2003).

Often, school superintendents struggle with the fact that, although they received advanced degrees and completed solid superintendent preparation programs, the real education for the superintendency occurred on the job (Hall, 2006). Leadership standards and the role of the superintendency continue to change, and it is imperative that high-quality preparation and support programs are in place to prepare school leaders (Mitchell, 2015). University-based preparation programs must continue to be evaluated to ensure that program requirements support the next generation of educational leaders (Hayashi & Fisher-Adams, 2015).

In Arkansas, school superintendents receive their credentials through university-based preparation programs. Because of this, it is important to evaluate to what extent currently practicing superintendents perceive that their preparation programs prepared them for the role of superintendent. To date, there has been no research study to determine the perceptions of Arkansas superintendents with regard to the degree to which their preparation programs have prepared them for their roles. This chapter will provide the background to introduce the study, define the problem, and discuss the purpose of the study.

Background of the Study

According to Petersen, Fusarelli, and Kowalski (2008), the preparation of superintendents is an essential element as education continues to be reformed. The effective preparation of school superintendents is far from a simple undertaking. The imperative to connect preparation and actual practice, the need for continual learning, and a steadily expanding knowledge base contribute to the enormous challenge and complexity faced by those who lead or teach in superintendent preparation programs (Cooper, Fusarelli, Jackson, and Poster, 2002 as cited in Petersen et al., 2008). Due to the fact that superintendents in Arkansas receive their initial superintendent training through university-based programs, it is necessary to gather information on superintendents' perceptions of their preparation in order to provide university leaders with relevant information as programs are reviewed.

Superintendents face increased pressures as leadership standards, school reforms, the overall political climate, and individual communities continually change. The enormous expectations of the position, along with the steep learning curve faced by novice superintendents during the first few years on the job, can cause feelings of isolation (Mitchell, 2015). Superintendent preparation programs that discuss educational trends, identify obstacles, and focus on the needed changes in leadership better equip aspiring superintendents to be successful (Perry, 2015).

In addition to the vast array of responsibilities placed upon superintendents, student achievement must also continue to be a strong focus. Student achievement is closely tied to the expectations of the overall community, as well as of the school board. The superintendent is often the only individual with positional authority to move a

district towards academic improvement. Their leadership role and responsibility in moving a district forward academically will be a factor in their leadership success (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013).

The review of the literature that will be presented in the following chapter illustrates the complexity, challenges, and professional knowledge required to be a successful school leader. The specific requirements for obtaining a superintendent license vary among states, and universities often have different course requirements for degree completion. However, most programs insist on the completion of a professional studies program based on researched leadership standards in order to obtain professional licensure (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

A formal university-based superintendent preparation program is an essential part of becoming a successful school leader. This study examined currently practicing Arkansas superintendents' perceptions about their personal preparation experiences.

Problem Statement

The increased complexity of the educational system and the evolving expectations of the school superintendent require university-based superintendent preparation programs to be high of quality, bringing together theory, practice, and policy (Mitchell, 2015). There are no specific, universal guidelines on what the job actually entails, and superintendent roles vary depending on the size of the school district (Copeland, 2013). Preparation programs that are based on the professional leadership standards provide the best focus on student academic success in leadership (Murphy & Smylie, 2016). According to Perry (2015), a combination of applied research and practical theory in superintendent preparation programs allows for a broader and more practical preparation

experience, leading to a better prepared superintendent. To date, though, there has been a lack of research to examine how current Arkansas superintendents perceive the quality of their university-based preparation programs in relation to the realities of the job.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study, using survey research methods and an analysis of open-ended items from a researcher-developed questionnaire, examined the degree to which current Arkansas school district superintendents perceive their university-based preparation programs as having adequately prepared them for the current realities of the superintendency.

Significance of the Study

This study gathered data on practicing Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of their university-based preparation programs. The significance of this study is that it provides needed data and meaningful recommendations from practicing Arkansas superintendents. The findings of this study will be shared with university-based superintendent preparation program faculty. The findings provide current information that may lead to the strengthening of existing preparation programs, and may contribute to the better alignment of programs with the current realities of the superintendent position in Arkansas school districts. The ultimate aim, of course, is for emerging superintendents to be as nearly fully prepared as possible to meet the needs of the children, families, and educators whom they serve in school districts across Arkansas.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are:

- 1.) What are the perceptions of Arkansas school district superintendents regarding their university-based superintendent preparation programs, and do they feel that they adequately prepared them for the current realities of the school superintendency?
- 2.) What aspects of the university-based preparation programs from which they graduated do Arkansas school district superintendents advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating?

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made for this study: First, that a satisfactory number of superintendents—all currently practicing superintendents in Arkansas during the 2017-2018 school year—would participate in the electronic survey to yield meaningful results; next, that all participating superintendents would freely choose to participate in the study and respond to survey items honestly; and, finally, that participants who provided suggestions for improvement to preparation programs would do so out of a genuine desire to better prepare future Arkansas school superintendents.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations of this investigation. First, as only currently practicing superintendents in Arkansas were included in it, the results of this study may not be immediately applicable beyond the State of Arkansas. Second, the study was not designed to examine the quality of any specific Arkansas university preparation program, merely to gauge practicing superintendents' views as to the impact of the state's university-based preparation programs overall. Next, the time that has

elapsed since responding superintendents completed their preparation programs may limit the applicability of their feedback.

Definition of Terms

The following acronyms and definitions are provided to ensure common understanding of terms used throughout the study. The definitions were developed by the researcher.

AAEA - Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators

ESEA - The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 is the nation's national education law. It was enacted to allocate federal funding for primary and secondary school education. This Act also established an accountability system for schools.

ESSA - The Every Student Succeeds Act. This legislation reauthorized the ESEA of 1965 in December of 2015.

ISLLC - The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers in collaboration with the National Policy Board on Educational Administration to help strengthen preparation programs in school leadership.

LEADS - The Leader Excellence and Development System. LEADS is a multi-tiered support system used in the evaluation of Arkansas administrators.

NCLB - The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 updated the ESEA to include a greater role of the federal government in holding schools accountable for student outcomes. (This law was succeeded by the ESSA of 2015.)

Preparation Programs - A program of study at an accredited college or university by which an educational leader may become certified in Arkansas to serve as a school district superintendent.

PSEL - The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders of 2015 updated the ISLLC standards and are now considered the foundation for all levels of educational leadership.

Scholarly Practitioner - An educational leader trained to blend practical and professional skills with relevant theoretical research to develop a broader educational leadership skill set.

TESS - Teacher Excellence and Support System. TESS is a multi-tiered support system used in the evaluation of Arkansas teachers.

Summary

The school superintendent has a complex and ever changing job. With ongoing changes to professional standards, to state and federal accountability requirements, in the nation's political climate, and in social and economic circumstances within local communities, the preparation of superintendents of schools must be practical, relevant, and grounded in theory and knowledge. Superintendent preparation programs should instill confidence in candidates and ensure the understanding of the exhaustive demands of the job (Klatt, 2014).

In chapter two, the review of the literature will provide information concerning the changing role of public school superintendent and the preparation programs designed for school leaders who aspire to the superintendency. The chapter is organized according to three major themes: the changing role of the superintendency, the current expectations

for superintendent leadership, and superintendent training and preparation programs for aspiring superintendents.

II: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the available literature concerning the changing role of public school superintendents and the preparation programs designed for school leaders who aspire to the superintendency. This chapter is organized according to three major themes: the changing role of the superintendency, the current expectations for superintendent leadership, and superintendent training and preparation programs for aspiring superintendents.

The Changing Role of the Superintendent: History of Position, Accountability, and Standards

The role of the public school superintendent has evolved significantly over the past several decades. Often referred to as the Chief Executive Officer of the school district, the superintendent, as an educational leader, has a vast array of responsibilities. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) 2015 place responsibility for many areas ranging from budget and finance to instructional supervision, student achievement priorities, ethical responsibilities, and community relations on the shoulders of school leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). It is important to understand the true nature of the superintendency to appreciate the complexity of the position and the need for strong and relevant programs to prepare leaders to assume that role. Over time, states have set specific requirements for aspiring superintendents, insisting on the completion of a professional studies program based on researched leadership standards in order to obtain professional licensure (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). These researched leadership standards continue to be revised and updated based on the needs of the educational leadership profession (Murphy & Smylie, 2016).

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) 2015 are the most current standards, replacing the previous Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards of 2008 (Murphy & Smylie, 2016). As the leadership standards and the role of the superintendency continue to change, it is imperative that high-quality preparation and support programs are in place to prepare school leaders (Mitchell, 2015).

The formal position of the school superintendent was first instituted in Buffalo, New York in 1837, and then again shortly thereafter in Louisville, Kentucky (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Superintendent positions soon expanded across the country, mainly in urban areas, and by the turn of century most urban school districts had formal superintendent positions. The rapid growth of the position was mainly due to early school district consolidations, mandated curricula, accountability in finances, demands for increased efficiency in operations, and the establishment of compulsory attendance laws (Kowalski, 2003).

Over time, superintendent priorities and public expectations began to change the role of the position. Initially seen as the instructional leader of the local school system, the superintendent position began to be transformed into more of a managerial and political position, while still maintaining responsibility for instructional leadership. It is also noteworthy that the size of the school district had a direct effect on the duties of the school leader, with smaller rural school district superintendents more likely to be required to manage a variety of different areas as compared to their urban counterparts (Fessler, 2011). Klatt (2014) cites that rural superintendents face unique challenges due to the size and location of their districts, and the financial inability of these school districts to hire additional administrative staff. Long work hours, lack of support, and school board and

community expectations often lead to work-family balance conflicts. These conflicts, faced by many superintendents, regardless of school district size, can deter capable educational leaders from pursuing the superintendency.

As the nation aged and the school systems became more complex, the citizenry began to demand more and more accountability from the school systems. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). This report asserted that the nation's public schools had placed the nation in economic peril due to the failure of the public school system to properly educate the nation's children (Björk et al., 2014). The report provided detailed recommendations for changes to the curriculum standards, teaching and leadership expectations, financial support, and instructional time, as well as increasing high school graduation and college entrance requirements (NCEE, 1983). These responsibilities for reform and increased accountability fell largely at the feet of the public school superintendent (Fessler, 2011).

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* began a two-decade wave of educational reforms calling for increased accountability through standardized testing, new instructional strategies focused on higher order and critical thinking skills, increased teacher professionalism, and reallocation of federal and state resources to ensure that all students performed at higher academic levels (Björk et al., 2014). By 2001, there was bipartisan support for additional educational reform, and on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law arguably the most comprehensive educational reform revisions of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in decades (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004). The major themes of the No Child Left Behind Act

(NCLB), as the new law was known, included yearly accountability measures for schools, accountability on teacher qualifications, promotion of scientifically based research in decision making processes, and increased parental involvement (Simpson et al., 2004). These reform efforts increased the accountability on schools and profoundly impacted the work of the superintendent (Björk et al., 2014). Through this legislation, the position of the superintendent as an instructional leader was reinforced and the levels of accountability were significantly increased (Rose, 2004).

By 2014, changes to NCLB were inevitable. According to Husband and Hunt (2015), the NCLB legislation created a number of negative consequences among the nation's teachers and administrators. Schools were labeled based solely on test scores without regard to environmental factors or cultural or language barriers. Teachers experienced a highly structured and inflexible working environment that discouraged professional collaboration (Husband & Hunt, 2015). In addition to negative effects on professional educators, many state education departments, districts, and schools struggled to implement various aspects of the law. These struggles were compounded by the negative sanctions for schools of all sizes in an effort to meet the impossible mandates of the law (Husband & Hunt, 2015).

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), replacing NCLB. While similar to NCLB, this new education law allowed for greater flexibility within states to control certain aspects of their education systems. ESSA ended many punitive sanctions, such as adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements for schools, and allowed states to determine the most appropriate ways to support low performing districts (Husband & Hunt, 2015). It removed the language

defining highly qualified teachers, allowing states to establish criteria for teacher qualifications. ESSA also moved certain funding programs authorized in NCLB into block grants, and allowed them to be distributed to the states (Brenner, 2016). As with prior authorizations of the law, this reauthorization of the ESEA of 1965 created great opportunities and challenges for school district superintendents.

The role of the school superintendent has evolved with successive educational reform movements and associated federal legislation. It is clear that while particular duties and priorities have changed over time, the position of superintendent has remained important and relevant (Björk et al., 2014). The problems facing school superintendents remain complex and continue to evolve.

Expectations for Superintendent Leadership

The work of school superintendents has evolved in many ways over the last century. Reform initiatives, public perceptions, and political influences have made the position more demanding and complex (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). The challenges facing public schools are great. Accountability, choice, legislative requirements, funding, and the lack of professional pipelines of committed individuals ready and willing to serve as educators are all of great concern. Educational leaders must have the willingness to move forward with fundamental and thoughtful change. Fullan (2001) writes that leaders are expected to find solutions to problems that do not have easy answers. This is foundational to leadership. Fullan (2001) further states that great leaders must always remember that they cannot accomplish change alone; the greatest leaders grow other leaders and work to instill great leadership throughout the organization.

With the growth in complexity and the work to clearly define expectations for superintendents by most states and local school districts, many state governments moved to set policies outlining specific requirements for obtaining a license to become a superintendent. According to Kowalski and Björk (2005), there is much debate among educational, business, and political leaders concerning the best practices to prepare superintendents for the high stress of meeting the incredible expectations placed on them by national, state, and local requirements. Perry (2015) suggests that programs that blend practical wisdom, research, and collaboration with applied theories and practice produce a more rounded and effective “scholarly practitioner” for the leader of the school district.

There are many expectations of superintendent performance. Successful superintendents understand both the opportunity and the responsibility they have in the execution of their leadership on both the identified and unidentified challenges they will face (Bird et al., 2013). Superintendents are required to set priorities based on the expectations given to or expected of them. With the increased demands of accountability and the daily realities of leading a school system, superintendents have been forced to identify and focus on a select number of priorities and delegate others. These priorities may not be consistent among all superintendents, since there are a variety of factors that must be considered when setting institutional goals and expectations. According to Fessler (2011), the instructional, political, and managerial roles of the superintendency are still necessary components of the position and play an integral part in professional success. Even with ample resources, many first year superintendents often feel isolated and are unsure of what to ask. Often, novice superintendents do not know what they do not know (Mitchell, 2015).

In a study conducted by Bredeson and Kose (2007), superintendents reported budget and finance, communications, personnel administration, and curriculum development as their most important tasks. The expectations of the board of education and the community may drive the ranking of importance for these tasks. The severity of current issues related to specific district needs will play a role in the level of time and dedication the superintendent gives to a particular issue. In addition, the superintendent may identify additional needs both on a personal and organizational level that must be addressed (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

The kind and number of issues facing the superintendent continue to evolve over time. Education is a fluid field, and the ability to be an effective school leader is not constant. Superintendents must expect their role to change. It is vital that they know when and how to adapt to those changes. Superintendents must work to grow in their areas of weakness and expand their areas of strengths to remain relevant and supported by their board and community (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

In the era of high stakes accountability, it is important to be clear that with all the expectations of the superintendency, student achievement must not be overlooked. While this may not be a specific daily concern of the superintendent, it is closely tied to community and board expectations. In many instances, improving student performance is the foundation for school reform movements. The superintendent is viewed as the only one with positional authority to move a district towards academic improvement. Their leadership role and responsibility in moving a district forward academically will be a factor in their leadership success (Bird et al., 2013).

District student achievement results are also the most publically published and discussed item outside of district financial items. A study conducted by Waters and Marzano (2006) examined the characteristics of effective schools and the influence of school district leadership on student achievement. There were three main findings that had statistically significant correlations to leadership and student achievement. The first finding was directly related to district level leadership. The researchers found a statistically significant positive relationship between district leadership and student achievement. The researchers also found specific superintendent responsibilities that have a statistically significant correlation with academic achievement. These responsibilities were identified as collaborative goal setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and the use of resources to support achievement and instructional goals. The researchers' third finding was that the length of superintendent tenure in a school district is positively correlated with student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

It is clear that district level leadership matters (Harris, 2014). When the superintendent, district level administrative staff, and the board of education work collaboratively and maintain focus, the students benefit. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stress the importance of developing a strong leadership team, distribution of responsibilities, and choosing the right work for educational improvement. The expectation of district success falls squarely on the superintendent. School systems thrive when the administrative leaders, teachers, and support staff understand the importance of

the end goal. The superintendent is ultimately responsible for district outcomes and the expectations are becoming greater each year.

Superintendent Training and Professional Preparation

The roles and expectations of the superintendent have continually evolved over time. The position of superintendent has become more complex, and accountability for job performance continues to increase. While there are many leadership styles and philosophies, the one constant is that leadership matters (Harris, 2014). Leadership has a direct effect on the functionality and success of the organization (Reeves, 2006). There is a moral purpose at play in this critically important profession, and the leader has a major impact on desired outcomes of the school district (Donaldson, 2006).

Given the demonstrated connection between superintendents and student achievement, it is critical that school district boards of education are selective about whom they appoint to that position (Massie, 2009). It is likewise imperative that superintendent training and preparation programs are rigorous, relevant, and are aligned with current leadership standards and current realities of the position. New superintendents report feeling uncertain, anxious, and isolated due to misalignments between their preparation programs and the experiences they face on the job (Petersen et al., 2008). University programs are the primary way in which educational leaders receive training and obtain licensure for the superintendency, and many states, including Arkansas, have specific licensure and degree requirements for the certification of superintendents (Arkansas Department of Education [ADE], 2017). Over the past several years, university graduate programs in education have revisited and restructured their superintendent leadership programs in an effort to keep current with the changing trends

in education. A concern of Orr (2006) during this time was that leadership programs needed to evolve to include more innovative and intensively focused curricula while also offering a variety of authentic opportunities for fieldwork. These concerns prompted some changes to superintendent leadership programs.

Björk and Kowalski (2005) stress that with increased accountability for student achievement and best instructional practice, superintendents must be sufficiently trained to ensure a level of adequacy to meet the accountability demands. Historically, licensure requirements varied greatly between states and significant differences existed among university programs. As the need for more accountability and common structure within educational leadership practices arose, an effort to establish leadership guidelines that stressed the importance of student academic success and school leadership began.

In the early 1990s, representatives from various professional associations in partnership with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) worked collaboratively to develop and write the first set of research-based leadership standards. By 1996, these standards were complete and were referred to as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (Kelley & Peterson, 2002). The standards have been included in law and regulation in 45 states and the District of Columbia, ensuring that these standards would be at the core of school administration preparation (Murphy, 2017). The acceptance of these standards in law and policy prompted many universities to incorporate the standards into superintendent licensure and preparation programs (McCarthy, 2015). In 2008, the ISLLC standards were revised and additional focus was placed on the importance of performance-based leadership. The

revised standards also relied on new research that did not exist during the initial writing of the standards (Lindahl & Beach, 2009).

In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) released a new set of standards known as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) that will soon begin to replace the ISLLC Standards in leadership programs (Murphy & Smylie, 2016). Murphy (2017) stresses the importance of the PSELs as these standards “exert considerable influence on the shape and texture of the profession of school administration” (p. 5).

While strong standards for preparation programs are critical, research conducted by Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) indicated that strong university preparation programs and superintendency career pathways are only part of successful superintendent preparation. The study revealed that the individuals’ experiences and relationship building with superintendent mentors had a significant impact on preparation as well. Augustine-Shaw and Funk (2013) suggest that comprehensive mentoring programs are crucial for new superintendents. In addition, personal qualities such as having a clear vision, demonstrating an unyielding commitment to the job, and possessing a strong work ethic factored into the successfulness of the individual. Other attributes of success discovered in the research were superintendents’ genuine concern for their work and for other people, as well as being courageous (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012).

Even as preparation programs continue to develop strong leadership standards and encourage growing individual candidate qualities as stated in Freeley and Seinfeld (2012), educational professionals have continued to debate what to include in superintendent preparation programs (Elmore, 2008). Over a decade ago, Levine (2005)

stated that most superintendent preparation programs were inadequate, and that changes were needed to better prepare future educational leaders. Levine (2005) also described how the rigor in many programs had decreased due to low criteria for admissions, irrelevant coursework, unqualified faculty, incoherent curricula, and expanded satellite campus programs taught by adjunct professors (Archer, 2005). Furthermore, Levine (2005) charged that some universities utilized educational preparation programs as financial stabilizers because they generated more revenue from tuition and fees than expended to operate the program.

Recent literature has indicated that many of Levine's concerns have been addressed. In developing the PSEL 2015 standards, school leaders provided information and recommendations through surveys, focus groups, and public comment periods. These standards focus on a future that brings values and wisdom of professional practice together with relevant research knowledge (Murphy & Smylie, 2016). In addition, Perry (2015) clearly indicates that a move towards a blended model of practical research and professional skill is occurring in many educational leadership preparation programs.

Superintendent preparation programs will evolve as educational reforms continue to require higher degrees of accountability and rigor. The natural progression of change in these programs may be expedited by external forces, such as federal and state governments and private industry (McCarthy, 2015). University preparation programs in tune with the changing landscape of the superintendency should make the necessary adjustments. In doing so, these preparation programs will lead to highly qualified superintendents who have a scholar practitioner mindset (Perry, 2015).

Summary

The school superintendency is an ever changing and complex profession. The review of the literature demonstrates the complexity, challenges, and professional knowledge required to be a successful school leader. The specific requirements for obtaining a superintendent license vary among states. Most states insist on the completion of a professional studies program based on researched leadership standards, in order to obtain professional licensure (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Kowalski & Björk, 2005; McCarthy, 2015). Educational leaders agree that, due to the changing roles of superintendents, preparation programs need to be reviewed to ensure that they are relevant with 21st century leadership standards (Archer, 2005). There is discussion on possible changes and updates to preparation programs. The difficulty comes with deciding which critical elements should stay and which should be removed (Fessler, 2011). As discussed, changes have occurred in some programs, and these changes are beginning to be studied (Perry, 2015).

Educational reform in America continues to prompt a hard look at school leadership programs. The changing expectation of the school superintendency continues to drive the discussion on educational best practice, for not only teaching and learning, but also leadership preparation. The debate among educational, business, and political leaders concerning the best preparation practices to equip superintendents for the high stress of meeting the incredible expectations placed on them by national, state, and local requirements is ongoing and unlikely to be settled soon (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

The literature is clear that superintendents are facing greater levels of accountability and higher expectations concerning the performance of the school systems

they lead. The trend for school reform continues to move forward. Current and future superintendents must be equipped to handle the expectations that the 21st century educational world requires. Solid preparation programs with continuous professional growth are critical to the success of superintendents and, ultimately, the communities they serve.

III: Methodology

This research study focused on current Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of their university-based superintendent preparation programs. To date, this is the only formal study of Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of their preparation programs. The qualitative methods used in this research study are outlined in the pages that follow. Information regarding the participants in the study, research design and instrumentation, and data collection and analysis are presented.

Problem Statement

The increased complexity of the educational system and the evolving expectations of the school superintendent require university-based superintendent preparation programs to be of high quality, bringing together theory, practice, and policy (Mitchell, 2015). There are no specific, universal guidelines on what the job actually entails and superintendent roles vary depending on the size of the school district (Copeland, 2013). There is currently no research that examines how current Arkansas superintendents perceive that their university-based preparation programs equipped them for the realities that they experience on the job. According to Perry (2015), a combination of applied research and practical theory in superintendent preparation programs allows for a broader and more practical preparation experience, leading to a better prepared superintendent. This study sought to determine current Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of the quality of their university-based programs, both in terms of job preparation and of their overall experiences in these programs.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of Arkansas school district superintendents regarding their university-based superintendent preparation programs, and do they feel that they adequately prepared them for the current realities of the school superintendency?
2. What aspects of the university-based preparation programs from which they graduated do Arkansas school district superintendents advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating?

Research Design and Rationale

For this qualitative research study of current Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of their university-based preparation programs, a survey instrument was utilized. According to Creswell (2003), survey research has value because it allows the generalization of findings from a representative sample population to the general target population. In this type of qualitative study, the goal was to determine the diversity and variations within a topic of interest in a given population (Jansen, 2010). In this case, the topic of interest is practicing superintendents across the state of Arkansas.

A researcher-created survey instrument that included open-ended questions was used to collect data from current Arkansas superintendents. The survey instrument was shared with administrators and educational leaders for peer review. It was also provided to members of the dissertation committee for their review. At one member's recommendation, the initial instrument was refined to allow participants to provide more specific responses. This research approach allowed the researcher to collect qualitative data from which to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

Participants

The participants in this study were Arkansas public school superintendents who were leading Arkansas public school districts during the 2017-2018 school year.

Although deputy and assistant superintendents who received their training in Arkansas completed the same university-based programs, this research study only sought perceptual data from the superintendents of Arkansas' 238 school districts.

Research Design and Instrumentation

The study was designed to determine the extent to which practicing Arkansas public school superintendents believe that their university-based preparation programs had prepared them for the superintendent position. A qualitative study using survey research methods was used to gather perceptual data. The online survey contained a Likert scale to determine participants' perceptions of their programs, and open-ended questions to enable respondents to provide recommendations and additional information related to superintendent preparation programs. Each Arkansas superintendent received an email requesting participation in the study. The email contained a link to the electronic survey using *Survey Monkey*®, as well as information about identity protection and instructions on how to complete the survey. A timeline for completion was also included. A follow up email was sent to participants two weeks after the initial email to encourage completion of the survey. A partnership with the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) assisted in the process of reaching all currently practicing superintendents in Arkansas.

The online survey also included demographic questions that sought information about participants' highest degree earned, whether or not their program was completed in

Arkansas, year of certification completion, time between certification and attaining the position of superintendent, size of current district, and years of superintendent experience. The survey did not include questions that would identify a specific university or certification program. The survey only ascertained respondents' perceptions of their preparation, and recommendations to improve superintendent preparation programs in Arkansas generally. The survey instrument used in this study is included in the appendix.

As the researcher, I chose to use the survey method due to the impracticality of conducting face-to-face interviews with all Arkansas superintendents. Time constraints and distance would not allow for the participation of many superintendents with a face-to-face method. The utilization of an electronic survey increased superintendents' participation in the study.

Data Collection

Data for this study came solely from the *Survey Monkey*® electronic questionnaire, whose link was emailed to each currently practicing Arkansas public school superintendent. The survey was researcher-developed and contained a Likert scale to gauge participants' perceptions of their preparation programs and open-ended questions to enable respondents to provide recommendations and additional information related to superintendent preparation programs generally. I also gathered demographic data concerning participants' highest degree earned, whether or not their program was completed in Arkansas, year of certification completion, time between certification and the position of superintendent, size of current district, and years of superintendent experience.

Validity

In a qualitative study such as this one, the credibility, competence, and perceived trustworthiness of the qualitative researcher are extremely important. According to Creswell (2003), validity is the extent to which a research instrument measures its intended purpose in order to draw credible conclusions. In addition, the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis is directly tied to the trustworthiness of the researcher who collects and analyzes the data (Patton, 1999). Therefore, I as the researcher have identified two areas where the validity of the study may be questioned by some. First, the reliance upon participants' recall of specifics regarding their superintendent preparation program, and second, the number of superintendents who completed the questionnaire in the time provided by the researcher.

Nevertheless, the data collected in this study provided valid and useful information to allow qualitative conclusions to be drawn. Seventy-two percent of currently practicing Arkansas superintendents participated in this study and provided meaningful, relevant, and current perceptual data concerning their university-based preparation programs.

Ethical Procedures

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Arkansas Tech University prior to data collection. All required documents were submitted to the IRB for approval to conduct the study. The confidentiality of participant responses was preserved. This was a voluntary study and did not require participation from any Arkansas superintendent. Consent to participate

was part of the survey instrument. At the conclusion of the data collection from the survey, access to the survey in *Survey Monkey*© was deleted.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study, using survey research methods, examined whether current Arkansas school district superintendents perceive that their university-based preparation programs had adequately prepared them for the current realities of the superintendency. It also allowed for superintendent feedback in areas in which they feel preparation programs can be improved. At the conclusion of the survey response period, the researcher identified significant themes based on the survey results.

Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I as the researcher examined participants' responses to demographic, open-ended, and comment sections of the survey instrument. Once categories emerged, I utilized the open coding method to code the data. Open coding is the "preliminary process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Silverman, 2006, p. 96). Qualitative data was cross-referenced and categorized into recurring themes. Once all data were categorized, I grouped the data into significant themes for interpretation. The interpretation of the data provided answers to the research questions.

Summary

This chapter outlined the study design including methods, procedures, and data analysis. The purpose of the study focused on current Arkansas superintendents' perception of their university-based superintendent preparation programs.

IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which Arkansas school district superintendents believe that their preparation programs had prepared them to serve as Arkansas school district superintendents. Survey research methods and an analysis of open-ended items from a researcher-developed questionnaire were the foundation for this qualitative dissertation study. Prior to this study, no formal study of Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of their certification programs had been conducted.

The study was based on two research questions. First, what are the perceptions of Arkansas school district superintendents regarding their university-based superintendent preparation programs, and do they feel that they adequately prepared them for the current realities of the school superintendency? Secondly, what aspects of the university-based preparation program from which they graduated do Arkansas school district superintendents advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating?

This chapter contains an overview of the data collection process and analysis for the study. It also addresses the findings of the study. Identifiable themes of the study were determined by an analysis of the open-ended questions.

Participants

An online questionnaire was created through the online survey platform *Survey Monkey*©. A link to the questionnaire was sent via email to all superintendents of public school districts in the state of Arkansas. The total number of superintendents currently serving Arkansas public school districts is 238. A total of 172 responses were received for a response rate of 72%.

Data Collection

Data was collected via the online survey service platform *Survey Monkey*®. An email invitation was sent to all 238 public school superintendents in Arkansas. To assist in the distribution of the survey, a representative from the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) sent the survey link to all Arkansas superintendents via email with details of the research study. The email contained general information outlining the research study, including that the survey would only take five to ten minutes to complete. The first page of the survey provided detailed information on how to contact the researcher with questions or concerns, and assured participants that the individual responses would remain strictly confidential and that no identifiable information would be shared. The participants gave consent to participate by clicking the “continue” button to begin the survey.

The data collection began on September 28, 2017 and continued through October 19, 2017. Email reminders were sent to all participants by an AAEA representative on October 6, 2017, and again on October 16, 2017. In addition, an email request was sent to Arkansas Educational Cooperative directors asking them to send a reminder email to their respective co-op superintendents on October 3, 2017. Arkansas Educational Cooperatives are institutions established to provide professional development and guidance to Arkansas school districts. They are governed by boards comprised of the school district superintendents within the cooperative region, and administered by a director. This was done to encourage greater participation in the study.

Survey Results

The participants in this research study included 172 public school district superintendents. The online survey that was employed in the study contained a Likert scale to determine participants' perceptions of the programs from which they had graduated, and opportunities for respondents to provide recommendations and additional information related to superintendent preparation programs. The survey instrument consisted of 11 questions. On question nine, open response comment sections were provided in each category for participants to share additional information. The survey instrument also contained an open response question, question 11, allowing participants to express their views on their personal experiences with their superintendent preparation programs (see Appendix A for complete survey instrument).

The first eight questions were designed to gain general information from the participants, including demographic data, data about the school districts where the participants currently serve, time lines for program completion and service as a superintendent, and information related to the instructional delivery format of their preparation program. Question one asked the participants to identify their gender. In this study, 143 participants were male and 29 were female. Question two asked the participants to identify their highest degree earned. Sixty-one (35.46%) participants indicated their highest degree earned was the Master in Education. Seventy-one (41.28%) identified the Educational Specialist as the highest degree earned, and 40 participants (23.26%) had reported earning the Doctor of Education degree.

Questions three through five provided information concerning whether the participants' completed their programs in Arkansas or another state, time since

completion, and time line from certification completion to first superintendent position. Question three asked if participants completed their certification program in Arkansas. One hundred fifty (87.21%) respondents indicated they did complete their preparation program in Arkansas, while 22 (12.79%) said they completed their certification program in another state.

Question four asked participants how long ago they completed their certification program. Fifty-four (31.40%) said they completed their program more than 16 years ago. Thirty-two (18.60%) indicated it had been between 11 and 15 years ago. Another 32 (18.60%) stated they had completed their preparation program between six and 10 years ago, and 54 (31.40%) individuals indicated that it had been five years or less since earning their certification.

Question five asked the participants how many years had passed between the completion of their certification program and becoming a superintendent. Seven (4.08%) individuals stated it was more than 16 years from certification completion to serving as a superintendent. Seventeen (9.88%) indicated it was between 11 and 15 years. Thirty-one (18.02%) participants said it was between six and 10 years, while 117 (68.02%) superintendents in the study answered that it was five or less years from their certification completion to obtaining a superintendent position.

Questions six and seven asked general information from the participants regarding the population size of the school district they are currently serving and the number of years of superintendent experience. When asked the current size of the participant's school district, 23 (13.37%) served in districts with a student population exceeding 3,000 students. Thirteen (7.56%) lead districts with a population between 2,000 and 3,000

students. Forty-seven (27.33%) superintendents are heading up districts between 1,000 and 2,000 students, while the majority of respondents (51.74%) are currently serving districts with fewer than 1,000 students.

Question eight asked the participants to indicate what type of instructional delivery format was primarily used in their certification program. Program delivery varies among university preparation programs. The three most common formats are fully online, a hybrid model consisting of online and face-to-face meetings, and traditional, which is a face-to-face only format. One hundred two (59.65%) of the participants said that their program was traditional. Fifty-one (29.82%) received their training through a hybrid format, while 18 (10.53%) gained their certification fully online.

Question nine on the survey asked participants to indicate how well, if at all, their preparation program prepared them in a variety of areas related to the superintendency. There were a total of 10 categories in which participants could indicate whether they felt they were not prepared, inadequately prepared, adequately prepared, or very well prepared. These categories were: adequacy/matrix funding, finance/budgeting, curriculum/instruction, facilities planning/management, instructional leadership/evaluation, board relations, community relations, ethics/legal issues, special education law/policies, and technology. Within each category, an option for additional comments was given for participants to share personal thoughts.

Adequacy/matrix funding. In Arkansas, the K-12 education foundation funding formula is referred to as the matrix. The matrix is used to determine the per-pupil level of funding that is disbursed to each school district. The purpose of this method is to

ensure an adequate level of funding which will allow school districts to meet the minimum accreditation standards necessary to adequately educate Arkansas students.

In terms of adequacy and matrix funding for school districts, 28% of respondents said they had no training at all in this category, while nearly 21% said they were inadequately prepared. Just over 50% of respondents indicated that they had received adequate training or were very well trained. Many participants indicated that adequacy and the matrix were not in existence, or were very new, when they received their training. One superintendent stated, “Adequacy and current matrix funding did not exist during my preparation program and training.” Another said, “Adequacy and the matrix were not prominent issues at the time.”

Superintendents who completed their programs in more recent years expressed a better understanding of adequacy and the matrix funding model as a result of their formal preparation programs. For example, one participant commented that “we received a basic knowledge of the funding matrix. We also received a brief history of the Lakeview lawsuit which brought us here.” Another said, “I understood it ok after my finance course, however, I don’t know that one can fully understand the ins and outs until you’re in the job.”

Finance/budgeting. Seventy percent of respondents said they were very well or adequately prepared in finance and budgeting. Twenty-eight percent indicated they were inadequately prepared, and two percent said they were not prepared at all. “This is such a huge area it would have been nice to have another class on it,” stated one participant. Another said, “This needs to be a much greater component.” An individual indicated that

“foundation funding and understanding the state aide notice was very well explained. Creating an actual budget based on taxes and revenue wasn’t.”

As with many aspects of the superintendency, the participants made it clear that many things are learned on the job. “There is no substitute for experience,” said one superintendent. Another stated, “I learned it on the job,” while yet another indicated their finance preparation was “not specific enough for someone to put into practice.” Some respondents were clear in their comments that many things had changed since they completed their programs. “What we were instructed on changed by the time I accepted my first position as a superintendent,” said one participant.

Curriculum/instruction. The data clearly indicate that curriculum and instructional aspects of preparation programs ranked high in preparation adequacy perception. Nearly 80% of superintendents completing the survey indicated that they were very well or adequately trained in curriculum and instruction. Less than one percent indicated they had no training, while only 22% indicated they were inadequately trained. One respondent stated that curriculum and instruction was “the main focus of the program,” while another said their program “prepared me more for creating the future as opposed to facilitating current practice.”

Some participants, while feeling they were prepared, also indicated they relied on prior knowledge and experiences as well. “For curriculum needs I call on my building level experiences,” said one respondent. “I learned more from being a building principal,” stated another. One participant stated that their preparation was “OK for me as a superintendent, but would not have been if I was going into curriculum.”

Facilities planning/management. Arkansas school districts are legislatively required to create and maintain a facilities master plan for school district facilities. Over 75% of respondents indicated that they were well or adequately prepared in facilities planning and management. Roughly 25% indicated they were not well prepared or were inadequately prepared. Some participants stated that they received this type of training on the job. Others felt that the theory was well taught. One participant stated that there was “not much relative to practical applications.” Another indicated that their program would have been stronger if the course was “taught by networking with architects, engineers, and assistant superintendents.”

Some respondents indicated that this topic was “briefly touched on” and that they had learned much of it through “on the job training.” Still, others were pleased, stating, “I had the best facilities class,” and “I recall how much I learned in the planning of a new facility.” Another participant said that, as part of that class, they had “visited several districts in the state” and completed a “large project on planning a new facility.”

Instructional leadership/evaluation. Instructional leadership and evaluation were clearly part of superintendent preparation programs, as indicated by participants’ responses. Under Arkansas law, school districts utilize a comprehensive teacher evaluation system, the Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS), as well as a comprehensive administrative evaluation system, the Leader Excellence and Development System (LEADS). The data shows that only one (0.63%) respondent said this was not covered in their program. A low number (8.81%) of participants indicated that their preparation in instructional leadership and evaluation was inadequate. One comment from an individual respondent said “my mentor was more valuable than the

curriculum,” while another indicated that they “drew on principal experiences and TESS evaluations” during the program.

Of the total number of respondents who answered this question, 104 or 65.41% said they were adequately prepared. In addition, about 26% indicated that they were very well prepared in this area. While there were no specific comments given concerning the positive or valuable aspects of instructional leadership or evaluation program experience, over 90% indicated they were adequately or very well prepared.

Board relations. Arkansas school boards are made up of elected, unpaid, individuals who live within the school district boundaries. Members can be elected in zones or at large and serve for five years. School districts may have a five- or seven-member board. In this category, over 80% of survey participants said their preparation program prepared them adequately or very well. Specifically, 31 (20.26%) indicated they were prepared very well, while 92 (60.13%) said their preparation was adequate. Only 25 (16.34%) said their preparation was inadequate and five (3.27%) said they had no board relation preparation at all.

Respondent comments were mostly general in nature. One specific superintendent said, “I am not sure a class can prepare you for working with the board. If you have good interpersonal skills, you have to figure it out. It would be nice to know more about conducting meetings, FOIA, and regulations.” In analyzing the comments, it seemed most respondents thought this was an important area to study in a preparation program. “I think people need to be taught this before they graduate,” said one participant. Another simply stated that board relation classes “should go into much greater detail.”

Community relations. As a school superintendent, it is wise to work to build a positive community presence. Understanding the community and what expectations they have for the school superintendent is extremely important in successfully running a school system. Building relationships, sharing the vision, and building support is critical (Donaldson, 2006). Participants felt that their preparation programs did a fair job in preparing them in the area of community relations. Over 68% of respondents said they were adequately prepared in the area of community relations. Nearly 20% said they were very well prepared. “My classes were very comprehensive on community relations,” stated one participant. Just over 10% indicated they were inadequately prepared or not prepared at all.

Ethics/legal issues. In the state of Arkansas, every person with a valid Arkansas teaching license is required to abide by the Code of Ethics for Arkansas Educators. There are eight ethics standards that define the professional ethical responsibilities of Arkansas educators. Superintendents are held to these ethical standards and are also responsible for the oversight of all educators in the school district where they serve. Ethical issues are only a small part of the vast array of legal issues superintendents face. Having a general knowledge and the ability to give due diligence to a variety of ethical and legal issues is an important aspect of the superintendency.

Less than two percent indicated that ethics and legal issues were not part of their program. Twelve percent said they were inadequately prepared. “Very little of our course work dealt with ethics,” said one individual. Another stated they would have “benefited from more information about the legislative process.”

Nearly 60% said they were adequately prepared. “My classes were very comprehensive in this area,” stated one superintendent. “I had a really good law class,” said another. Over 25% indicated that they were very well prepared in ethics and legal issues. One participant indicated that their school law class was taught by an attorney. They stated that they had a “great advanced law class and a great experience with a practicing school attorney.”

Special education law/policies. This is a very broad and complex topic. Special education law and policy is an area that requires specialized training and guidance. Laws related to special education services are continually being updated. In most situations, the superintendent relies on special education teachers and administrators to assist in following the laws and guidelines of special education.

The survey data showed that only 10% of individuals felt they were very well prepared in the area of special education law and policies. More than 52% said they were adequately prepared. “These laws are constantly changing but I was prepared to recognize the importance of staying current with SPED laws,” explained one participant. Another said, “My classes were very comprehensive in this area.”

Nearly 40% of respondents felt that they were inadequately or not at all prepared in this area. “I had some good special education classes, but they really only teach information, not really what happens in a hearing,” stated one superintendent. Another participant simply stated, “Can you ever be adequately trained for this? Unless you are a special education supervisor, there is really no way to get enough coursework.”

Technology. Less than 10% stated that they were very well prepared in the area of technology. Forty-six percent said they were adequately prepared. One participant

felt that he or she had been prepared “to the degree of the era.” Some, who completed their programs prior to technology being readily available in school systems, shared comments such as, “I graduated before technology” and “technology was not as available at the time I was completing the program.” Just under 55% indicated that they were inadequately or not at all prepared in technology.

Participant recommendation of their program. In many ways, word-of-mouth and professional recommendations are a critical aspect of aspiring superintendents’ quests to choose a preparation program that best fits their specific needs. Often, program requirements are relatively similar, and finding the right fit for the aspiring superintendent can come down to personal and professional conversations from program graduates.

Question ten on the survey asked participants to indicate whether or not they would recommend the preparation program they completed to individuals aspiring to the superintendency. One hundred and seventy-one participants answered this question. One participant skipped this question. One hundred thirty-eight (80.70%) said yes, they would recommend their program. Thirty-three (19.30%) said no, they would not recommend their program to aspiring superintendents.

Qualitative Data Themes

The final question on the survey asked participants what aspects of the preparation program from which they graduated they would advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating. One hundred and seventeen respondents (68.02%) chose to provide responses to this final open response question. The answers were cross-referenced and

analyzed, and common themes were identified. The following information and overarching themes emerged from the analysis.

By far the greatest number of open responses dealt with the format of instructional delivery. Twenty-nine (24.78%) respondents mentioned this topic. Of the 29 who commented on instructional delivery, 28 (96.55%) stated that preparation programs must have a face-to-face classroom component. “There needs to be face to face time. Candidates need to learn to work through and on topics with real human beings,” said one participant. Another stated, “I believe face to face classes should be a part of any leadership program. The greatest value I received from my program was the interaction with other educational practitioners.”

The qualitative response data also showed that many liked some form of online work. One superintendent stated, “I like the hybrid format. I liked not having to travel to class every time, but I wouldn’t want a totally online class. I like the interaction with peers and the relationships that I built with them during interaction of the classes.” In addition, one respondent commented that “there is too much to be gained with some face-to-face meetings for me to fully support an all online program like I completed.” Another respondent commented that “a mix of online and traditional classes would be great. The networking with face-to-face classes was outstanding and still helps me today.” In the comments related to instructional delivery, the building of relationships, networking, and developing better communication skills, the need for face-to-face interactions in superintendent preparation programs was frequently mentioned.

The next most common theme that emerged from participants’ responses to question eleven addressed school finance and the budget process. It is clear from the

analysis of the comments that a majority of respondents feel the finance and budgeting piece of their preparation program needs to be expanded. Many superintendents stated that programs need to focus additional time on the State of Arkansas funding matrix, budgeting requirements, state aid notice, and additional training on the audit process.

Respondent comments such as the “matrix needs to be a focus,” “programs today need to spend more time on budgeting practices,” we “need to know more about the ins and outs of budgeting,” and “more emphasis placed on understanding school finance” clearly suggest that survey participants feel strongly about budgeting and finance in preparation programs.

There were several additional findings during the analysis of the open response data. These findings generally fell within the categories outlined in question nine. Most of the comments provided additional information on these topics. In addition, it was surprising and disappointing that very few respondents commented specifically on what should be modified or eliminated from preparation programs. As the researcher, I would like to have obtained additional data to address any additional perceived positive or negative aspects of participants’ preparation programs.

A few respondents commented that they enjoyed having practicing or former superintendents teaching courses. “My program has practitioners who are in the field right now,” said one participant. Another stated, “My professors had actually been superintendents,” while yet another commented that “having professors that were former superintendents is a huge asset for any preparation program.”

School facilities was also discussed frequently. There is a clear indication that respondents felt coursework dealing with facilities and facilities management is

important. Those who commented on facilities mentioned enjoying visiting school facilities throughout the state and working collaboratively on facilities projects. One participant said, “During my facilities class, students were required to visit specific schools and buildings. This was a good networking piece, as well as provided authentic learning.” Another simply stated, “Definitely keep the facilities piece.”

Other areas where participants shared their thoughts were technology, law, and the legislative process. In each of these areas, respondents stated that more emphasis needed to be placed on these topics. For example, one participant stated there needed to be “more active engagement in information technology,” while another said, “participants need more background into new laws and regulations that impact schools, students, and parents.” Another respondent stated that programs needed to “add some information about the state legislative process and how important that component is to the future of our systems as a whole.”

In terms of overall preparation program effectiveness, one superintendent stated, “I believe we try to shove too many things down the throat rather than take the reality of the work and build on a leader’s strengths to tackle those challenges. A significant part of the training should also be how to use your team to support areas that you may not be as strong in. I think we are missing out on really assisting young leaders.”

Summary

This qualitative study on the perceptions of Arkansas superintendents about the quality of their certification programs yielded specific and timely information about the current superintendent preparation programs in Arkansas, and how they have met, and will continue to meet, the needs of current and future superintendents. This study made

clear that there are many areas where current superintendents felt very prepared by their preparation programs. Those areas include instructional leadership, community relations, board relations, and legal issues. Areas where superintendents felt improvement could be made were matrix, finance, budgeting, special education and technology. In addition, the majority of respondents felt the format of instructional delivery should contain some face-to-face classroom instruction in order to build relationships and develop the networks of professionals that are so useful to superintendents once that position has been obtained.

V: Conclusions

This qualitative study was conducted to answer the following research questions concerning Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of the quality of their preparation programs:

- 1.) What are the perceptions of Arkansas school district superintendents regarding their university-based superintendent preparation programs, and do they feel that they adequately prepared them for the current realities of the school superintendency?
- 2.) What aspects of the university-based preparation programs from which they graduated do Arkansas school district superintendents advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating?

The qualitative study used survey research methods. A link to an electronic survey was emailed to all 238 public school superintendents in the state of Arkansas and used to gather perceptual data. The online survey contained a Likert scale to determine participants' perceptions of their programs, and open-ended questions to enable respondents to provide recommendations and additional information related to superintendent preparation programs.

One hundred seventy-two superintendents completed the online survey for a response rate of 72%. The survey contained eleven questions including questions to determine demographic data, school district data where the participants currently serve, time lines for program completion and service as a superintendent. The survey also requested information related to the instructional delivery format of their preparation programs, time between completion of the programs and serving as a superintendent, and

how they perceived that their programs prepared them in a variety of areas. The survey also allowed participants, through an open response question, to share their thoughts on what aspects of their programs they would advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating.

This chapter includes a brief summary and interpretation of the research data. In addition, recommendations, based on the data, are included for strengthening superintendent programs in Arkansas. Suggestions for future research in the area of superintendent preparation are also included. The research conclusions from this study will be shared with university leadership program faculty and staff, as well as AAEA, ADE, and Arkansas legislators.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which Arkansas school district superintendents believe their preparation programs prepared them to serve as Arkansas school district superintendents. This qualitative study examined whether current Arkansas school district superintendents perceive that their preparation programs adequately prepared them for the current role of the superintendency. Before this study, no formal research had been completed concerning superintendent perceptions of preparation programs.

The findings from this study will be shared with university leadership program faculty in order to help strengthen university-based superintendent certification programs in order to better prepare students for the realities of the job. In addition, the findings will be shared with the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) in order to assist them in providing relevant support, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to provide relevant and timely feedback pertaining to certification, and Arkansas

legislators in order for them to understand the current educational and training needs of current and future superintendents.

The study was designed to determine the extent to which practicing Arkansas public school superintendents believe that their university-based preparation programs prepared them for the superintendent position. After an extensive review of the literature in the area of superintendent preparation, a qualitative study using survey research methods was developed to gather perceptual data from currently practicing Arkansas superintendents.

The online survey tool used in this study consisted of 11 questions, including an open response question for the respondents to share their thoughts on various areas of their preparation program. The researcher-developed survey consisted of a variety of demographic questions and job related content questions to determine the level of preparedness the participants felt they received in their preparation programs. Within each area of job related content, a comment box was provided for respondents to express additional thoughts and to provide suggestions based on their experiences.

The research sample consisted of 172 out of 238 current Arkansas public school superintendents. One hundred forty-three were male and 29 were female. Forty participants had an earned doctorate; 71, the specialist degree; and 61, the master's degree. Twenty-two of the respondents did not complete their superintendent certification program in Arkansas.

Eighty-six participants completed their preparation program in the last 10 years, while the remainder of the respondents completed their programs more than 10 years ago. In terms of program instructional format, 102 respondents stated their program was

traditional, 51 indicated their program was based on the hybrid model, and 18 said their preparation program was fully online. Fifty-five said they had 10 or more years of superintendent experience, while 117 indicated they had 10 years or less. In addition, 117 participants indicated that they were hired as a superintendent within five years of program completion. Thirty-one moved into the role within five to 10 years, while 24 stated it took more than 10 years after they completed their preparation program before becoming a superintendent.

The areas in which participants were asked to determine how well, if at all, their programs prepared them were adequacy/matrix funding, finance/budgeting, curriculum/instruction, facilities planning/management, instructional leadership/evaluation, board relations, community relations, ethics/legal issues, special education law/policies, and technology. According to the survey data, respondents felt the most prepared in instructional leadership/evaluation, community relations, ethics/legal issues, and board relations. The participants felt the least prepared in adequacy/matrix funding, finance/budgeting, technology, and special education law/policies.

The open response question on the survey asked participants what aspects of the preparation programs from which they graduated they would advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating. One hundred seventeen respondents chose to provide responses to this question. Anticipating Arkansas' new licensure rules, which are still under review, and which will require all educational leadership programs that lead to licensure to include a face-to-face component, the most commonly mentioned response dealt with instructional delivery. According to the data, the majority of respondents prefer some

type of face-to-face instruction in preparation programs. The need to foster relationships and to build a network of support was cited as most important. The second most common suggestion was to increase the focus on finance and budgeting within preparation programs. Specifically, respondents would like to see additional time spent on Arkansas matrix funding, the state aid notice, and the ways in which categorical funds are used to enhance the educational process.

Interpretation of Findings

It is evident from the data collected that Arkansas superintendents have a positive perception of their preparation programs. Many participants gave important and valuable suggestions for strengthening programs, and nearly 81% would recommend their superintendent preparation programs to aspiring superintendents. However, participants did acknowledge specific areas where additional preparation is warranted and were clearly concerned with the movement towards fully online preparation programs.

A majority (68.02%) of respondents had less than 10 years of superintendent experience. Of this group, a majority (66.66%), had five years or less superintendent experience. The current population of educators serving in the superintendency in Arkansas is relatively young in terms of years of superintendent service. In most cases, administrators moving from the building level to the superintendency face an arduous learning curve. It is plausible to relate the preference of additional face-to-face time during preparation programs to the need for novice superintendents' support from each other and to build a solid network of trusted and friendly advisors.

University-based preparation programs should revisit program curriculum requirements to ensure a solid foundation in crucial areas of school leadership. Programs

must ensure that financial and budgeting standards are sufficiently taught. Nearly 50% of participants indicated that they were not at all or were inadequately prepared in the areas of adequacy and matrix funding. In addition, only 63% percent felt they were adequately or well prepared in the area of special education law and policy. Another area where participants showed less than sufficient preparation was in technology. Only 53% of the respondents on the topic of technology felt they were well or adequately prepared. Technology is a moving target and it is difficult to keep current in this area. The results of the survey showed that participants' feelings towards technology preparation were impacted by when they had graduated from their program. However, the data clearly show a need and an interest in ensuring that technology is an integral part of a superintendent preparation program.

A solid and relevant superintendent preparation program can have a profound impact on the success of a newly hired superintendent. By ensuring that the standard coursework and curriculum topics addressed by the preparation programs offered in this state are relevant, focused on the practical aspects of the job, include opportunities for relationship building and networking, and are as realistic as possible in regards to expected outcomes, Arkansas will have a solid foundation of well trained and well prepared superintendents to lead the public school districts well into the future.

Limitations

The population for this study only involved currently practicing superintendents in Arkansas, and therefore, the results of this study may not be immediately applicable beyond the State of Arkansas. A limited sample size of 172 (72%) currently practicing Arkansas superintendents participated in the study. The use of the survey method over

face-to-face interviews may be seen by some as a limitation; however, due to time constraints and Arkansas' large geographic size, this method proved to be useful in ensuring the participation of the preponderance of the state's superintendents.

The year in which the responding superintendent completed their preparation program may have also had an impact on their perception of certain areas of their program. In addition, the amount of time between preparation completion and a participant's first superintendent position may have affected their perception of the effectiveness of their program in some areas. The data showed that participants who completed their programs more than a decade ago tended to list technology and school finance as a weakness in their programs due to the current advances in technology and the changing rules and regulations pertaining to school finance.

Recommendations

This study has provided needed information on current Arkansas superintendents' perceptions of the quality of their preparation programs. Through this study, participants have provided insightful, meaningful, and valuable information concerning university-based superintendent preparation programs. There were several areas in which participants clearly identified strengths and weaknesses within current program curricula. While this information is valuable, recommendations for further research are vital to the continued improvement of leadership programs.

Leadership program faculty and staff should work to revisit and redevelop, if necessary, program goals and expectations in the area of superintendent preparation. Course offerings, course curriculum, and course projects should be reviewed to ensure adequate and relevant preparation for the current realities of the superintendency.

Universities should also consider surveying their recent educational leadership graduates to gain insight on how they perceived their preparation program. In addition, instructional delivery of program requirements and course offerings should be examined to ensure some face-to-face interaction (ADE, 2017).

There is significant support from current superintendents of their preparation programs. Over 80% of participants said they would recommend the preparation programs from which they had graduated. However, current superintendents have also clearly indicated the need to strengthen and add instruction in a variety of critical areas. It is also worth noting that nearly 20% of Arkansas superintendents would not recommend their preparation program. By reviewing the participants' responses, it was noted that many participants who did not feel their program was as valuable as it could have been cited a lack of real-world experiences, too much theory, professors who were out of touch, and outdated instructional methods. The goal must be to work to improve the areas within superintendent preparation programs as indicated by this research study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional research may be needed to build a greater body of knowledge concerning superintendent preparation programs. The following recommendations are presented for additional research:

1. Expand the current study to other states.
2. Examine academic preparation success in relation to professional practice success.
3. Study the relationship between superintendent mentoring and university-based preparation.

Conclusions

This qualitative study contributes important information to efforts to ensure that Arkansas educational leaders are well prepared to handle the great responsibility of leading Arkansas public school districts. The results of this study indicate that a majority of current Arkansas superintendents perceived their university-based preparation programs to be sufficient; however, there were identified areas where additional focus was needed.

Strong and relevant preparation programs are key to ensuring the success of the state's superintendents. It is extremely important that university faculty and staff have knowledge of what current practitioners are sharing about their preparation programs when reviewing and enhancing program requirements. It is equally important for current superintendents to be involved in helping to shape future programs by providing thoughtful and meaningful experiences and suggestions in order to continue to produce quality superintendents for Arkansas school districts.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

ARKANSAS SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THEIR PREPARATION PROGRAMS
--

We invite you to take part in a research study, **ARKANSAS SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THEIR PREPARATION PROGRAMS**, which seeks to determine the extent to which Arkansas superintendents believe their preparation program prepared them to serve as Arkansas school district superintendents.

The questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. We are confident that you will find the overall results of our study interesting and applicable to improving superintendent preparation in Arkansas. Your feedback is important. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or general questions or concerns about the research, please contact Mr. Clint Jones (a graduate student working under the supervision of Dr. Christopher E. Trombly) at 479-738-2011, or contact Dr. Christopher E. Trombly at 339-236-4475.

Please be assured that your individual responses will remain strictly confidential. There are no known risks associated with this survey. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Before making the decision to participate in this research, you should have reviewed the information in this form. If you decide to participate in this survey, you will give your consent by pressing the "Continue" button below.

1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female

2. What is your highest degree earned?

- ☐ Ed.D.
☐ Ed.S.
☐ M.Ed.

3. Did you complete your certification program(s) in Arkansas?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

4. How long ago did you complete your certification?

- ☐ 0-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 11-15 years
☐ 16 years and above

5. How many years passed between completing your certification and becoming a superintendent?

- ☐ 0-5
☐ 6-10
☐ 11-15
☐ 16 years and above

6. What is the current size of your school district?

- ☐ 1000 or less
☐ 1001-2000
☐ 2001-3000
☐ 3001 and above

7. How many years of superintendent experience do you have?

- ☐ 0-5 years
- ☐ 6-10 years
- ☐ 11-15 years
- ☐ 16 years and above

8. What type of instructional format did your program(s) utilize?

- ☐ Fully online (no face to face meetings)
- ☐ Hybrid (online and face to face meetings)
- ☐ Traditional (face to face meetings)

9. How well, if at all, did your program(s) prepare you in the following areas? You may also share a comment in the box below each topic.

	Not At All	Inadequately	Adequately	Very Well
Adequacy/Matrix Funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Finance/Budgeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Curriculum/Instruction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Facilities Planning/Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Instructional Leadership/Evaluation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Board Relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			

	Not At All	Inadequately	Adequately	Very Well
Community Relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Ethics/Legal Issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Special Education Law/Policies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
Technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<input type="text"/>			
10. Would you recommend your superintendent preparation program(s) to aspiring superintendents?				
<input type="radio"/> Yes				
<input type="radio"/> No				
11. What aspects of the presentation program(s) from which you graduated would you advise keeping, modifying, and/or eliminating?				
<input type="text"/>				

Appendix B

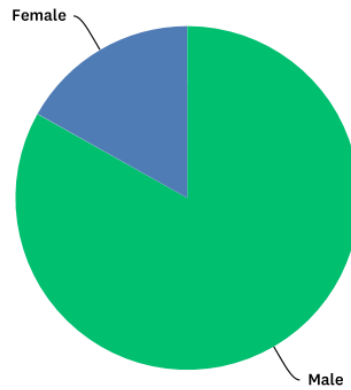
Survey Data

Arkansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Quality of Their Preparation Programs

SurveyMonkey

Q1 What is your gender?

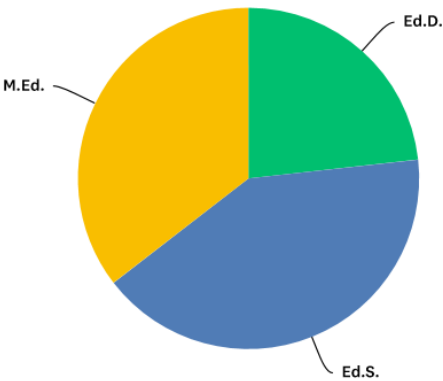
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Male	83.14%	143
Female	16.86%	29
TOTAL		172

Q2 What is your highest degree earned?

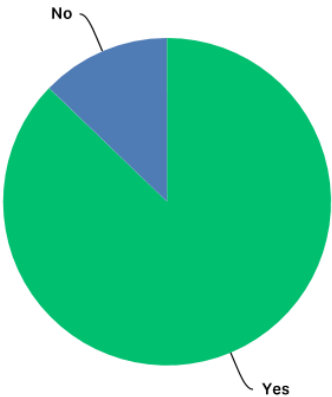
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Ed.D.	23.26%	40
Ed.S.	41.28%	71
M.Ed.	35.47%	61
TOTAL		172

Q3 Did you complete your certification program(s) in Arkansas?

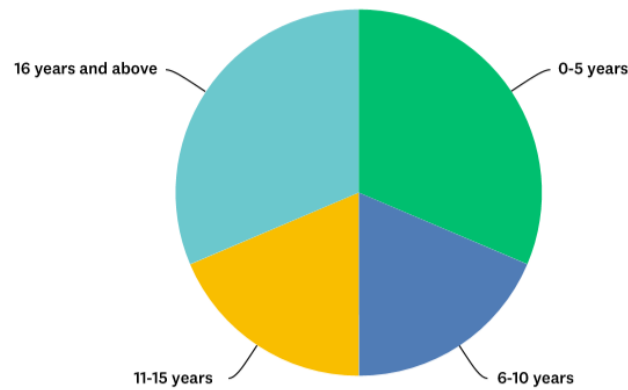
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	87.21%	150
No	12.79%	22
TOTAL		172

Q4 How long ago did you complete your certification?

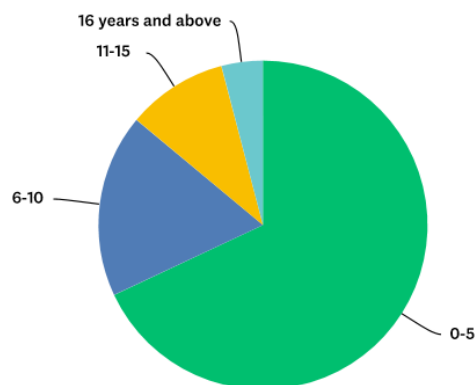
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
0-5 years	31.40%54
6-10 years	18.60%32
11-15 years	18.60%32
16 years and above	31.40%54
TOTAL	172

Q5 How many years passed between completing your certification and becoming a superintendent?

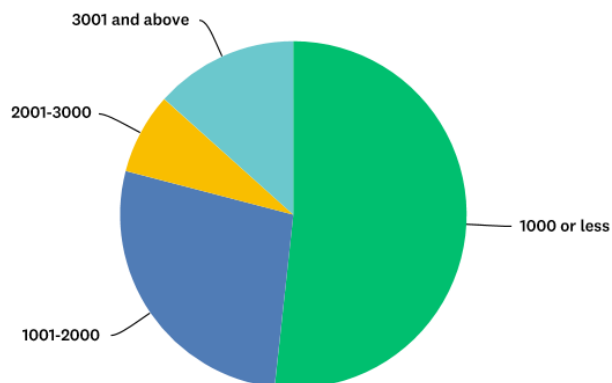
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
0-5	68.02%	117
6-10	18.02%	31
11-15	9.88%	17
16 years and above	4.07%	7
TOTAL		172

Q6 What is the current size of your school district?

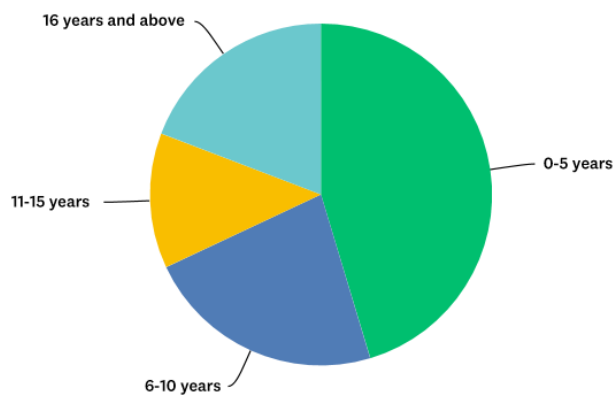
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
1000 or less	51.74%	89
1001-2000	27.33%	47
2001-3000	7.56%	13
3001 and above	13.37%	23
TOTAL		172

Q7 How many years of superintendent experience do you have?

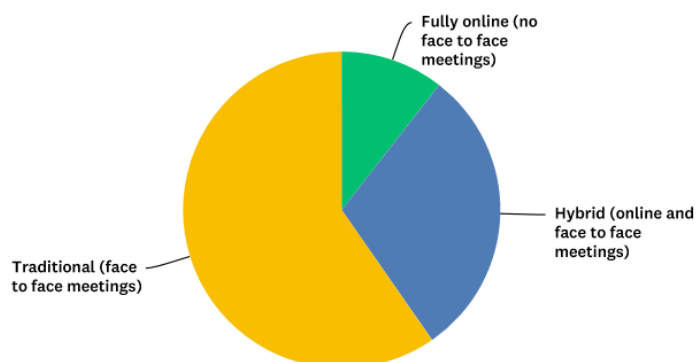
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
0-5 years	45.35%	78
6-10 years	22.67%	39
11-15 years	12.79%	22
16 years and above	19.19%	33
TOTAL		172

Q8 What type of instructional format did your program(s) utilize?

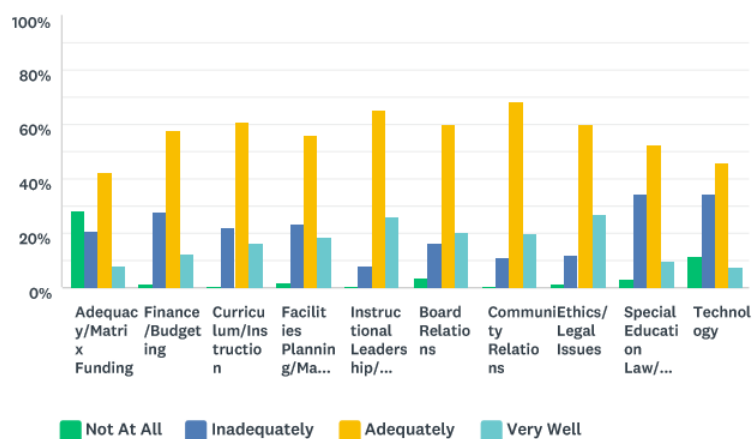
Answered: 171 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fully online (no face to face meetings)	10.53%	18
Hybrid (online and face to face meetings)	29.82%	51
Traditional (face to face meetings)	59.65%	102
TOTAL		171

Q9 How well, if at all, did your program(s) prepare you in the following areas? You may also share a comment in the box below each topic.

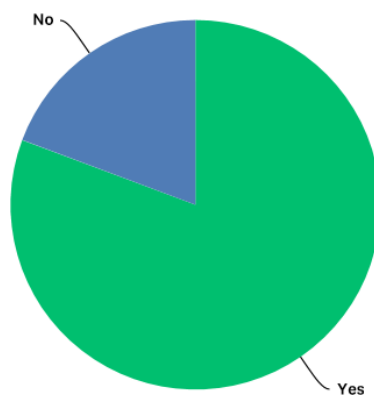
Answered: 172 Skipped: 0



	NOT AT ALL	INADEQUATELY	ADEQUATELY	VERY WELL	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Adequacy/Matrix Funding	28.40% 46	20.99% 34	42.59% 69	8.02% 13	162	1.00
Finance/Budgeting	1.37% 2	28.08% 41	58.22% 85	12.33% 18	146	1.00
Curriculum/Instruction	0.64% 1	21.79% 34	60.90% 95	16.67% 26	156	1.00
Facilities Planning/Management	1.96% 3	23.53% 36	56.21% 86	18.30% 28	153	1.00
Instructional Leadership/Evaluation	0.63% 1	8.18% 13	65.41% 104	25.79% 41	159	1.00
Board Relations	3.27% 5	16.34% 25	60.13% 92	20.26% 31	153	1.00
Community Relations	0.64% 1	10.90% 17	68.59% 107	19.87% 31	156	1.00
Ethics/Legal Issues	1.27% 2	12.10% 19	59.87% 94	26.75% 42	157	1.00
Special Education Law/Policies	3.13% 5	34.38% 55	52.50% 84	10.00% 16	160	1.00
Technology	11.54% 18	34.62% 54	46.15% 72	7.69% 12	156	1.00

Q10 Would you recommend your superintendent preparation program(s) to aspiring superintendents?

Answered: 171 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	80.70%	138
No	19.30%	33
TOTAL		171

Appendix C

IRB Approval



**Office of Sponsored Programs
and University Initiatives**
Administration Building, Room 207
1509 North Boulder Avenue
Russellville, Arkansas 72801

Office: 479-880-4327
www.atu.edu

9/27/17

To Whom It May Concern:

Clinton Jones' IRB application "Arkansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Quality of Their Preparation Programs" is approved through September 27, 2020. The approval code is Jones_092717.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeff Aulgur".

Jeff Aulgur, Ed.D.

IRB Chair

