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## **Administrator Stress and Well-Being: Lessons Learned from Retired Administrators**

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ADMINISTRATOR STRESS AND WELL-BEING: LESSONS LEARNED  
FROM RETIRED ADMINISTRATORS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Carrie Bosco

May 2021

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The Designated Dissertation Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

ADMINISTRATOR STRESS AND WELL-BEING: LESSONS LEARNED  
FROM RETIRED ADMINISTRATORS

by

Carrie Bosco

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## ABSTRACT

### ADMINISTRATOR STRESS AND WELL-BEING: LESSONS LEARNED FROM RETIRED ADMINISTRATORS

by Carrie Bosco

School and district leaders work in stressful jobs and a better understanding is needed about how these conditions affect their personal and professional lives. This study presents the stories of experienced K–12 public school and district administrators contending with and managing administrative stress and its effects on administrators. Through qualitative inquiry and narrative analysis, the learning that comes from experience is explored as a way of understanding administrative practice. Storied examples of stressful situations range from the most serious and traumatic events a school administrator might face to the daily grind of always being “on.” Powerful themes that emerged from the leadership stories include: (a) part of the job of a school or district administrator is having to deal with the stressful consequences of traumatic events when they occur, (b) experienced leaders contend with stress with the support of trusted colleagues, and (c) experienced leaders have a “go to” process for dealing with difficult or challenging situations or issues. Suggestions for current administrators are presented and include specific recommendations such as Trauma Informed Practice training and individual and group coaching and support.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. My Leadership Story**

Having grown up in a small, rural area of Michigan, my parents allowed us kids to have the run of the neighborhood as long as we were home by dark. As a kid, I thoroughly enjoyed the joys of getting groups of boys and girls of different ages organized. Perhaps it was because I was the oldest child in my family, I was given the freedom to be out freely exploring the world unsupervised, or it may have been because of my early childhood experience in preschool, that I developed a very solid self-confidence by the tender age of eight. The self-confidence and propensity to lean into leadership roles would both serve me well and challenge me throughout my childhood, schooling, and during my career.

I met my husband while we were doing our student teaching, and after graduating we moved to California and began teaching in a K–8 Silicon Valley school in classrooms next door to each other. The experience of serving students who were from very diverse backgrounds ignited my interest in having an even larger impact on the students I was encountering. The school principal became a mentor to us and the district administration took notice. It wasn't long before we found ourselves in site administrative roles in the district. I was quickly promoted to a district office position, and then after more than a decade in that K–8 district, I was recruited to a 9–12 district for another district administrative role. The positive sense of self and confidence I had developed was unchanged. For me the stress of the work was minimal, as I found it exciting and fulfilling. I felt competent and comfortable in each of these roles, even when in a new position or when faced with a new challenge. That all changed for me in 2018.

My doctoral research journey begins in February of 2018 with the tragic death of an administrative team friend and colleague. I was serving as a district administrator with oversight of human resources and curriculum/instruction in a high performing Silicon Valley high school district. The school district staff was focused on effectively supporting students' social-emotional needs and providing intervention services to address serious issues pertaining to student mental health while simultaneously maintaining an atmosphere of exceptional student achievement as evidenced by college attendance and Advanced Placement (AP) participation and pass rates. I had the unfortunate experience of dealing with a student suicide in 2012 after being on the job for just a few short months. As an educator, losing a student to suicide is your worst fear. I was charged with the responsibility of postvention by bringing on grief counseling followed by increasing mental health services onsite, developing a therapeutic program, and ensuring our district's suicide prevention plan was up to date. Despite not having prior experience with a student committing suicide or leading these efforts, I was surrounded by professionals who had sadly experienced a loss like this before and who could help with our response. It was stressful and difficult and by far one of the worst things that can happen to a school community. Even with this in my background experience, I was in no way prepared to deal with a colleague's sudden death. Perhaps because of the proximity of working so closely with this person and knowing this person so well, I was absolutely heartbroken—but it did not matter, I still had to lead the response. I had no idea what to do and was stressed. I lost my self-confidence and for the first time in my life, I did not want to lead anymore. This incident is the source of inspiration for this study and the start of my journey.

## **1.2. Mental Health: A Critical Problem Facing Our Schools**

In recent years there has been increasing concern about the social-emotional well-being of students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012). This concern has resulted in many school districts across the nation exploring and implementing policies and practices that prevent or reduce factors that cause social-emotional problems for students, as well as establishing tiered support programs to promote student wellness (Saeki et al., 2011). Silicon Valley school districts are particularly affected by conditions which impact students' psychosocial well-being, and thus there have been increasing efforts to provide staff with professional development to support students' social-emotional wellness. Districts are augmenting traditional counseling and guidance services with increased onsite mental health support providers to address student need. Responding to mental health needs is now considered a critical component in ensuring healthy school organizations (CDC, 2012). In schools, we approach student support systems for academic, behavioral, or social-emotional concerns through tiered interventions based on the Response to Intervention (RtI) model and approach (Saeki et al., 2011). Universal supports are designed to support all students and are intended to be preventative. For students who require more support, targeted or strategic interventions are employed, and for those students who need even more support, intensive services are provided (Saeki et al., 2011).

While there has been increasing concern and more extensive and effective actions to respond to the wellness needs of students by school districts, attention to the well-being of the adults in schools has not been comparable. If support for employees' mental health

and well-being was constructed like that for students, there would be similar levels of employee assistance and support to address these issues.

Characteristics of effective employee wellness programs have been identified by the Partnership for Prevention (U. S. Chamber of Commerce, 2009). These characteristics include: (a) various approaches such as employing health education programs that address skill development and behavioral change; (b) supportive environments that promote wellness; (c) integration of employee wellness services; (d) onsite health screening programs; (e) support for individual follow-up; and (f) evaluation and improvement plans (U. S. Chamber of Commerce, 2009). Understanding the need for supporting the well-being of educators exists in the context of the current conditions of adult mental health in the United States. According to the CDC (2011), more than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental condition sometime during their lifetime. Furthermore, 25% of Americans will experience a mental illness in any one-year period, and 1 in 25 Americans are living with a serious mental disease such as major depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder. A particularly alarming statistic in the updated CDC (2018) report is the increase in suicide rates. There has been a rise of 30% in suicide rates just over the last 16 years.

A recent study by Snyder and Dillow (2012) reports that there are 7.2 million K–12 teachers and administrators in the United States. If school faculty are not immune to the mental health issues that afflict the general population, they too might benefit from practices to address stress and mental health issues. Stress factors that are directly related to an administrator's job are clearly relevant to efforts within districts to implement practices and policies to reduce their harmful consequences, and these harmful consequences are

not only faced by the administrators. Addressing mental health issues for teachers and administrators can also result in producing healthier mental well-being for students.

School personnel face additional challenges to their emotional well-being that are directly associated with their responsibilities as staff members. Educators contending with high levels of stress or with challenges to their own mental health face additional challenges when working to support students. It is therefore extremely important to address these mental health needs in that these issues indirectly affect the health of the millions of students who attend school every day (Eaton et al., 2007).

### **1.3. Stress in Teaching and Administration**

The stressful workload, the feeling of having to be “always on,” the perceived lack of resources, and the burden of ever-changing expectations take a toll on educators. According to a recent report, health problems educators face are compounded by a variety of external factors (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2017). This report points to multiple health problems faced by educators, such as having a stressful workload, the adoption of new initiatives without appropriate professional development or training, and mandated curriculum and standardized tests. In their study the AFT surveyed 30,000 educators in 2015 to investigate the quality of their work life. The Educator Quality of Work Life survey was motivated by concern about the deleterious impact of stress on educators’ work in their schools. In 2017, the AFT did an abbreviated follow-up survey with more than 4,000 educators. In 2015, 34% of the educators surveyed reported that their mental health was “not good” in the past month. By 2017, this statistic had risen to 58% with 61% reporting that their work was “always” or “often stressful” (AFT, 2017). A recent

National Education Association (NEA) commentary (Walker, 2018) reported findings from a study by Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, and Reinke (2018) which analyzed elementary school teacher stress. The research found that 93% of teachers reported high levels of stress and very few teachers were found to have high coping skills (Walker, 2018).

It is important to recognize that the totality of factors that cause emotional and social problematic conditions for educators go beyond the workplace; however, addressing the problem within school organizations in terms of educators requires school districts to apply the same concept that is advocated for students: support for the whole person.

One constituency of school district staff that receives even less attention with regard to their own preparation for contending with the stress and emotional problematic aspects of their job is school administrators (Schmidt, 2010). There is a scant body of research specifically about preparing school administrators for managing stress. Schmidt (2010) argues that leadership preparation programs should include training in dealing with emotions in order to deal with professional burnout, stress, and role anxiety.

One way to get a sense of the significance of this problem is to do a Google search of the phrase “mental health of school administrators.” The search results in a large volume of hits pertaining to the role of the administrator in dealing with the emotional health of teachers and students, but with very few hits pertaining to the issue of the mental well-being of administrators. A review of the first twenty Google responses yields only results pertaining to the role of principals and schools in tackling issues related to student mental health and not a single result discussing administrators’ mental health. Examples of hits include, “Why Principals Need to Make Student Mental Health a Priority” (Prothero, 2018)

and “Principals: We Need to Talk About Student Mental Health” (Burch, 2018). If administration is “attempting one of the most difficult works of the mind and one of the most challenging human tasks” (Hutchins, 1946, p. 407), administrators’ mental health within the context of the school district is important to consider.

#### **1.4. Statement of the Problem**

School and district leaders work in stressful jobs and a better understanding is needed about how this affects their personal and professional lives. Considerable research exists pertaining to the factors that cause stress for administrators (Borg & Riding, 1993; Gmelch et al., 1994; Gmelch & Torelli, 1993; Koch et al., 1982; Litchka et al., 2009; Warner, 1980). This literature is helpful in understanding the factors connected with the jobs of school administrators that can cause emotional problems. However, the literature on concrete and practical steps that can be taken within school districts to reduce stress and emotional problems is quite limited. For those working in leadership positions in schools, it is not helpful enough to simply articulate the problems; there is also need to understand what strategies have been used to help administrators in their day-to-day work and which strategies seem to be most effective. The problem at the core of this study begins with understanding the impact of the work on individual people with names, families, and lives. It is not possible to have a healthy organization if those who inhabit the organization are themselves unhealthy—even though some within the organization may not see the link between the health of the people who live and work within the organization unless there is some highly tragic situation such as emotional breakdown or a suicide. Yet efforts to deal with the emotional health of school personnel need to happen before such tragic



occurrences. The findings of this study have implications for administrator support and for the actions administrators can take to help mitigate stressful situations. I have personally seen manifestations of issues related to mental health in both site and district administrators ranging from the problematic to the highest level of severity and am engaging in this study to help address these needs.

### **1.5. Significance of the Problem**

There are a myriad of factors related to administrator stress, some of which may also be connected to the social and cultural conditions of the school community. The stress factors confronting school leaders have two negative consequences. First, those factors represent a force in the life of the school leader. Second, a person who is contending with their own psychological well-being may not be in a good position to be a good resource for others who report to her or him or the total school community. Finding ways to directly address the generally unmet need of reducing the stress level of school administrators therefore supports the entire school community.

There is critical significance in finding pragmatic solutions for the task of reducing administrator stress. While there seems to be a lack of attention to this problem that exacerbates efforts to provide the right response to the psychological well-being of school administrators, there are also efforts to improve district and school culture that are supportive of this mission. Many larger, and better resourced, organizations deal more directly and comprehensively with the well-being of all employees. An example of this is right here in Silicon Valley with tech companies, such as Apple Inc. A former colleague now working in Apple Park reported that she now has access to a dashboard of resources,

as well as onsite restaurants, childcare, fitness centers, spas with massage services, doctors, dentists, dry cleaning and more. School districts generally do not have any of these types of resources or the funding to provide them.

Challenges faced by school leaders are complex and varied. Dealing with budget constraints, student and staff concerns, labor unions, public relations, and legal matters are just some of the regular functions of the position. Additionally, media or dissatisfied individuals can cause great harm in telling stories that are simply untrue or that cause speculation about a storyline in social media. Educational leaders, especially superintendents, are under fire and in many cases find themselves “between a rock and a hard place” on certain issues. Joe Sanfelippo and Tony Sinanis write about creating school culture in their book, *Hacking Leadership* (2016). They provide some concrete examples of how school leaders telling stories of positive messages through public relations strategies, such as through social media, can counter the negative messaging and narratives that emerge over time. The need to be public relations experts adds additional pressure to school and district leaders who already are over encumbered with the daily grind of school and district leadership. This convergence of stress and issues results in untenable situations for many superintendents and school leaders. Educational leaders need effective strategies for how to more effectively deal with and cope with situations such as these.

There is an urgent need to devise plausible and effective means of dealing with the psychological well-being of school administrators. It is appropriate that this be done within the district since it has been shown that many of the factors that affect the

psychological well-being of school leaders emanate from aspects of their work as professional educators. Trial and error is an uncertain means to generate practices which have a chance of making a positive consequence.

### **1.6. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

School and district leaders work in stressful jobs and a better understanding is needed about how this affects their personal and professional lives. The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the ways school leaders have been impacted by stress and how they manage stress. Some boundary research questions include:

RQ 1. What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County (California) administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator?

RQ 2. What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators?

RQ 3. What themes related to managing stress and traumatic events come out of the narratives of retired administrators?

### **1.7. Summary**

This chapter presented my leadership story, introducing the topic of stress for teachers and administrators. It reviewed the statement and significance of the problem and the corresponding research questions. In Chapter Two, I will provide a review of the literature and discuss the etiology and consequences of administrator stress, effective practices to contend with administrator stress, discuss occupational support programs and tiered support, and crisis leadership including contending with the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Chapter 1 discussed a review of research pertaining to mental health statistics in the United States, and data and commentary on educator stress from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2011, 2012, 2018), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA). That information provides a context for an examination of stress as it particularly pertains to school administrators. This chapter provides a review of literature on the research as it pertains to the key issues of the problem of practice (POP) for this dissertation. School and district leaders work in stressful jobs and a better understanding is needed about how this affects their personal and professional lives. The boundary RQs to be addressed in this study include:

RQ 1. What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County (California) administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator?

RQ 2. What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators?

RQ 3. What themes related to managing stress and traumatic events come out of the narratives of retired administrators?

The remainder of this chapter will be organized as follows. Section 2.2 will review literature related to the three RQs. In Section 2.2.1., I will cover literature that will help to better understand the etiology and consequences of administrator stress. Next, in Section 2.2.2., I will include a discussion of the literature that describes how administrators deal with or cope with stress. In Section 2.2.3., I will cover literature pertaining to

occupational support programs in order to understand the history of occupational support programs and how they might be reframed to address administrator support needs utilizing a tiered approach. Identified gaps in the literature that pertain to the RQs will also be discussed in Sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2., and 2.2.3. In Section 2.2.4, I will provide a discussion of contending with the COVID-19 crisis as school and district administrators. In Section 2.3., I will discuss the conceptual framework for the study, which is based on narrative inquiry. In the final section of this chapter, I will provide a summary discussion to set the stage for the next chapter, Chapter 3: Methods.

## **2.2. Literature Related to Research Questions**

### ***2.2.1. The Etiology and Consequences of Administrator Stress***

In order to better understand what it means to be a leader in a stressful job in education, I will discuss the literature related to the etiology and consequences of administrator stress. Numerous studies have described the problem and impact of stress on school and district administrators and have included various surveys and inventories of administrators to study the causes of perceived stress in administrators. Responses from superintendents, district administrators, and site principals have identified causal factors ranging from role ambiguity, overload, and conflict to work conditions and responsibilities. These studies have identified the impact of stressors on administrators to include burnout, high levels of turnover, physical health and mental health challenges, including the development of anxiety and depression (Borg & Riding, 1993; Gmelch et al., 1994; Gmelch & Torelli, 1993; Koch et al., 1982; Litchka et al., 2009; Warner, 1980).

Concern about administrator stress is not new. Over thirty years ago, Gmelch et al. (1982) produced a paper, “What Stresses School Administrators and How They Cope,” and presented it at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The Administrator Stress Index was born. The 35-item questionnaire was developed, validated, and sent to members of Oregon’s Confederation of School Administrators and received 1,156 responses, including district office and site administrators. Four dimensions of stress were identified: role-based stress; task-based stress; boundary-spanning stress; and conflict mediating stress.

Eleven years later, Gmelch and Torelli (1993) surveyed 1,000 administrators in Washington State and received responses from 741 of them. Respondents included superintendents and building principals from all levels including elementary, middle, and high school. The purpose of their study was to “study the relationship of administrative role conflict and ambiguity with stress and burnout” (p. 1). Gmelch et al. (1982) developed The Administrator Stress Cycle. Gmelch and Torelli (1993) describe four stages of the stress cycle in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The first stage of the cycle is a set of “demands, or stressors, placed on administrators” (p. 2). The second stage “consists of the perception or interpretation of the stressors by the individual” and the third stage deals with how the administrator chooses to respond to the stressor whether it is “perceived to be harmful, threatening or demanding” (p. 3). In the third stage, “individuals use coping strategies when they believe they can counteract the stressor in a positive manner” (p. 3). The fourth and last stage of

the cycle deals with consequences and long-term effects of stress including “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of low personal accomplishment” (p. 5).

Gmelch and Torelli (1993) found that role conflict ambiguity was most closely related to conflict-mediating stress. They define conflict-mediating stress as stress that “arises from the administrator handling conflicts within the school such as trying to resolve differences between and among students, resolving parent and school conflicts, and handling student discipline problems” (p. 3). While Gmelch and Torelli (1993) recommended that principals receive training specifically in conflict mediation to address these issues, they point out that the literature at that time was “relatively silent on coping mechanisms, stage three of the Administrator Stress Cycle, as they relate to the constructs of stressors, burnout and role structure” (p. 16). Gmelch et al. (1994) continued to pursue this issue with another study specific to administrator burnout. They utilized survey data from 656 respondents from the 1,000 subjects in their survey. This sample included superintendents and school principals. Recommendations from this study were limited to suggesting that strategies are needed for clarifying the role of the administrator (role ambiguity) as well as providing techniques for administrators to address the time required and intensity of the job. Whitaker (1996) analyzed emotional exhaustion, defined as “feelings of overextension and exhaustion caused by daily work pressure or emotional overload” (p. 63). Of the nine principals queried in the study, eight indicated that emotional exhaustion was a significant issue for them. Principals provided insight regarding challenges with the nature of the job, dealing with student issues, mediating issues with

teachers, addressing parent concerns, paperwork, budget issues, interruptions, night time meetings, having to multitask to complete numerous projects, and constant interruptions.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2019 update of the *The Condition of Education* annual report “Principal Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers” defines “stayers” as principals who stayed in their roles as their schools sites, “movers” as principals who changed schools but stayed in the principal position, and “leavers” as those principals who left the role altogether during a given year based on annual survey data and status data files of principals across the country. According to the report, data collected between the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years was not significantly different from data collected between the 2007–08 and 2008–09 school years. For example, in 2016–17, 82% of principals were “stayers” up from 79%, 6% were “movers” down from 7%, and 10% were “leavers” down from 12% in 2008–09. Of the 10% of “leavers” between the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years, 32% retired while 32% were still in education but not in a school, including 19% who moved into a district office role, and 27% were working at a school but not in the role of principal, and 8% had moved into a job outside of education entirely. This data suggests that in 2016–17 approximately 18% of principals left their schools or the roles annually. The website for the School Superintendents Association (AASA) (n.d.) provides demographic information of superintendents including that approximately 21.7% of superintendents are women and that the average tenure for a superintendent is five to six years with an annual turnover rate between 14–16%. However, the data provided by AASA appears to be based on an outdated study from 2006. Grissom and Andersen (2012) wrote an article, “Why Superintendents Turn Over,”



based on a study of California superintendents finding that “among 215 superintendents studied beginning in 2006, 45% turned over within 3 years” (p. 1). In addition to retirement, superintendents would also move for career advancement, often leaving behind working relationships with boards that were poor. Overall, the analysis provided indicates that superintendents turn over for a variety of reasons including their age, school boards’ assessment of their performance, working conditions, and opportunities outside the district. The conclusions of these studies do not provide pragmatic or useful information about how to support administrators that are in the jobs currently experiencing stress or burnout, nor do they conclude what factor stress actually played in the departures. They do not provide insight into whether stress was a factor of the 18% of principals nationally who leave their schools annually or of the 45% of California superintendents that turnover every three years.

Using data from the U.S. Department of Labor database, *Business Insider* identified “41 Jobs to Avoid If You Hate Stress” (Gillett & Premack, 2018). The job of educational administrator is one of the jobs on their list. While there is research that has occurred over the last 30 years detailing the cause and consequences of administrator stress, much of the literature is dated. There is very little mention of the impact on administrators of the pressures and consequences of social media and the perceived need to be responsive and accessible 24/7 due to smartphones, texting, and instant messaging. Additionally, most of the studies are limited to the distribution of questionnaires and surveys. This gap in the literature indicates a need to conduct further qualitative research to better understand

what it means to be a leader in a stressful job in education, especially from the lens of an individual's experience in the job of district or school administrator.

### ***2.2.2. Effective Practices to Contend with Administrator Stress***

In order to understand what it means to successfully balance work and life as a leader in a stressful job in education, I discuss literature related to effective practices administrators employ to contend with stress. Studies that discuss the cause and consequence of stress in administrators often suggest an area of further research should center around administrators developing effective coping strategies. Gmelch et al. (1994) write “to properly navigate and divert the turbulent road to burnout, administrators must be equipped with both a better clock and compass for the journey ahead” (p. 9). The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) developed a “Report of Lifestyles/Personal Health Care in Different Occupations; A Study of Attitudes and Practices” (1979) that included surveying school administrators to determine effective coping strategies for dealing with stress. About half of the administrators surveyed reported they exercise while 38% meditate, 21% eat, and the remaining 19% use alcohol, sex, or smoking cigarettes to cope with stress. In Warner's (1980) study, “School Administrator Stress: Prevalence, Sources, Symptoms, and Coping Approaches,” school administrators were found to use exercising to cope with stress. However, the study queried administrators on the number of hours per week that they exercised and found that only about half of the administrators exercised less than three hours per week.

In Poirelle and Yvon's study (2014), “School Principals' Emotional Coping Process,” a review of literature on coping research analyzed numerous studies and six school

principals were followed for a full day and filmed throughout the day. Then about a week later they were shown the clips of the video of them throughout that day responding in difficult situations. The findings contextualized stressors showing how principals experience anxiety and anger in dealing with difficult situations and how they coped in the situation with the stressors. Inhibiting emotions was found to be the most frequent coping strategy employed with the principals in this group. The results from Poirielle and Yvon's (2014) study "confirm that the emotional-transactional process involves problem and emotion focused coping" (p. 13) and suggest that, while surveys and quantitative methods aid in understanding the transactional theory of stress, there is a need for further research on coping in order to fully understand the dynamic processes involved.

Practicing gratitude through daily exercise of gratitude practices and mindfulness meditation have been found effective in improving well-being and combating issues associated with stress:

Positive psychology training has the depth of theory, research and interventions to allow principals to manage these stresses in an effective way. Mindfulness meditation facilitates enhanced present-focused and more effective emotional regulation; gratitude teaches us to tune into the things that work well in our worlds and to savour the positive; positive emotions allow us to broaden our resources and to cope during times of stress; and the nurturing of transcendent strengths such as hope can make us more resilient. (Wicher, 2017, p. 26).

There seems to be less available research on effective coping strategies administrators employ to deal with stressors of the job than there are studies about causes and consequences. There is little research on coping strategies for contending with pressures and consequences of social media and the perceived need to be responsive and accessible 24/7 due to smartphones, texting, and instant messaging. The RQs deal specifically with

what we can learn from the perspectives of retired educators in dealing with stress. There is little to no research that involves retired educators and their views and perspectives on occupational stress. Further research in this area could provide a rich perspective on effective coping strategies and how administrators successfully balance work and life.

### ***2.2.3. Discussion of Occupational Support Programs and Tiered Support***

The literature that supports developing practices and policies to minimize school administrators' stress and to promote their emotional well-being is quite minimal, but there is useful information that can be obtained in the literature and history of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). The literature on Employee Assistance Programs does not deal with the specifics of the stress generating factors of school administrators; however, this literature can provide insight into how these programs might be developed further to address specific occupations such as for school administrators.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) became prominent in the 1940s. The focus in those early programs was often on worker alcohol problems. In the 1970s, occupational alcoholism programs transitioned to occupational social work programs and began to address mental health and other familial problems. Through the 1980s to the current time, employee assistance programs have continued to expand. Following September 11th, 2001, numerous federal grants and programs to support development of Employee Assistance Programs resulted in both increased services offered and the prevalence of their presence in workplaces around the United States (Masi, 2011).

EAPs—such as the ESI Assistance Group, which is a national provider of employee services—offer employees counseling services from a behavioral health professional.

Counseling services, work-life benefits, and certified financial coaching are offered to employees to address a variety of concerns including relationship and family issues, legal issues, mental health concerns, grief or loss of a loved one, substance abuse, health, and workplace difficulties (ESI Assistance Group, 2017). School employee wellness programs, such as EAPs, have been found to be cost-effective. School districts have experienced cost savings from the need for fewer substitute teachers for absent teachers (Eaton et al., 2007). While extensive in the services offered, EAPs like the one offered by the ESI Assistance Group are administered by a single vendor and are considered cost-effective in that they offer an array of benefits at a low cost. For example, ESI provides districts EAP coverage at the flat cost of under \$100 per employee per year. Yu, Lin, and Hsu (2009) found in their study that “EAP interventions can provide a buffer against the detrimental effects of stressors if the real predictors of employee stressors are well defined and considered” (p. 374). Eaton et al. (2007) agree, writing that “schools should implement comprehensive employee wellness programs to improve faculty and staff health behaviors and health status” (p. 557).

Programs for students to support social-emotional needs are more abundant than those for staff. If support for employees’ mental health and well-being was constructed similarly to that for students, there would be tiers or levels of employee assistance and support to address these issues. In schools we often approach student support systems for academic, behavioral, or social-emotional concerns through tiered interventions based on the Response to Intervention (RtI) model and approach (Saeki et al., 2011). Traditionally, RtI programs have been developed for students; however, the approach could also be

adopted for adults in the school system. In RtI, the first tier of support is often described as universal. Universal supports are available to all individuals in the organization and are intended to be preventative and proactive. For individuals who require more intervention or support than what is available at the universal level, a second tier of support is made available and is often termed as targeted or strategic. For those individuals who need even more support, a third tier is often available and considered intensive (Saeki et al., 2011). Employee assistance programs as they exist today, such as ESI, would then be considered a targeted or strategic support for staff who need additional support or intervention.

While EAP services are accessible to all school employees in districts that provide them, they are most associated with supporting individuals reactively to address some type of general concern. If employee assistance and support were constructed as a multi-tiered system, there would be additional support to address prevention and more individualized support for employees who are struggling. Yu et al. (2009) discuss the effectiveness of EAPs for individuals in improving quality of life, promoting educational wellbeing, reducing absenteeism, etc.; however, they are superficial in that all employees are treated the same.

While there seems to be developed systems of support for students to address the increase of challenges and concerns associated with mental health and well-being, there is less support and fewer systems that address the needs of school staff and in particular school administrators. Even less attention has been focused on the establishment of district's practices and policies to support the emotional well-being of administrators.

Simply knowing that stress exists for administrators does not in and of itself provide useful knowledge about actions that could be taken to minimize job-based stress.

There have been commentaries identifying the Silicon Valley area as a particularly high stress environment (Huang, 2015). In these districts, school and district administrators are challenged with working in high stress environments. No example is more severe than the string of student suicides experienced by the Palo Alto schools. These suicides resulted in area districts creating robust programs targeting student social-emotional health.

While there is substantive literature on the causes and stress levels of administrators (Wells, 2013), little to no attention has been paid to the development of policies and programs for districts to support administrators in these stressful positions. Adding levels of support has proven to better address student needs (Saeki et al., 2011); however, currently there is a gap in the literature concerning the impact of adding support levels to address the needs of staff and administrators serving in schools and districts. The result is a gap in the literature that implies a need for further research to inform what can be done to address this issue and ameliorate the effects of administrator stress. Research is needed to better understand recommendations for practice and for districts to consider in terms of professional development and strengthening occupational support programs using tiered supports in order to ensure healthy leaders for our students.

#### ***2.2.4 Crisis Leadership: Contending with the COVID-19 Crisis***

Midway through this study the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and as of this writing, more than 417,000 people have died in the U.S. (“Coronavirus in the U.S.,” 2021). Schools, including in the district where I work, are still shut down after ten months of closures and

students are being taught through remote instruction. Administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents are dealing with the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic while the nation is experiencing unprecedented events including a recent hostile takeover of our national capitol building. Vaccines are currently being administered to health workers and there is collective optimism for a better 2021.

I know from my own experience and from talking with teachers and administrative colleagues that being a teacher and administrator during this time has been very stressful. Remote learning has required a complete shift in pedagogy for teachers and operating schools and districts in the midst of this crisis has created an intense new workload. We have been charged with reacting and reshaping education with a moment's notice, and we are now faced with the reopening of schools with concerns about students and staff safety. We know that there will be immense issues and challenges moving forward that we only can speculate about now while we are still closed. I can't think of a more stressful time to be an educator or an educational leader in schools.

The COVID-19 situation contextualizes the importance of leaders having the skills and capacity to contend with crisis. A recent article from the Harvard School of Public Health, "The Importance of Meta-Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis" (Ellis, 2020) discusses the importance of healthcare executives having the internal and external capacity to lead during crisis and change. Ellis describes leading with emotional intelligence and situational awareness during these difficult times as key and "the challenge for leaders is to deploy influence, often beyond their formal authority to foster unity of purpose and effort. The secrets to their success are communication, coordination, and collaboration."



The same is true for school and district administrators. The Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network (MHTTC)'s "School Mental Health Crisis Leadership Lessons" (2020) guide provides leadership lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic and suggested frameworks for school leaders dealing with crisis. The guide outlines skills and attributes that leaders need in a time of crisis in four phases of response: readiness, response, recovery, and renewal. In the area of readiness, school leaders need to possess skills that cultivate trust, they must practice reflection, and be able to identify and implement staff training. In order to respond they must be able to ensure relational safety, be strategic thinkers and guide the restoration of a sense of safety. To aide with recovery, school leaders must be able to be relational and work interdependently, enable and empower others, cope with ambiguity, transform ambiguity into coherence, find solutions, and be constructive, while naming navigating and normalizing the response.

The dissertation "Portraits of Professional Vulnerability in the Principalsip: Exploring an Aspect of Humanistic Leadership" by Gary Kiltz (2004) described personal and professional vulnerability. He defines personal vulnerability as "wounding that impacts the life of the leader outside the professional organization" (p. 35) that includes the emotional and physical manifestations of stress, such as health issues and professional vulnerability as "wounding that impacts the role of the leader within the organization where the wounding occurred" (p. 36) that includes the impact to the leader in terms of their work. If "school leadership is a practice of stewarding inquiry and vulnerability" and "the mental wellness, coping, resilience, and healing before, during and after a crisis

is suddenly at the forefront” (p. 5) as suggested in the Pacific Southwest MHTTC guide, then school and district leaders, like health care leaders, must have the capacity and skills to lead in unprecedented times.

### **2.3. Conceptual Framework**

As appropriate, administrators care for the well-being of students and school employees who report to him or her, yet, attention to the emotional well-being of administrators does not seem to be the responsibility of anyone within the district. “Principals cannot but face and deal with these emotions, while enacting their job and developing a professional self-understanding” (Kelchtermans et al., 2011, p. 104). While administrators may share their emotional problems with colleagues who are friends, it is considerably less clear who, if anyone, has a role in providing support and help to a colleague administrator who is having difficulties contending with aspects of his or her job. Nevertheless, administrators who are contending with job stress or issues affecting their well-being may be less well situated to be as effective as they might be were they not beset by stress. This study will focus on the reflections of retired educators from Santa Clara County in Silicon Valley who lived through the experience. The answer to the RQs will come from retired educators’ descriptions. The theoretical framework of phenomenological research is based on “seeking reality from individuals’ narratives of their experiences and feelings, and to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon” (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015, p. 2). Retired administrators from these districts can provide a unique perspective looking through the rear-view mirror at their experience. The conceptual framework proposed for this study is grounded in the use of narrative inquiry and the stories of retired educators. This method will help us to

better understand the impact of stress on administrators' personal and professional lives and the use of helpful coping strategies and tools. Understanding the impact of these roles on the lives of administrators will help inform practices for individual administrators and for districts to better support them. Retired administrators have experienced the aspects of the job and can help with understanding the causes of stress for administrators in order to devise effective strategies, resources, and practices to help current administrators. The themes and trends most often employed effectively by administrators will be analyzed from these narratives.

#### **2.4. Summary**

Stress is a pervasive factor for many people in American society and affects individuals in all constituencies in our schools. Many school districts are making serious efforts to contend with the stress, particularly as it affects students. In general, little is being done to respond to staff and administrator stress. While there is some research about the causes of administrator stress, there is minimal research into the efficacy of specific strategies administrators can employ to develop effective coping strategies. There is scant literature for how districts can best address this issue by supporting administrators and staff with professional development or other supports. While the research is limited, studies have also indicated that educational leaders directly impact the school's "vision, climate, morale and therefore achievement" (Wicher, 2017, p. 24), and so addressing and supporting administrator well-being is an important component of understanding leadership and administration.

The literature gaps suggest a need for more descriptive research that is oriented to capturing the dynamic process of dealing with stress from the school or district administrator's perspective. There are few studies into this topic targeted to administrators that go beyond administering surveys. The research would benefit from an addition of examination and analysis of narratives. Retired administrators are an untapped source of valuable information about potential pragmatic and effective ways to provide resources for stress management of administrators. Narrative research will help us better understand the storied experiences and practices of these school and district leaders.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology**

### **3.1. Overview**

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the methodological approach for this dissertation that includes sections pertaining to (a) sample, (b) selection process, (c) research positionality, (d) instrumentation, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, (g) rationale for the methodology, (h) potential conclusions, and (i) potential limitations to interpreting and generalizing findings. While the literature was used to inform the research in this descriptive study, qualitative methods were utilized including conducting interviews and developing descriptive narrative stories. The combination of interviews and the development of narratives and storied examples of leadership is a method that has been used to better understand the individual experience (Brill, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Murphy, 2013; Kiltz, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Riessman, 2007).

#### ***3.1.1. Scope and Limitations of the Study***

The scope of the study was limited to districts in Santa Clara County which is located in the Silicon Valley. As such, some of the conclusions of the study may be generalized only to these districts. Utilizing retired administrators as the sample source provided valuable insight; however, the participants were looking back and reflecting on their experiences. This insight is useful, but limited in that it will not include a perspective of administrators who are currently in the situation contending with stressful situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It does not provide reflections in real time on specific experiences of current situations like that of a black box of a plane (Kransdorff, 1996);

however, many of the participants are mentors to current administrators and were able to provide insight from previous experiences to current situations.

### ***3.1.2. Assumptions, Background, and Positionality of the Researcher in the Study***

Retired school administrators are a valuable if not untapped resource. Drawing benefit from their reflections through narratives and the identification of themes in their stories in order can help inform practice. While their experience can no longer benefit the individuals in their previous work roles, it could certainly benefit those who are in a position to make use of their experience currently serving in similar roles in school districts. As retirees, they are able to use their own experiences to express what they have come to recognize as a result of their experience, without being constrained by anything that would pertain to their employment. While they do not get a second chance, what they can share may help in the design of training and implementation of support systems for school and district leaders and give these leaders a better first chance.

In terms of my positionality, I am a current administrator in the role contending with stressful situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I have experienced the sudden death of a colleague and I am fueled to want to better understand the impact of work and stress on individuals in order to make a positive difference. With that said, conceptually I am more interested in learning about how individuals effectively manage stressful situations and balance their work and life, than what it is that stresses them out. In the context of educational administration, age and years of experience in administration are respected and valued. I see myself as still fairly young to be in the role that I am in at work. When I first was initially promoted to an executive cabinet role, I was more than 25 years younger

than the next youngest member of the team. In addition, there is also an imbalance in the number of male versus female educational leaders, especially in the role of superintendent in the U.S., with males serving in these roles at much higher rates. As a woman in my role, I am in the minority. While I have been promoted a number of times, gender remains somewhat of a factor. Some examples of my personal experience include being queried on multiple occasions, including by board members, about whether or not I intended to become pregnant soon when being considered for positions. As a young district administrator, I may have been perceived as seeking advice or wisdom from the retirees I was interviewing, which in many ways is the research that I proposed to do through this research.

### **3.2. Selection and Sample**

This study included five retired administrators from Santa Clara County. I chose the roles of superintendents and associate superintendents because they have experience serving as the leader of a district, and principal because they have experience serving as a leader of a school. After approval by the IRB in the fall, I sent out invitations to the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) region eight retiree list for Santa Clara County and received responses from four individuals who were invited to participate. I then reached out to more retired individuals who were known or recommended to me in order to recruit additional participants. I was able to recruit five individuals including three women and two men as participants, one of whom I worked with previously. Each of the participants had retired from school and district leadership roles either as superintendent, associate superintendent, or school principal. Among them, they average 39 years of

experience working as educators. Four of the five were teachers and one had been a school psychologist before going into administration. All participants provided signed informed consent forms (see Appendix A) and participated in at least two open ended interviews. The participants were kind enough to engage in follow up calls and communication for clarification and additional questions during the process. I spent four months interviewing the participants between October 2020 and January 2021. All of the participants participated in the interviews with openness and a willingness to share their experiences and reflections and each participant chose their own stories and examples to share as administrators at the site and district level. Each participant shared background information and many shared insight into how their prior educational and work experiences shaped their approach for contending with difficult situations.

### **3.3. Selection Procedures**

In order to obtain a range of views, a list of retirees was created and a letter of invitation was sent to potential participants (Rapley, 2004). Potential participants included retired principals and superintendents. After volunteering, exploratory conversations were had with the five subjects for the study in terms of interviews. Participants were considered as qualified if they retired from one of the roles noted above from a district or school in Santa Clara County.

### **3.4. Interviews**

Initial interview questions were created to probe factors such as: (a) experience prior to becoming a school/district administrator, (b) years of experience as an administrator, (c) stressors faced on the job, (d) individual definitions and stories about stress, (e) stress



management and coping strategies, (f) impact of the work on personal and professional life, and (g) advice or suggestions for current or prospective administrators. These themes and questions were tested during two pilot interviews. Following the pilot process, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of the hindsight of those administrators who have retired and can look back and reflect (Hatch, 2002). See Appendix B for the interview protocol.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the interviews were over the phone or via Zoom. Rapport was developed through providing support for the participants through employing active listening, paraphrasing back when appropriate, and asking “gentle but nudging” questions and follow up questions where appropriate. Additionally, I shared my own leadership stories with participants pertaining to my positionality in terms of my own experiences with stress and interest in the subject. Follow up interviews, phone calls, and communications helped clarify information or to further probe areas during the development of the narratives. Each of the in-depth interviews was recorded and transcribed. For the recordings, I let the participants know I would be recording the Zoom interview sessions and for back up I would also record the audio using a recording application on my phone. I then uploaded each audio file to Rev.com (an electronic transcription service) and received a draft. Because the drafts were automated, there were a number of errors in the text. As I worked on the stories, I listened to each audio file and cleaned up the final text of the transcript.

Talking about the impact of work or stress on one’s personal or professional life can be sensitive, particularly for someone who has had health issues, or went through a divorce or

other difficult experience. In order to support participants' comfort in participating in the initial interview, participants were provided the initial interview questions in advance. The follow up interviews were open-ended and did not have structured questions in the traditional question and answer format to allow stories to emerge. Participants were assured that their name and the names and locations of people and places will be changed to protect their identity.

### **3.5. Data Collection**

Data collection methods to address the RQs included qualitative interviews of Santa Clara County retired school and district administrators to identify stories and lived-experiences with job related stress and ways they managed stress. Information from the interviews was recorded, transcribed, and coded to provide thematic insights, and excerpts that were used to create a collection of storied experiences. The content of the interview instrument included open ended questions that address the RQs focused on collecting stories of leadership challenges, examples of work-related stressors, and the impact of the job on the administrator's professional and personal life as well as suggestions and recommendations the participant has for current administrators. These interviews and follow up interviews followed an emergent design and were used to create a collection of storied experiences highlighting the findings (Creswell, 2009). After the interview sessions that I recorded on Zoom and using an application on my phone, I uploaded the audio files to Rev.com for an automated transcription of the session. I read and re-read each transcript, and listened to the recordings of each of the interviews, in some cases multiple times in order to understand and select individual excerpts that

illustrated their lived experiences with stress and their suggestions and recommendations for managing stress.

I uploaded the transcripts to Dedoose and coded them using emergent coding to look for thematic trends and to identify key quotes and storied experiences that addressed the RQs. The initial codes I created included stressors, resilience, and coaching/mentoring. Examples of some of the emergent codes include caring about others, self-care, gratitude, community/network resilience, individual resilience, triangular concept of problem solving, and relationships. Given the personal nature of creating narratives after the stories were created, I sent drafts to each of the participants to review for correctness. As I moved through the analysis, I received supportive feedback from each of the participants and some clarifying information (e.g., a participant's age and the name of a book title that was referenced) which helped me improve the overall accuracy of the stories.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

Drawing from Riessman (2007), the method for analyzing the data collected during the interviews was through thematic analysis in which the goal is to “keep the story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than component themes (categories) across cases” (Riessman, 2007, p. 53). This data analysis methodology has extensive use in qualitative research and provides a way for explicating the data. Danzig (1999a) discusses analyzing leadership stories in his article, “How might leadership be taught? The use of story and narrative to teach leadership.” He writes,

Analysis looks at the structure of the story. It explores what makes a story believable and what are possible alternative interpretations. Analysis invites the listener to compare and discriminate among multiple representations of phenomena. It is my

contention that analysing experienced leaders' stories promotes learning by examining the underlying motives and theories that inform actions (p. 119).

Analyzing the text allowed for the creation of emergent categories of themes. Through this process I was able to identify patterns and connections in the interviews that helped me select key excerpts that were responsive to the RQs and identify themes across interviews (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Table 1 depicts each research question with the corresponding source of information and data analysis and reporting procedure.

In order to capture meaningful excerpts and craft the narratives of the participants, I engaged with the transcripts and audio recordings in a variety of ways. I started out by highlighting the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, and coding the full transcripts using emergent themes in Dedoose. Through that process I was able to identify initial themes related to stressors the participants faced on the job and ways they managed the stress. This helped me to create an outline of each of the participant's stories that addressed the RQs. I then crafted each individual story by listening and re-listening to each participant's full recording of the different interviews, starting and stopping the recording so that I could make notes and capture their exact words. This process helped me identify themes for each of the participant's stories. Each story was organized with an introduction to the participant through a brief overview of their background followed by a key quote. The key quote in each participant's story is intended to serve as an introduction to their leadership story that details their experience with stress and contending with stress. After the creation of each of the individual stories I reflected on each of the participant's experiences, in relation to my own personal experience, and identified what were three key or powerful themes for me from the stories.

**Table 1***Sources of Information and Methods for Analyzing Data*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Corresponding Source of Information</b>	<b>Corresponding Data Analysis/Reporting Procedure</b>
RQ 1: What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator?	Open ended interviews with questions such as, what were some of the stressors of the job? What were your biggest challenges? Could you share a story or an example of a specific challenge, something pivotal for you that you faced and how did you deal with it? What was the impact of the stressors on your personal and professional life?	Qualitative procedures including narrative analysis and the development of narratives
RQ 2. What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators?	Open ended interviews with questions such as, as a retired educator, who has been there, done that and survived, how'd you do it? How did you cope with the stress of the job? What advice do you have for current administrators?	Qualitative procedures including narrative analysis and the development of narratives
RQ 3. What themes related to managing stress and traumatic events come out of the narratives of retired administrators?	Transcripts and recordings from the interviews	Qualitative procedures including narrative analysis, coding, and reporting of emergent themes and identification of powerful themes from the narratives

### **3.7. Rationale for the Methodology that Informs My Research Design**

The purpose of this project was to learn from the experience and reflection of retired educational administrators. Caduri (2013) writes,

Aristotle was the first to distinguish between two sorts of knowledge: one theoretical (*Sophia*), within which we describe the world and understand it; the other practical (*Phronesis*), which entails the virtues one has to possess in order to achieve *eudemonia*, that is, wellbeing. (p. 40)

The research design was multi-pronged with the first phase focused on collecting data through the interview process in order to answer the RQs. Leadership stories were developed to highlight how administrators cope or struggle with the stressors of the job. The final phase involved analyzing the themes from the excerpts in order to interpret results and make recommendations for practice and further research.

### **3.8. Conclusions**

The conclusions of this study will help current administrators understand the experiences that retired administrators describe as stressful and their retrospective considerations for the practices that were more or less effective in coping with or avoiding job related stress. These stories and analysis of them signify a need for more focused preparation programs and professional development for administrators focused on developing skills and provides insight for the content of these programs.

### **3.9. Authenticity and Believability**

Retired administrators offer a unique and valuable perspective on the problem for this investigation. They have had to deal with the stressors of the job, not as an abstract issue,

but in their day-to-day work as a school leader. Using the words of the participants to craft the stories gives the narrative greater authenticity and believability.

Utilizing retired administrators as the sample source provides valuable insight; however, the participants were looking back and reflecting on their experiences. This insight is useful, but it does not include a perspective of administrators who are currently in the situation or provide reflections in real time on specific experiences.

## **Chapter Four: Research Findings**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In my role as an administrator I have to deal with day to day stressful situations, but there are situations when I am faced with more serious but isolated events including some difficult personnel matters, such as the death of a teacher and the suicide of a student. In February 2018, I experienced a personally traumatic event with the sudden death of an administrative colleague and friend. As an administrator I had no formal training with how to deal with that magnitude of loss or the stress of any of these types of situations or events, let alone how to deal with the sudden death of a colleague. When my colleague passed away, I was completely overwhelmed and stressed yet I had to figure out how to be in a supportive role and help coordinate the district's response while also processing what had just happened to a friend and co-worker. I was not prepared for this and it shook me to my core.

I began this qualitative study because I wanted to find out about other administrators' experiences and how they faced the day to day, as well as, the more serious issues that generate stress. I wanted to learn from them about strategies that might be employed to avoid or ameliorate some of the negative impacts of stressful situations. I chose to interview retired administrators because I felt that they could provide advice and insight from their own lived experience as site or district administrators contending with difficult issues and dealing with stressful situations. These individuals were able to provide real examples of both day to day stressors, as well as the extraordinary events that they faced on the job as an administrator. As retirees they had more freedom to share their experiences



and perspectives. Each of the individuals shared ways they approached and responded to problematic events, what they perceived as stressors of the job, and how it impacted them personally as well as suggestions for current administrators based on what they had learned along the way. During the interview sessions I was able to capture the participants' experiences and stories of stress, and coping. Each shared their description of their approach for addressing some problematic situations and suggestions and recommendations for current administrators dealing with similar issues.

In this chapter the research findings are organized into sections. Section 4.2 addresses RQ 1 (What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator?) and RQ 2 (What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators?). In this section, the findings for the RQs are presented through the collection of the individual storied examples of the participants. Each leadership story begins with a background section that includes a brief biography and personal history of the leader (Danzig, 1999a and 1999b) in order to contextualize the leader's experiences. Quotes that are included in the stories are the words of the study participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality. In order to better understand concerns of administrators in Santa Clara County and suggestions for administrators for managing job related stress, I also spoke informally with an individual who is a provider from a nonprofit organization with the pseudonym, "Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness." The Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness supports educator mental health and provides mentoring and support

for teachers and administrators. A discussion of Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness's support services and what I learned from talking with one of the providers about her experience working with teachers and administrators in terms of the stressors they face and coping mechanisms is included after participants' stories section of this chapter in Section 4.3. Finally, a summary of findings related to the RQs is discussed in Section 4.4.

#### **4.1. Participant Stories**

##### ***Adam Reed***

##### **Background**

Adam Reed is a white male and first generation immigrant to the U.S. He is currently in his 70s and retired from the role of superintendent. Adam spent his career all in the same K-8 district working his way up, having started out as a school psychologist. He was a school psychologist for seven years before he moved into an assistant principal role at the intermediate school level where he served for two years. He was a principal at the elementary level for three years and then four years at the intermediate level prior to his promotion to the district office in administrative roles in curriculum and instruction. Adam served as superintendent for ten and half years prior to his retirement. In retirement, he coaches current administrators and works for a nonprofit organization that provides consultation services to school districts.

Adam told me he "always wanted to be a teacher." As a young person, he described having positive experiences attending school and had attended seminary school for five years. He was the only one in his family to go to college, and he missed being drafted by

one week. When he graduated college, his number came up and he joined the national guard and served for six years. Adam attended graduate school and was awarded a Master of Science degree in applied psychology and began his career as a school psychologist. Adam spent his entire career in just one district and I asked him about this. He shared that he “grew up” in his school district and was “lucky along the way.” He said, “I know it’s kind of unusual, but I never had reason to move. I moved up pretty quickly, once I got into administration. I was very fortunate.”

*“You need a process to deal with things that you don’t know are going to happen to help you make decisions when the time comes.” -Adam Reed*

Adam talked about the angst he felt when making the transition from site leadership to the district office and the challenges and stressors he faced with a dysfunctional team in his new role at the district office. He said, “The only time in my career I was not happy was my first 6 months at the district office.” As a principal Adam felt like the school was his “baby,” and when he went to the district office he was now part of a team where there was dysfunction and he was distressed. Two of the directors were challenging the assistant superintendent whom Adam had a tight bond with, and he didn’t like it at all. So much so, that in January of that year when one of the district’s principals got sick, he went back to that elementary school site as principal, while also continuing to do district office work. He said that “saved him” because he was “miserable.” After that year, things got better. There was a new superintendent and Adam started to enjoy his district office role. He was creating programs, such as a reading and writing academy, and he started liking it because he could do things.

I asked Adam about his ascent to the superintendency. He told me he wasn't sure he actually wanted to be a superintendent at the time. He loved the assistant superintendent role, but part of what drove him was that he didn't want to experience having someone in the superintendent role again who would bring disruption and distrust. He had experienced that earlier in his career. He shared that the district had a long time superintendent, the "George Washington of the district" who was a "good guy," and was there close to thirty years before he retired. During that time the district grew from one school to fourteen or fifteen schools. Unfortunately, that superintendent got sick towards the end, and wasn't as visible, and so the board wanted to hire a superintendent who would be visible to the staff, parents, and the community. Adam said they got that in the new superintendent but the superintendent just "alienated so many people." Budgets were tight and cuts had to be made. Adam reflected and said that there was a "good way and a bad way to deliver bad news" where people feel respected, and with the new superintendent it was a "horrible process." That superintendent ended up getting fired and the board was recalled. Adam refers to that time as very difficult. In effect, there was "civil war" in the district. He describes that experience as having impacted him and his thinking a lot. While Adam's position in the district enabled him to have a "front row view," his role precluded him from taking action to end the discord.

Adam shared other examples of events and situations that generated stress. One of the most tragic events occurred when he was a middle school principal. There was a murder-suicide of one of his teachers who killed his wife and then killed himself. Adam had to deal with the crisis that "was just stunning all the way around." He said it was the

late 1980s, and as principal he was “pretty much on his own” and “just had to deal with it.” He shared that he was fortunate because he had a “good older principal, a good mentor who was a friend” who was able to help him. He also felt that his prior years of administrative experience helped him. “It wasn’t like I’d ever had to deal with a murder-suicide, but I had been accustomed to dealing with issues, and things of that nature. I’m not sure how it might’ve been if it would’ve been in my first year.”

I asked Adam how he dealt with such a difficult situation that entailed a considerable emotional component. He told me, “you need a process to deal with things that you don’t know are going to happen to help you make decisions when the time comes.” Safety always comes first, then you start going down the line. “First, make sure everyone is safe.” He explained the need for caring for the “psychological safety of the people involved” and provided an example of what he learned when responding to the media. He was being “peppered” by the media to provide details about the staff member. Adam knew that the individual involved in the murder-suicide had a family and kids and he saw how some individuals in the school community had been misquoted in the press. He said, “It was a lesson for me on how to talk to the press, and not to talk to the press. And fortunately, one of the principals, a veteran principal, who had been there, he goes, don’t tell them much.” Adam took his mentor’s advice and was very measured with responding to the press. He talked about how challenging of a situation that was and how administrators don’t have “any formal training” in dealing with events like these.

Adam explained how the murder-suicide affected him personally. He told me, “Obviously when it happened I was scared. I was really nervous on how to handle it.

First, you hear about it and then you start (dealing with) all the implications.” He shared that his initial reaction was feeling nervous, but then he “jumped into action.” He had a laundry list of things he needed to do. He contacted the Center for Living with Dying, a grief organization, and set up faculty meetings and support for staff and students. “It was like, get a hold of this person, notify the superintendent...get ready, notify the parents, draft the parent letter...talk to the kids, talk to the faculty first thing.” Adam explained to me that he knew the individual who murdered his wife and then killed himself and that he and his wife had just been at the individual’s house for a social gathering, a month earlier, where we had met the individual’s new wife who had been killed. He said he was scared when the event first happened, but he knew he had to “put his own grieving aside” and “deal with it.”

We talked about the tragedy of student suicides and how these events affected Adam deeply as a principal and as a superintendent. He said having a staff member do it “was bad enough but if I had a kid do it, I’d go into the tank emotionally.” During his tenure as superintendent a student committed suicide and he was “absolutely devastated.” He said, “I acted right away. I knew what to do, to get the principal calmed down, get the staff together... I jumped into superintendent mode and called (a PR consultant) for communication-crisis intervention...got everything ready and set everything up. I jumped in. I knew what to do, but inside I was devastated... because that was a kid. That impacted me in a completely different way. I am a very emotional person. I take it hard, but I know I have to move into action.” I asked him to tell me more about it and how he coped with it personally. He said, “you have to act right: that’s your job. Everyone’s looking at you.

You don't have time to, you can't fall apart, and you have to take care of everyone else and that's the way it works. I have to take care of the assistant superintendents, the principals, leadership team, and it rolls down. It doesn't come up, and that's part of the job."

Adam believed his training as a school psychologist helped him become a successful school and district administrator. He said, "I've been a principal. I've been a superintendent. I've taught leadership classes for years. and I've never taken a leadership class in my life, not one." Adam told me that there was an article that came out that was titled, "What Makes or Breaks a Principal" (Donaldson et al., 2009). It said, "there were three things that really separated successful principals and not. It was the ability to facilitate, consult and mediate, which was exactly what my training (was)." Adam elaborated strategies for dealing with difficult situations and on coping mechanisms he employed personally to deal with stressful situations. He said, "I have my own coping mechanisms. When I get like that, I go into myself. I reflect and try to sort it out in my mind and just let some time go by." He also explained how important it is "to have people around who you can share things with and vice versa, whether it's other colleagues that you can trust, or friends that you can trust, because you need to be able to go back and forth and have people that understand what you're going through." He said it was really important for him to build up a social network of people. For him, there were people he was close to at work, some whom had become friends for life. He said it was really good to have people there who you could bounce things off, and who would act as mentors, to talk, and guide you through it. Adam said, "the combination of the peer social and then having mentors who you can trust and run ideas by can make a big huge difference from

a professional perspective.” Adam believes that all administrators need to have a professional group of individuals in similar roles outside of their districts to meet with, and talk to, in a safe and trusting space about all the things that are really bothering them for both support and to learn from each other’s experiences.

Adam told me that some of the work he was most proud of was also among the most challenging and stressful he accomplished during his years as a school administrator. He shared that his work in the area of equity and whole system reform in his district was an example of difficult work that was particularly stressful but that they actually had “good results backed up with data.” He said, “life isn’t fair but my approach always has been I want to make it a little bit fairer for others and as much as possible eliminate luck as a variable” and that his district was one of the first districts to “name race as a variable” in looking at barriers to student achievement. He mentioned that he still has a copy of the district’s plan from the late 1990s focused on closing the achievement gap. He talked about it being controversial at the time and that it involved him leading discussions about white privilege and racism and that required a “whole different skill set.” He also talked about the challenges with leading these efforts at the district level. He told me about the need to balance all of the various interests of the individuals involved and that it was “hard work, but necessary work.” He said one of the “scariest parts” of doing the work was that people, including his friends, said he was “tearing the district apart.” He told me, “I always say everyone is in favor of equity until it impacts them and then it’s a whole different ball game... people actually have to give up something and be faced with having conversations and questioning.” He said that he started this work in the late 90s,



and it's the same work that is needed today. He mentioned one of the reasons he continues to teach in retirement is so can stay current. He continues to read about and learn about how to address the issues we face in schools in this area.

I asked him about his strategy for addressing the challenges of the equity issue at that time, and he told me he started out by listening. He would have “meetings with the African-American parents at every school, every Friday night for a year.” With twenty-one schools that meant twenty-one meetings he was attending on Friday nights, and then he would do the same thing on Tuesday nights with the LatinX families. He said the meetings would start around seven o'clock in the evening, and sometimes he would get home by eleven. He would take the time to just listen and then would have to act on what he heard at the meetings and get other people convinced to act. We discussed stressful situations that he faced where people were resisting change, and when litigation ensued or the media and other organizations got involved and how he would have to deal with all of that.

He said his “theory of action is if you can imagine a triangle, you have results, process, and relationships. The more complicated the results, the tighter the process, or the better the relationships need to be. And if you don't have a tight process, you better have really tight relationships. If you don't have tight relationships, your process better be tight, or you're not going to get those results.” He explained the triangular process further as a “kind of a mathematical equation” in how it operates. He said, “a lot of times you have people trying to take on a complicated result without doing a real true analysis. Do you

have the processes in place, the skill set in place or someone who could provide the skillset and then who are the key relationships that you need to have in order to get those results?”

Equity, he contended is “the most complicated process of all, because you’re asking people to question very fundamental beliefs.” He said, “It starts as an intellectual discussion, we get into your White privilege, how you’ve benefited, how the system contributes to institutionalized racism. And then it becomes personal when you have to question your own beliefs. That becomes a whole different ball game, and that requires a completely different leadership skill set that needs to happen because now you’re asking people to question their beliefs.”

I asked him to tell me more about the assets that he had for his functioning as a superintendent and he said he had “a great board and a great executive team” and that made a “big difference.” He said they were on the same page and he had great support and he didn’t have to expend energy “arguing with the board or worrying about an executive team member that wasn’t holding their weight.” He felt that he was “really blessed with outstanding support.” He had “positive energy” doing the work, and not having to “spend negative energy on the board or the executive team.” He said, “everyone should be so lucky” and commented, “once you develop a trust and they trust you, that was great.” Adam shared that stress impacted him personally in that he is a “worrier.” He said he had to learn to accept that’s who he is, but that he also was really good with boundaries and keeping the work “separate” from his family life. He talked about the importance of both having a strong social network and being able to “look outward” on the different situations in order to deal with them.

I asked Adam about how his on-the-job experiences influence the work he is doing subsequent to retiring; he said he believes in mentoring and coaching and was “blessed and always had outstanding mentors” in his career. He shared that he thinks it’s really important to have coaching, even before you really need it, before things get hard or you’re faced with a major challenge. He said as superintendent he had mentors whose primary role was to take care of his needs. He shared that he thinks it is important to just have “someone you can air your frustrations with and get some ideas from.” Adam shared his approach to coaching his mentees. He explained that first he listens to them, because “oftentimes it’s about their emotional needs,” and dealing with the frustration. Then he talks with them about the context and the specific issue. He said, “It’s a lot like counseling” and at the appropriate time he asks questions and shares with them that “we all have had failures and challenges.” He feels like letting them know, “you aren’t the only one,” helps normalize the challenges that they are facing. He also tells them, “It’s not the problem that counts, it’s the response to the problem,” because the problems are always there, and it’s how we respond to the problem that is key. He acknowledged it’s always a hard situation when someone attacks you personally. Adam advises his mentees to “keep the focus on the problem” and to “step back a little bit, like leadership on the line, get on the balcony, look down, and say ok, how would you look at this if you were coaching somebody else? What would you advise them and look at it from that perspective?” The ‘on the balcony’ metaphor comes from Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky’s work on leadership, *Leadership on the Line* (2002). Heifetz and Linsky describe getting “off the dance floor” and going “to the balcony” and “looking down at the dance floor,” an analogy

that describes taking a mental step back while in a middle of a situation and examining it from a different perspective (p. 53).

I asked Adam for suggestions for ways to support current administrators. He shared with me that he doesn't feel that administrative preparation programs formally teach the skills of facilitation, consultation, and mediation that are most needed to address these complex issues. He said that it is a specific skill set administrators need and you have to "practice it, rehearse it, get feedback on it." He said it's called facilitative leadership, and "it's more than just being an instructional leader. It's how you get the staff moving in the right direction, how you coach teachers to improve their instructional practice in the classroom, how you facilitate a difficult situation, and managing up." Adam talked about challenges that his mentees are facing right now in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic including school closures, remote learning, and learning pods. He provided an example of an Assistant Principal he's working with who hadn't yet met her Principal in person with everyone working remotely. He shared that he believes in having a mentor or coach help you deal with the stress of the job by having someone you can talk to and bounce ideas off of. I asked him to elaborate on that and he said, "there is a difference between stress and distress. Stress is the normal part of doing business, like people getting angry with you. Distress is when it becomes a pattern when it impacts your lifestyle and your thinking, and that's when you need to be really careful, when it gets to the point where you're almost thinking, I can't stand to do this anymore."

Adam provided an example of distress that stood out to him. He said one of the "biggest forms of distress is when you have a bad boss." "Bad bosses are terrible." He said he

experienced this with a person once who was “wreaking havoc for three years and no one could trust her and that was distress, because that wasn’t part of the job. That was just bad leadership.” We talked about how to handle that kind of distress and he said that one thing he was always good at was “managing up.” He said, “You have your staff you deal with, but then you are going to have a boss and bosses have different styles and you have to be able to figure out what their style is and what happens to push your buttons and then you have to be able to manage up.” Adam gave the example, “if you have a very authoritarian boss you have to know that they are going to want to do things a certain way and if you have trouble with that it can be really distressful.” We talked about supervisory relationships and how “you have your own relationship with the people you supervise, but the people above you, you have to know how you deal with them.” He told me at my level it’s all about the superintendent and the Board, and that, “they could wreak havoc on you. If you have a board that is out of control or even just one board member who doesn’t know the role and tries to micromanage everything that can cause a lot of stress.”

I asked Adam to share his advice for current administrators, and he talked about the importance of practicing gratitude. He said, “thank others, because it comes back to you.” He shared a story of attending a retirement party and seeing someone he hadn’t seen in twenty years. She came up to him and told him she still had a thank you note from him. He said it, “made me feel good and made her feel good.” He told me “paying it forward pays dividends because it comes back to you.” Adam said he understood that focusing on other people’s needs and their interests and solving problems was all part of the job. Adam shared that when his son became a principal, he gave him a box of thank you notes and

he told him to “use these up.” Adam shared that he still has thank you notes from during his career that were given to him. He described a “little treasure chest, a little box” that his school board gave him where he keeps all of his thank you notes from over the years. He remembered he got this idea from an old superintendent who told him, “when you get down, go pick them up and look at them.” He said, “It’s good to remind yourself and get some validation and to validate others because they need it too.”

### *Crystal Cali*

#### **Background**

Crystal Cali is a white female in her early 70s who retired after nine years as the superintendent of a K–8 school district after a 41-year-long career. Prior to becoming superintendent, Crystal served as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in a K–12 district for five and a half years. She also had experience as an elementary principal for four years in a different K–8 district, and worked at a county office for three years. Crystal served as an assistant principal at the high school level for three years, and one year at the middle school level. Prior to becoming an administrator Crystal had 15 years of teaching experience. In her retirement, Crystal coaches new superintendents and administrators and teaches administrators in one of the preliminary credential programs. She also works for an organization assisting school boards with searches for new superintendents.

Crystal talked with me about her educational experience. She grew up in the Midwest and was the first in her family to graduate from college. She describes her parents as advocates for education and shared that her dad was a very positive person with many

mantras. He told her, “no matter what happens to you in life, if you get a good education no one can take that from you.” She said that became like “marching orders for her to go to school.” Crystal said her high school experience “wasn’t the best” but she got a scholarship and went to college and became a teacher. She was a classroom teacher at the middle school and high school levels and moved to Europe and taught at the early elementary level there for a few years. After returning to California, she felt that she should do something different and enrolled in an administrative credential program. She became department chair of her high school English department and the opportunity came up to become a high school assistant principal. She shared that she didn’t love high school administration though and after three years became interested in becoming an elementary administrator. Crystal earned her Doctorate in Educational Leadership, and was ready to become a district leader. She began applying for positions and was offered a superintendent position but declined the job because it didn’t feel like a match and instead took a position at the county office of education. She said the work at the county office was a great experience for her because she was working with districts from all over as part of the instructional support program.

Subsequently, she was hired as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in her former district where she had both previously taught and served as a high school assistant principal. It was an exciting time for the district as there was a \$3 million grant from a foundation intended to help “really turn the corner on student achievement.” Some of the district’s students were struggling. There were even ninth graders whose English language proficiency levels according to ELD assessments hadn’t

improved much even though they had been in the district since the first grade. Crystal describes working with educational leadership experts like Doug Reeves and Michael Schmoker who were helping them do their accountability plan and assisting them with professional development. She describes this period as “when we had the wind on our sails and the board was in alignment. We had the money and we really did make a difference for kids who needed the playing field leveled.” She describes doing very “avant-garde” things for kids with assessments and interventions. Because of the work they had done with these researchers who really invested in assessments, they instituted NWEA assessments and “formative assessments until the union was ready to kill us.” She said it was a wonderful time in the district.

*“If we aren’t having fun, we aren’t doing it right.” -Crystal Cali*

I asked Crystal about job related factors that caused her to experience stress, and she said that her job became very stressful when the board membership changed. She said, “instead of being the reform minded board that wanted to do everything they could to narrow that achievement gap and enable our EL students to really achieve their potential, the new board members came in with a different agenda. They believed we were doing everything we could to meet the needs of the struggling students and that somehow meant that the non-struggling students were getting cheated. It wasn’t the same climate anymore.” She knew the superintendent was going to leave, and so she left first, and much of the district office team followed, “because of the board.” Crystal left the district and became a superintendent of a K–8 district. Because of all of the work she had previously done to address barriers to student learning, Crystal was able to come to her new district with the



knowledge and experience to set up new data systems with intervention tracking and implement common assessments with a focus on continuous improvement of academic achievement for all students. She described an early leadership team meeting in her superintendency where she handed out little cards to everyone and asked them to write on the card “something they wished for the district.” After she retired she found the card she wrote for herself. She had written that she wished “to make the district the highest performing” in the area and she said, “Guess what? We were!”

I asked Crystal about the stressors she faced on the job. Crystal shared that a major challenge during her superintendency occurred early in her tenure and pertained to budget issues. She told me that many districts were cutting costs by implementing furloughs and some districts were making cuts to salaries. She recalled her board being extraordinarily fiscally conservative, but also feeling the teachers were working hard to improve instruction for kids. She said budget cuts were the “last thing that she needed to have happen.” In thinking about the teachers, she said she didn’t want to “do something dastardly to their salaries and never going to get them back on board.” Although Crystal was a new superintendent, she was able to work successfully through the difficulties with the board and to not do furloughs or take-backs. She explained that as a revenue-limit district with set funds from the state based on average daily attendance, there were even less funds available than districts which were funded by property taxes. She said, “we honored their contract and gave them step and column raises, and we were one of the only revenue districts that did that at the time.” Crystal talked about other stressful situations she contended with that pertained to work with school boards and also strategies she thought

were helpful when working with staff and unions. Crystal had been in districts where staff were just being beaten up by the board at board meetings. It was as though staff were being “crucified” or that it was an “inquisition” and after a meeting like that, the next day, “people were down and unhappy.” She said, as a leader, she thought it was her role to be the cheerleader type that brought the people back up and not have everyone “wallow around in what went wrong.” She said, as a leader you should take on the role that despite your own circumstances you try “to bring people out of that malaise.” When Crystal became superintendent she instituted “perception meetings” with staff to debrief the board, meeting the morning after board meetings with the purpose of letting everyone vent, and share in the frustration, and then come together in order to move forward.

We talked about the challenges with working with staff and unions and how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact various school policies and practices like negotiations. She described it as the “perfect storm to really create a sense of urgency.” She said, “we can look at the results of the situation for our children and it’s extraordinarily clear that some students have not benefited from this and are going to be even further behind than they might have been had they been at school.” Crystal said, “it is a moral obligation” to address students’ learning loss, and “creating that sense of purpose is 90% of it.” She said, “once staff get bought into the purpose and the why, you can help them make incremental changes.” She said you also have to be careful to not to do too much at once. One of the biggest mistakes Crystal saw over time is leaders starting something and all of sudden there is a new something that the leader wants to try and they wouldn’t sustain the first something. She talked about the importance of communicating with all of the staff in the

district in addition to what is being communicated by the union leadership at the table. She said “we spend so much time with the union leadership and we often have a false belief that the union leadership represents the teachers and are communicating.” She said that as district administrators we need to be able to manage the message about what’s going on and “how happy we are with all the things the teachers have done.” For example, we can say, “we are going to shine the light every week on five teachers that are doing really amazing things” and “create that sense of togetherness and urgency with the rank and file regardless of what is going on in negotiations.”

When faced with problems, Crystal says she would weigh out the problem and possible responses using a “cost-risk factor.” She’d think about the decision and analyze the risk-benefit and that really helped her deal with difficult situations. She said she’d consider what is the “worst case scenario” and ask her cabinet team to do the same. She also talked about the concept of dealing with challenging situations using a triangular process, the same exact process that was described by Adam Reed. She said, “I always see in my mind a triangle and one side of the triangle is relationships. Another part is processes and another part is results.” Crystal believes that people can learn these skills and be taught effective ways to address results by identifying a goal, metric, and an accountability plan. She believes you can learn how to build relationships, and be taught how to look at and create processes. She said that she is trying to teach these skills in the administrative credential program, and she is also mentoring administrators and superintendents in the three areas. I asked her about where she learned about this triangular process to approach problems and she shared that a colleague told her about

that years ago, and that it may have come from professional development training.

We talked about the implications of being a woman in educational leadership. She said she is hopeful that there will one day be a gender neutral attitude, but she doesn't expect that is going to happen. Crystal shared she had seen women respond in two different ways if they felt that there was stereotyping or obstacles because of gender. She said she had seen some of her friends choose to "wear it on their shoulders like a badge of honor" if they had felt passed over for a man for a position. She said the other path, her path, was "you realize this is our reality and you don't beat your head against the wall, you find a way around the wall." I asked her about her approach in mentoring current administrators and what stressors she is seeing current administrators and superintendents facing right now. She shared that COVID-19 and all of the different challenges of reopening are there, but the biggest challenge she is seeing facing the new superintendents is "dealing with the board." Crystal went on to speak about the issue as it pertains to female superintendents. She said, "there are some boards that are primarily male and sometimes don't respect the female superintendents as much as they need to and it's difficult for the female superintendent to know how to react." Crystal said she thinks each situation is unique because every one of the players is different and what might work for one person might not be the same thing that another person will respond to. She provided some examples of situations including one where a board member is an "absolute bully" and "very disrespectful" to the superintendent. She described another situation where the board member is very respectful to the superintendent but distrusts the superintendent's recommendations and so will go around her to another district official. Crystal believes

that “boardsmanship” and “how to work with each of the different personalities of the board” is the biggest challenge facing new superintendents. She shared that it’s also important that the superintendent is a match with the district; otherwise there will be clashes with the board, parents, and different political groups. She said it’s important to have to navigate your choice of districts before you join. I asked her how to do that, and she said she thought a large part of it is intuition or common sense. She said she thinks a lot of people don’t take that into consideration because they desperately want the title. She said she thinks it’s better to wait and make sure you are in a district that is the right fit than to get the job earlier for the title.

I asked Crystal about the impact of stressful situations on her personally and how she coped with the various stressors. She said that she never took things like budget issues personally. She went on to say, “when you are dealing with the personnel issues though, that’s the stuff that tears at your heart because you have trusting relationships with people, and when that trust is violated it not only hurts the organization it hurts you personally.” She told me those situations are “horribly stressful,” but that “you have to be resilient and tell yourself that there was nothing you could do to prevent it” and that “you aren’t their mother and you can’t make them behave the way they should be behaving.” I asked about how she coped with stressful situations such as issues with personnel. She told me she “tries to look at things optimistically, not taking things personally and understand that this is the game, this is how it’s done, and not get wrapped around the axle about anything.” Crystal also said exercise was important to her, and that she was a “jogger” and “a four mile a day walker,” but for her it was mainly about having a positive attitude and thinking

“no matter what happens the sun is going to shine tomorrow.” She’d remain positive and recalled her dad telling her, “I felt sorry for myself that I didn’t have any shoes until I saw the guy that didn’t have any feet.” She said, “I still had a job. I still had a paycheck. I had a healthy family. It is unfortunate that misbehavior happened and it does hurt the organization but you have to move on.” Crystal talked about the importance of work-life balance. In the K–12 district she worked as assistant superintendent she was working weekends and at night. Board study sessions were often held on weekends, and at times people would be emailing back and forth until midnight during the week. “It was a driving culture and it needed to be.” When she became superintendent of the K–8 district it was a different situation in that district and she decided to “to model the behavior” she would have liked earlier in her career. She made it her point to go home every day at 5:00 or 5:30 p.m. and would tell everyone at the district office to close up. She said, “If they didn’t get it done it could wait until tomorrow.” She tried to not go in to do work on weekends and told her management team that they “could email her after 6 o’clock at night, but I don’t encourage you to do that. If it’s an emergency and it absolutely can’t wait, ok. It’s not because I don’t want to take your email, it’s because I don’t want you doing it. I don’t want you thinking about it after hours.” She said she felt really good about that culture she helped establish there. Crystal explained that she thinks another way “to release stress” is being authentic with your leadership style by “letting your hair down” and “being who you are with the people you are leading.” Stress is contagious so alleviating personnel stress makes her job less stressful. Thus a big focus for her was on building positive relationships with people. She said it was important to her that everyone

felt important and she believes that something that helped in these situations was to have fun and laugh every day. Her saying was, “If we aren’t having fun, we aren’t doing it right.”

### *Cindy Heinze*

#### **Background**

Cindy Heinze is a white female in her early 70s who retired from the position of elementary principal in 2009. She served in the role of elementary principal for eleven years after having started out as a teacher with over a decade of experience teaching middle school, 4th grade, resource, and compensatory resource. Prior to becoming principal, Cindy was an assistant principal at the middle school and at elementary level for approximately eleven years. Cindy taught at the university level in the education department, including a clinical practicum class and two classroom management classes for new teachers. She coordinated the elementary student teacher placement program for 4 years where she hired, trained, and worked with field supervisors, placing student teachers out in schools and working with master teachers. In addition, Cindy has served as a field supervisor and is currently supervising three student teachers. Cindy has earned 3 master degrees in Social Science, Reading, and Educational Administration, as well as her doctorate in Educational Leadership.

Cindy attended K–12 Catholic schools growing up and reflecting on her own school experience, she shared that she felt “well prepared” to be successful in college. Cindy became a teacher. She told me about her “mascot,” Gork, and described a poster that she has in her office with a large fire breathing dragon with the words, “the monster who ate everything.” She said it was her mascot because she “went through some pretty challenging

times as a middle school teacher” and said, “I visualized having Gork’s power to stand my ground with the students in my classroom.” Cindy became a resource teacher that gave her a “feel for what it was like to work for the whole school.” She became an administrator and spent time at the elementary and middle school levels. Cindy shared with me that she was glad she spent as much time as she did as assistant principal as it really helped her be prepared to be a principal. In her final seven years, she served as a principal at one elementary school after having been transferred there from another elementary.

*“Make time for yourself, and make sure you have a balanced life.” -Cindy Heinze*

I asked Cindy about the stressors she faced on the job. She described a time that was “very, very difficult” when she was principal and was charged with integrating two sets of schools’ teachers staff and “getting them unified” following the school closure of one of the schools. Cindy said that a major success after the consolidation was that the school staff got together and applied, and was awarded the honor of becoming a California Distinguished School. She had thirteen staff members, including staff from both schools, attend the ceremony in southern California and she feels like that was really the “impetus” for the two schools coming together as one school.

She described challenges that she faced as principal including dealing with difficult issues with parents as “a major stressor.” She said, a parent might complain to the district office, “they would call my director, who would call me and say, you have a bit of a problem you need to straighten out.” An event that was a major cause of stress was when she would get a call from her director’s secretary letting her know, “a parent has contacted



the director about something you did. You need to call that parent and talk to them.” She said, “what would bother me so much from the way it was handled was the only thing you heard was what the parent said I did and I thought they have no idea what I did or didn’t do and they’re taking that point of view and that kinda bothered me.” Cindy said she would get on the phone as fast as she could, because she wanted to be able to deal with the problem quickly and effectively so she could report back to the director that everything was taken care of. When there was a complaint from a parent, she said she would try to cope with it by being “objective” rather than “taking it personally.” She said she’d “try to glean from them what they are trying to tell you, and maybe how you can improve yourself and how you can get past it.” She felt like the most important thing she learned from working with parents was being in “problem solving mode, to try to find a solution that works and implement it because you don’t want it dragging on.” Cindy said that when she found out a parent was “irate” or if her director called she would get to them that same day to take care of business, “because it’s better to do that than let it linger and it just gets worse and not better.” Cindy shared a story of a difficult situation involving calling a parent of a kindergarten student to come to the school. The student had “severe behavioral problems” and had been taken out of the classroom. When the parent arrived he went directly to the classroom “and accused the teacher of physically abusing the child.” There had been two adults in the classroom, the teacher and a resource teacher, who said she didn’t see the teacher do anything but the dad wanted to call the police. Cindy remembered going back to the office, and her secretary telling her she “couldn’t believe how calm” she was. Cindy thought maybe it was just that she was “in total shock.” She

said she called the police, called her director, and told her director what was going on. She said the director “came out and we were in my office and she sat with me and I think that was smart on my end, because obviously you have to let your superior know what’s going on with you, and to her actually come out and be with me, I think it really helped me a lot.” She said they called the police, and the police wanted to interview the teacher, but the union had advised the teacher not to participate in the interview. Cindy said that was the end of that situation, except that she continued to have difficulty with the parent. She described the situation as “scary,” but that it was resolved “the best that could be at the moment.”

Cindy provided another example of a challenging situation that involved a staff member. She said it was at the end of a school year when the teachers take the 5th grade students “across the street to the pool.” One of the teachers became upset and “took off” and left her students alone with the other classes and teachers at the pool. Cindy said, “Her partners came to me and were not happy because when she left they had to take care of her kids and they didn’t like it, and they definitely wanted me to do something about it.” Cindy talked to the teacher about it, and wrote up a memo about the incident and “gave her the letter and she told me she was going to go to the union about it, and I said fine.” The teacher was not happy with Cindy, but “came around” a little later after there was “a student who was really giving her a hard time” and Cindy “dealt with it with her” and the teacher realized she was being supported.

Cindy described her approach for coping with the stressors she faced at work. She said, “I think the stressor that I had was I would come home and I didn’t have a really good

day like I didn't handle something really well and that would always bother me." She said maybe it was a conversation with a parent or a discipline issue with a student that didn't go well. She said she was lucky. Her husband would ask her about her day and would discuss it with her and be her "confidante." She said, "I would lay out the case for him and say what do you think I should do? And so he gave me some ideas." Cindy appreciated his counsel and said, "I think having somebody who is not in the school business who you can sit down and present something to them, and say this is what I did. I wasn't happy with how this turned out. What is a better way for me to handle it?" She said, sometimes I didn't always like to listen to the correction, but I know I was better off for trying something based off on what he suggested and that really did help."

Another way Cindy mitigated the stress was by setting boundaries around her time at the school site. She said her colleagues would "stay until 5-6-7 o'clock at night working" and she would get out of there at 4pm. She said, "for me it was the best thing because I was able to kind of destress just by going home, and putting on casual clothes. I could still work at home, but it's just the idea of being in a more relaxed situation that really helped reduce the stress. I think if I had to stay until like 6-7 o'clock I would be very, very stressed. I would be really, really, really tired." She said, "especially if you are worried about something, just getting into another environment and really thinking it through in a different environment, I think it spurs you to come up with solutions you wouldn't come up with if you were in the situation per se."

Cindy worked out every morning and she feels like that helped her "immeasurably." She'd go for walks in the morning or would work out at a fitness center. She said

sometimes she'd think about a problem when she was out for a walk in the morning and by the time she was finished walking she had a new idea for how to address the problem. Golfing was another example Cindy provided as a way of self-care. She said, "Golf really helped me. Every Sunday we'd go out and play golf and just really have a good time. When it was time to prepare for Monday I didn't feel like, oh god it's Monday because I got a chance to get out and relax a little bit." She said, reading when she was able to helped "take some of the stress off" as well.

Cindy had colleagues she could rely on for support. She said, "I also had people I could talk to at the district if I ever had a problem" and that she could call her colleagues and say, "I have this problem. What would you do?" According to Cindy the district had "various ways for the principals to get together and de-stress." They had several meetings including an elementary principals' breakfast once a month. They also had time for the principals to get together with a retiree at her house and talk about issues that were of concern. She said, "I always felt like I was supported by my colleagues and if I ever needed help to talk over a problem I could always do that." She felt like she got some good pieces of advice that way. Cindy mentioned when she was first hired as an elementary principal the district had one of the retired principals to support her and they became "fast friends" and friends for twenty years after that. Cindy said the elementary principals would get paired up and were overall a close group and that was a good support network for her.

I asked Cindy what her advice was for administrators currently in the role and she said she feels it's important to be highly visible, and present on the school site even for district

office staff. She thinks it's important for principals to visit classrooms at least once a week. Cindy said she really liked visiting classrooms to see the kids, and see what they were working on and would always leave the teacher a positive note. Cindy shared that she felt like one of the bright spots of the job was working directly with kids, and finding out from them what was going on with them. She said that it's important to make sure that the school is run efficiently, but she also "learned the value of positive reinforcement" and different methods for dealing with students who have experienced trauma. Cindy mentioned that after schools reopen we are going to have to think about the trauma caused by the pandemic. Cindy described her approach to problem solving, "I deal with the situation directly, get help if needed, delegate if necessary, really sketch it out."

I asked Cindy about her experience being a female educational leader. She said she didn't think she experienced any challenges directly, but she felt there was a "glass ceiling" for her, and wondered if she was a male if she would have been promoted. She explains that she was happy with her decision to retire when she did because she was able to complete her doctoral degree, get involved in new projects, and reinvent herself in a way. As a coach to student teachers, Cindy is able to coach them on managing stress. She said she tells her student teachers to "make time for yourself, and make sure you have a balanced life." She went on to say it's important to "have friendships and to be sure you have somebody to talk to." "Having balance is super important. Being an administrator is a lot of energy and you just need to be able to feel rested so you can do your job."

## *Sharon Shively*

### **Background**

Sharon Shively is a white female currently in her mid 60s who retired in 2015 after serving as an Associate Superintendent for two years. Previous to 2015, she was the Director/Assistant Director of Adult Education for 18 years, which included principal duties for the adult education program. She served as Program Specialist for 10 years in a public school district. Earlier in her career she taught English and social studies at the high school and middle school levels. Later in her work in the school district she taught English as a Second Language for adult refugees and GED test preparation to at-risk learners. Sharon has a Master's degree in Educational Administration.

Sharon started out in public relations and marketing before becoming an educator. She enrolled in a program at a "teacher's college with a very strong education department." She said it felt like she was "in a good place and in good hands." She started her internship at two different schools and those experiences helped shape subsequent steps in her career. These experiences led to Sharon's first job teaching Vocational English as a Second Language to adults. Her students were refugees from Vietnam and learning English so they could be successful in the workplace. Sharon said that this was one of the initial highlights of her career. She was proud to be part of working with these amazing individuals, who were very eager and always showed up to class. Each week Sharon would teach her refugee students in the mornings, and then in the afternoons she served as an aide to another English teacher. At night she would teach other adults GED test preparation. Sharon said she appreciated that the different positions "offered a lot of

flexibility and a lot of opportunities.” She told me that she was very lucky to have had a mentor early on, an assistant principal, who guided her. She said, “I started doing program coordination and I worked with staff in curriculum, evaluation, and assessment and that’s how my career took off.” Eventually, she became the Assistant Director and then Director of Adult Education. Given her success in the district, she was asked by the superintendent to consider the position of Associate Superintendent. She said she accepted the position because of the challenge it presented and because the Superintendent and District Board of Trustees had faith in her. She said, “I was uncomfortable and I learned to accept things that were uncomfortable because I knew it would help me grow.” She said she also had it “way back in her mind” that if it became too difficult and she couldn’t do the job to her level of satisfaction, she could leave. She already had identified a pretty firm retirement date that was just a few years off. Sharon reflected on her two years in the Associate Superintendent job. She said the job piqued her interest in legal issues and mediating disputes which she is now doing outside of the education field in her retirement in addition to mentoring a public school administrator.

I asked Sharon about what she was most proud of from her career. She told me about a memorable highlight from her first year of teaching. It was in December and the students were giving gifts and she knew the students had very little given their financial circumstances. She said, “one elderly man came up to me and handed me a two to three inch piece of red tissue paper, like the tissue paper you’d find with a gift, and he had written in ink, ‘Good for you help me.’ I still have that paper.”

*“The best way around something is through it.” -Sharon Shively*

I asked Sharon about factors that caused stress in the different roles. Sharon began our discussion of stress factors by speaking about one of the most difficult tasks she had to face as a school administrator. “At one point, the District had to literally disband our school, let everybody go and rehire.” To her shock, she herself had to remain an employee while everyone else was laid off. She ended up “talking to every full time and part time employee in the school to personally let them know they were going to be laid off.” Sharon felt like there was “good district support” during that time and she presented a plan that she, “thought was reasonable, logical, positive and maybe, a way to make the school better.” She said, “We pulled it off, but during that time I remember easily working to 8 or 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, until 6 p.m. on Friday, sometimes coming in on Saturdays and working from home just because there was so much at risk. The stakes were high and I felt that staff needed to be valued yet we were laying them off.”

In the Associate Superintendent role, there was so much that was new to her in the position. She said, “I had nothing to go by. I was asking questions all the time.” She said “it was challenging transitioning and getting enough information to feel like I had some sense of where I was headed” with issues such as negotiations, legal issues, and personnel matters. Dealing with the legal issues was a particularly stressful aspect of her new role as Associate Superintendent since that aspect of her job had a highly significant impact on employees. Sharon said, it was “a major stressor” in her career and “significant because it involved employee relationships and livelihoods.” While in a greeting card shop Sharon said something caught her eye. It was a greeting card that “I almost mailed to myself, but I ended up putting it on my bookshelf in my office.” It was a line by Robert



Frost that said, “The best way around something is through it.” She told me, “When I thought that things were very, very difficult going, I would look at the card and say don’t quit, plod through.” Sharon talked about the challenges of “staying focused and plodding through” and that she “felt fortunate to be surrounded by people who had answers and who were supportive.” In looking back at the stressors of her different roles over the years, Sharon said she was advised that “personnel and budget” are two things you can’t delegate or hand off to anybody else. She said, “when you think of it, working with people and working with money really are the two most stressful things for many administrators.”

We discussed Sharon’s approach to dealing with difficult and potentially stressful situations. She said that she is pretty good at “facing reality, not sugar coating it, and looking at the facts.” She said, “I think about what approach would have the least amount of negativity, that shows the most ethical and positive spin that I can actually deliver.” We talked about the importance of communication and she said, “I would always tell them (the employees) the exact information I had and I would say it might change in two weeks but right now this is my source, and this is what I know, and I would keep them posted. During those times I would send emails every couple of days just to let them know the status of things and to let them know they could call me anytime or come into my office and have a 1:1.” Sharon emphasized that for her “relationships and communication are the bedrock of everything we do.” She talked about the importance of “establishing relationships and nurturing those relationships by good communication which has a heavy emphasis on listening and attentiveness and just being around.” In

order to build solid professional relationships, she would be an active listener and always hold employees' confidences. She would sometimes do a "walk and talk" with a staff member and walk for a half hour to discuss a topic or issue. Sharon said that in the last five years of her career when she had some big obstacles and challenges, she realized she wanted to be a leader who was "bringing people together." She said she feels that "how the problem gets solved is just as important as what the solution is." She learned you get "to be the leader you want to be, applying your own personal values and what you want to accomplish and the kind of person you want to be." Sharon said that her office would do a lot of potlucks and that after the difficult budget situation at the adult education school, she started bringing in home baked goods every Monday with items "made with love" because she wanted "people to feel valued and comforted" and because she feels like little gestures go a long way.

I asked Sharon how the stressors of the job impacted her personally. She told me that she is an introverted person and could feel anxious at times. She said sometimes the stress would impact her physically and would sometimes manifest itself physically in spots in her vision, eye twitching, small mouth sores, or feeling physically depleted at times "where her body was just craving some extra energy to build up its resources." She felt she had "absolutely no time to exercise" and was "happy to have enough time to get some sleep." Sharon said, "I would not maybe handle it that way looking back because now I am very big into exercising, walking every day, and bicycling and all that, but I have the time. Now, I have the flexibility of scheduling it." I asked Sharon more about the coping strategies she employed when dealing with the challenges and stressors of the Associate

Superintendent position. She said that she would “totally immerse” herself into the work and that it was “all encompassing.” When she did meet with friends, she told her friends she did not want to talk about work. She just wanted to take a break and talk about something totally different. For Sharon self-care was saying, “it’s ok to do something special” and “small things” like going out for a coffee instead of making it at home, or going for a walk or to a movie with a friend, reading even just a chapter of a book “would go a long way for her.” She said when it came time for a vacation she would “always travel far” and “get totally away.” Sharon described having mentors and positive relationships with people she reported to during her career and that she would receive positive affirmation from individuals and feel like it was quite nice, but that she didn’t need it. She said, “I basically know when I put in a good day’s work and when I drive home I would say to myself, ok what went right today and what could you have done better?” She said, “I did that each and every day because that’s just my self reflection piece.” Later, she realized with time that because the positive affirmation from others, including one superintendent she was working with, was “coming from an authentic place” and that it had helped build her confidence.

Sharon talked about coaching her mentee and all of the issues that person is facing related to COVID-19 such as issues where some teachers and other support staff don’t want to come back to work yet. She said she will often advise her mentee to think about “what things you have control over and what are some of the things you don’t have control over.” She said we don’t have control over people feeling scared or when this virus will end, but it is important to keep in mind it will end. Sharon discussed the

importance of communicating with the individuals involved in an issue and shared an example that was addressed with her mentee when some custodians she supervised did not want to return to the school site. The custodians were needed to open the school for hybrid classes. Her advice was to talk to the individual custodians and see if their concerns could be addressed and to take a personal interest.

### *Don Miner*

#### **Background**

Don Miner is a white male currently in his early 70s who retired in 2020 from the role of superintendent in a K–8 district after eleven years. He had also served as interim superintendent three times over the years for a total of 14–15 years of experience in the superintendency role. Prior to becoming superintendent, Don was the district’s assistant superintendent-chief business official for twenty-two years. Don graduated college with a double major in business administration and secondary education. Because of the secondary education degree, he had to do student teaching and “absolutely loved it” and instead of seeking a business career he became a teacher. Just a few years later he became a district’s school business manager at the young age of 24 years old. Don enjoyed all aspects of that work as a school business manager and for thirteen years he served as the school business manager or an assistant superintendent of business. Don’s district was in the Midwest but one year he attended a conference in the San Francisco bay area and “fell in love with the area.” Upon returning home he happened to see an ad for a job posting for a chief business official in a bay area district. He applied for it and got the job. That was the late 1980s and the first year of what ended up being a 33-year career in

that same district. He told me that he never really aspired to the superintendency because he really enjoyed the job of school business administration. When the superintendent retired he decided to apply rather than have someone new come into the district. Don shared that he found the expansive role of the superintendency “reinvigorating” and “quite a renewal.” He shared that he really enjoyed it, especially the public aspect of working with the community and with his district team to make a difference for kids.

I asked Don about that and what he was most proud of during his time as an educational leader, and he shared that he was most proud of the partnerships he was part of establishing over the years. He talked about partnerships that “resulted in far greater service for kids than we could have done independently.” He provided examples of very successful partnerships, such as the creation of a neighborhood center partnership that “provides social services and health services to an underserved community,” bringing visual and performing arts, as well as counseling and mental health services, to the schools to address students’ social emotional needs. He said that the array of services would have cost millions of dollars if the district was to try to replicate it independently, and it would have been unaffordable without the partnerships through government and nonprofits. Most recently he was involved with establishing a partnership with the district, the city, and another school district to create a \$25 million branch library that is being constructed at one of the elementary sites in an underserved area. Don said he believes the district has created “a wonderful model” and the results have benefitted students and families so much greater than what the district could do on its own without the partnership.

*“You can’t do these jobs alone. It’s a team that does that work.” -Don Miner*

I asked Don about the stressors of the job. He said, “I used to call them ambushes. You never know what you are going to be ambushed by. I used to tell folks, what is going to be our ambush this year? It’s the unexpected and being able to respond to the unexpected.” He explained that these “highlighted stress points took a toll” because there are so many different things to respond to at one time. He went on to say that he found the politics sometimes very stressful.

He gave an example of a stressful situation that started out with a board meeting where a discussion item came up with the idea to evaluate changing the school district’s boundaries to address school size and sufficiency of space. A week after that meeting, “We had pickets and people wearing the same t-shirts outside saying don’t change our boundaries, and I found myself having to go out to talk to multi-purpose rooms and gymnasiums and rooms full of people about this topic that was never even up for a vote. It was just a discussion topic, something we were going to study.” He said it got really ugly on social media. He said people would use anonymity to attack him publicly and in a manner they would never do in person and that really got to him. We talked about dealing with personal attacks. Don said it’s the same on the local level as it is on the national level. He said he “thinks that national discourse trickles down to local politics somewhat... it kind of gives people license to be disrespectful and I really think leadership matters, words matter in all that we do.” He said it wasn’t that things were always directed at him, but it would be distasteful comments directed at “those kids, we don’t want those kids to come to our school, thinly veiled racial and discriminatory issues would surface on social

media and that really did bother me.” Don said these attacks went on for several months and he felt like something this disruptive “could impact the entire school district and undercut all the good work we are doing.” At first he was going to continue with the study of the topic as discussed, but as people continued to express upset, he made a decision to work with the board to ameliorate the issue by removing it as a topic of conversation. He described that the cost to the district included having to add on to another school to add capacity when there was already capacity at another school, “but sometimes you just have to do what’s best for the greater good of the community.” Don explained his approach as a human systems approach. He told me he understood that cost-benefit analysis of these types of issues aren’t just dollars costs. “You have to factor in the human factor and the emotion factor and keep the district stable in terms of continuity of leadership.” He said, “We had a good, caring, supportive board. It was all about the kids, and you wouldn’t want to see that disrupted by a recall. Losing good people and disrupting the team is a high price to pay for something that can be accommodated for in another way.” He said, “local politics can be some of the ugliest politics because it gets personal.” We discussed another example of a stressful situation involving a school closure. He said it was “one of these times when the data drove the decision and the politics were very troubling and troublesome. He said, “In fact, it cost us an election for the bond at that time, but you had to look to the longer term what was best for the community and kids.” He said it was the right decision although there was a cost. Don provided additional examples of stressful events including a student suicide, students killed in traffic accidents, a teacher suicide, and an incident where a teacher fell at work and died. She was found by students in her

classroom. He said, “the things that are the unfortunate side of human life occur when you have a large organization and hundreds of employees.”

I inquired about how stressors of the job affected him personally. Don shared that he had so many sleepless nights. He told me, “I process at night and once you wake up and your head starts thinking about a problem, it just goes on and on.” He said, “the one thing I never managed well during my career was work-life balance and paid a price for that over the years because it was always about the work.” He said, “that was just who I was.” He went on to talk about how leadership to him also meant “ownership.” He took ownership of the community and the school district and that was some of what “drove him.” He said in some ways it wasn’t healthy for him and caused stress. He suggested that if administrators can separate themselves from the work a bit more that would be good, but he “never had that ability.” To take care of himself during these challenging times, he said he always tried to exercise a lot. He explained that he was finding that harder toward the end of his superintendency. He shared what got to him toward the end of his superintendency was the feeling that he was on 24/7. He said you are always in the spotlight just by being in the role and that would stress him out and be draining for him. He said, “Stress is an interesting thing. Even on a good day there’s always that incremental or that subliminal level of stress that is always there and I didn’t really realize it until I retired because it was gone.” Don said when he retired he was able to start sleeping through the night, exercise more, drink less, and do more healthy things. He didn’t realize how stressed he had actually been until after he retired. He mentioned having colleagues in other districts in leadership roles who have struggled with alcohol or



substance abuse and he feels like stress is a contributing factor with those issues. He said, “Try to keep a work and personal life balance. Setting boundaries and taking time off is just so important. Try to gain an understanding if you are in a leadership role and you are working directly with the board or the superintendent that you have to be able to make that time for yourself and your family.” To that end Don feels like it is important to try to strike agreements up front with the board, or your supervisor to be respectful of your private time. He said, “we know jobs are demanding and there are times when you are going to have to do that, but there also times when people just need some space, some private time.”

We discussed Don’s approach to dealing with difficult issues. He said that he tried to be open, transparent, and communicate as much as he could. He said having the support of his board was key and that he was able to keep the board on the same page with him through ongoing communication and discussion. He said he “always had an ability to be centered” and once he would come to terms with a decision, he would feel confident in the decision and ready to move ahead. Don said, “To get to that place where I really feel a sense of comfort in moving forward with a decision would be first preceded by talking to a lot of people about the issue and hearing various perspectives and drawing upon the expertise of others and the advice of others. That advice can be grounded in practice, it can be political, it can be emotional. The advice can take on many forms as you gather it and you hear about it. I am not a quick decision maker. I am very deliberate... I would process it over time... I would just get centered on where I felt would be the right direction to go forward.” He said, “It’s hard for me to get to that point, but once I do, I can just go

forward feeling good about it and all the noise all around me, I can just tune it out.” He said once he “gets through that process” he feels comfortable and “it’s a release of the stress.”

Don said that one of the ways he was able to manage the challenges of the job and one of the reasons he stayed engaged so long in the role was because people in the community trusted him. He was able to pass parcel taxes and bond measures and felt that people believed the money would be used wisely and to the benefit of the community. He also said what helped him was having a great team of individuals and getting the right people in the right roles. He expressed gratitude and said it has “always been about the team that’s assembled doing the work” because as a superintendent it’s not a task orientated job, it’s more about orchestrating the work of the people that work with you and keeping the focus on the students and the community.

I asked Don about his advice for current administrators and in working with school boards. Don said you have to “budget the time and you need to work to build relationships, one on one with them.” He said, “I always found you don’t build relationships with groups easily. You don’t build relationships with teacher unions. You build relationships with teachers individually one by one. It’s the same with the board, on a smaller scale you have to reach out and spend the time and that pays off, just building the relationship and getting the trust and understanding. You don’t always agree but you have to devote the time, and it takes a lot of time, but it’s well worth the investment of time.” Don said he would meet individually with each board member and that he would get into conversations about issues, personal and school related, and would “find that there were always insights that they would bring to the table that should be listened to.”

I asked Don about his advice for administrators to better deal with problems and with stress. He said, “I think what’s very important, and I can’t stress it enough is to surround yourself with good people. Don’t get in their way and don’t micromanage them. Give them some autonomy to do their jobs and hold them accountable. If you get good people working with you and you have good relationships with them and allow them to do their work, that is a stress release. You don’t feel like you are responsible for doing everything. Of course you have the ownership, you care deeply and you provide the guidance but you don’t want to get in their way.” He said that it’s important “you understand the skills and talents of the people. You delegate to their skills and talents and you don’t delegate to their weakness. You support and coach the best you can, you clear the field for them so they can be successful.” Don said it’s important to get the right people in the right positions and let them do the work while staying informed so you can be articulate about the work that’s going on in the district. He said, “You don’t want to cast too big a shadow. You don’t have to take credit for everything.” He said it’s important to give credit to the people who are actually doing the work, to share that credit and to recognize them for the good work they are doing. He said, “You can’t do these jobs alone. It’s a team even in a small district, it’s a team that does that work.”

#### **4.3. Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness**

I was introduced to the Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness during the 2019–2020 school by a colleague in another district. Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness had already been facilitating educator resilience groups for teachers and administrators in the bay area and having a positive impact. When the COVID-19

pandemic hit, we reached out to Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness to see if they could provide support for our teachers and for our administrators. We were concerned about how the challenges of dealing with the pandemic, school closures, remote learning, and the prospect of reopening were impacting our staff and students. We were hearing that teachers and administrators were feeling overwhelmed and stressed out. Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness provides resilience groups for teachers, staff, and administrators and is intended to be another layer of support during this challenging time.

I was able to speak informally with one of the Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness team members. As someone working directly with educators facing challenges, she was able to provide general information about different concerns administrators are dealing with, as well as some suggested strategies. She told me that Community Collaborative for Educator Wellness has over 20 years of experience supporting educators, and that she and her colleagues lead resiliency support groups for educators and deal with issues related to stress in these groups. She mentioned that she feels it is a really challenging time, and while the topic of stress for educators is not new, this year it is so much more with the COVID-19 pandemic. She told me that educators are dealing with feelings of isolation and disconnection, and the separation of space (e.g., working remotely) has really heightened feelings of loneliness. She said there seems to be a lot of anxiety with competing needs or concerns from parents who are over involved and want more or vice versa. She said that stress is coming from workload with some teachers and administrators finding themselves working 12–14 hour days. She said that there is also stress about the very real concern that students are falling behind. She said that

administrators are facing challenges with coming to peace with the fact that not everyone is going to be happy with how schools are addressing these issues and not taking it personally when people are upset. She said that she believes that leading schools right now seems like an impossible task. She was able to provide insight into different skills that are helpful for dealing with the stressor that she refers to as a toolkit or as habits. She said it is important to be able to look at things from a systemic perspective, not take it personally and with the assistance of a good therapist, or through contacts with other principals and administrators, hear that it's not just you, that you're not alone. She said developing resilience skills, like a first aid toolkit, help address issues of stress management and coping. Tools such as practicing mindfulness can be deeply useful to help people feel present. She said that there are many strategies that can help such as gathering people together to practice mindfulness, reading books and having book studies, and learning how to depersonalize can all help address symptoms of depression and anxiety. She said it takes practice and effort to make them habits. She mentioned another piece is having a mentor or somebody who can give you some checkpoints along the way and to support you with depersonalizing things, providing some perspective, and being an ally who can boost you up or give you honest feedback. She emphasized the importance of having folks in your corner!

#### **4.4. Summary of Findings**

*RQ 1: What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator?*

The participants described a variety of experiences that explain the stressors of the job.

Adam and Don described different stories of personally having to deal with traumatic events on the job, such as suicide, a murder and accidents. Don described stressors by calling them “ambushes,” a term to describe unanticipated or unexpected stressful events. All five participants mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and their concerns for current administrators facing the reopening of schools and emotional issues that students and staff may bring as a result of the pandemic. All five participants discussed their individual experiences dealing with complex and often stressful situations involving competing demands and bringing groups of people together. Adam spoke about the difficult and stressful situation of contending with race, discrimination, and equity. Crystal talked about leading change to improve student achievement. Crystal and Sharon discussed challenges involving labor negotiations. Each shared the challenge of dealing with legal issues involving students and parents or staff. Don and Cindy discussed issues related to a school closure. Adam, Cindy, Sharon, and Don shared stories of how worry or concern about work related issues impacted them ranging from feeling tired, anxious, experiencing insomnia to other physical manifestations of stress and anxiety. Adam, Crystal, and Don provided examples of stressors associated with dealing with local politics and/or the school board such as changes in board leadership, district boundaries, and other issues their mentees are facing on the job. Adam, Crystal, and Sharon spoke about stressful situations involving dealing with budget cuts or constraints that involved employees, including layoffs and issues pertaining to salary and benefit negotiations. Sharon and Don both described their experience with work intensification and the residual impact of constant feeling on 24/7.

*RQ 2: What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators?*

The participant stories provided rich information about practices they employed to manage job related stress but many of the participants also shared suggestions and recommendations based on their personal experiences. All five participants explained their use of self-reflection and the importance of having supportive relationships, including having a supportive community or peer network. All five shared examples of individual coping strategies and self-care activities, including discussing the importance of having personal boundaries with personal time and accessibility. All of the participants described the benefit for them of practicing gratitude. Examples included leaving notes for teachers after observations, sending thank you cards, bringing baked goods to the office to say thank you, and sharing the credit for accomplishments. Four participants reflected on the importance of exercise and the need to make time during the day to walk or exercise in some way. Five participants described go-to processes that they employ when faced with difficult and complex issues.

*RQ 3: What themes related to managing stress and traumatic events come out of the narratives of retired administrators?*

My review of the interviews from the administrators led me to conclude that there were three powerful themes that emerged from the interviews. I selected sample excerpts and key quotes to highlight the participant's powerful words connected to each theme as part of my findings below (see Table 2). Discussion pertaining to my conclusions for each of these themes is presented in Chapter 5.

**Table 2***Powerful Themes and Exemplary Quotes*

<b>Powerful Themes</b>	<b>Exemplary Quotes</b>
<p>1. Part of the job of a school or district administrator is having to deal with the stressful consequences of traumatic events when they occur.</p>	<p>“I acted right away. I knew what to do, to get the principal calmed down, get the staff together... I jumped into superintendent mode and called (a PR consultant) for communication-crisis intervention, got everything ready and set everything up. I jumped in. I knew what to do, but inside I was devastated, because that was a kid. That impacted me in a completely different way. I am a very emotional person. I take it hard, but I know I have to move into action.” - Adam</p> <p>“When you are dealing with the personnel issues though, that’s the stuff that tears at your heart because you have trusting relationships with people, and when that trust is violated it not only hurts the organization it hurts you personally.” -Crystal</p>
<p>2. Experienced leaders contend with stress with the support of trusted colleagues.</p>	<p>“I always felt like I was supported by my colleagues and if I ever needed help to talk over a problem I could always do that.” -Cindy</p> <p>“You can’t do these jobs alone. It’s a team that does that work.” - Don</p> <p>“I felt fortunate to be surrounded by people who had answers and who were supportive.”-Sharon</p>
<p>3. Experienced leaders spoke of the importance of having a “go to” process for dealing with difficult or challenging situations or issues.</p>	<p>“You need a process to deal with things that you don’t know are going to happen to help you make decisions when the time comes. Safety always comes first, then you start going down the line.” “First, make sure everyone is safe.” -Adam</p> <p>“To get to that place where I really feel a sense of comfort in moving forward with a decision would be first preceded by talking to a lot of people about the issue and hearing various perspectives and drawing upon the expertise of others and the advice of others. That advice can be grounded in practice, it can be political, it can be emotional. The advice can take on many forms as you gather it and you hear about it. I am not a quick decision maker. I am very deliberate... I would process it over time... I would just get centered on where I felt would be the right direction to go forward...It’s hard for me to get to that point, but once I do, I can just go forward feeling good about it and all the noise all around me, I can just tune it out.” -Don</p>



Table 3 summarizes the findings for each of the RQs. In this table, intermediary themes that emerged pertaining to RQ 1 and RQ 2 are listed with the number of individual participants who talked about or provided examples in those areas. The findings listed for RQ 3 are the powerful themes I identified and connected to in the stories.

**Table 3**

*Intermediary Themes and Powerful Themes*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Themes</b>
RQ 1. What have been the experiences of retired Santa Clara County administrators that help explain the stressors of the job of school or district administrator? <i>(Intermediary themes)</i>	Stressors indicated by the participants were: traumatic events (2), addressing complex issues (5), worry or concern about work related issues (4), politics (3), budget (3) work intensification (2), personnel issues (5)
RQ 2. What suggestions or recommendations for managing job related stress come from the experiences and reflections of retired Santa Clara County administrators? <i>(Intermediary themes)</i>	Suggestions and recommendations indicated by the participants were: self-reflection (5), relationships (5), community/peer social network (5), individual resilience (5), personal boundaries (5), practicing gratitude (5), exercise (4), having a process (5), being authentic (5), other self-care activities (5)
RQ 3: What themes related to managing stress and traumatic events come out of the narratives of retired administrators? <i>(Powerful themes)</i>	Part of the job of a school or district administrator is having to deal with the stressful consequences of traumatic events when they occur.  Experienced leaders contend with stress with the support of trusted colleagues.  Experienced leaders spoke of the importance of having a “go to” process for dealing with difficult or challenging situations or issues.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions, Applications, Recommendations, and Implications**

Section 5.1 will provide a summary of my conclusions and applications. Section 5.2 will discuss recommendations for practice followed by recommendations for future research in Section 5.3. Implications will be discussed in Section 5.4. In Section 5.5, I will provide a final thought on this dissertation.

### **5.1. Conclusions and Applications**

School and district leaders have stressful jobs. The causes of stress, and stressors identified during this study, included examples of administrators dealing with traumatic events, complex problems, challenges with school boards and local politics, legal and personnel matters, and work intensification. Managing all of the human challenges and competing interests was a stressor identified by all of the participants. For those leaders who do not learn to manage the challenges, stress and distress can result. Having colleagues or mentors whom you can confide in and trust and leadership training on topics such as trauma informed practices, dealing with dysfunctional teams, facilitation, and self-care were all identified as helpful strategies. My conclusions related to the three powerful themes that emerged are discussed below.

*Part of the job of a school or district administrator is having to deal with the stressful consequences of traumatic events when they occur.*

Dealing with trauma is part of the human experience. The impact of traumatic events in our life is very personal. Accidents, injuries, death not resulting from natural causes, illness, a global pandemic, or any other deeply distressing experience affects us differently and we find ways to cope. As administrators we have to deal with traumatic situations that are complicated by the fact that it's part of the job to manage our own

grief, our own anxieties, hurt and fear in order to support the people in our organization.

The fact that many, if not all, of us has had an experience in dealing with a traumatic event involving someone who is an important person in their lives does not automatically equip the administrator with a traumatic situation in the workplace when he or she is occupying a leadership position in an organization where a traumatic event occurs.

It is not surprising that a traumatic event involving a workplace colleague engenders stress since they must function in a way that enables the persons who are their responsibility to get through the crisis. When traumatic events occur at schools, administrators experience the trauma together with the people in the organization, but they are also responsible for coordinating and leading the response to the event. Some of the administrators I spoke to shared examples of challenges dealing with different crises including the COVID-19 pandemic, suicide, murder, serious accidents, and litigation. In each of these situations the administrator had to set his or her own feelings aside in order to deal with the responsibility of supporting personnel in their districts and schools. Adam talked about how he was affected by his experience with the murder-suicide involving one of his teachers when he was principal and the suicide of a student and how it affected him. Adam said it “absolutely devastated him” but he had to compartmentalize his grief and hurt in order to deal with the situation. In some instances such compartmentalization could be detrimental for the school administrator in contending with what they needed to do to help their organization find some resolution that enabled them to continue their work in a way that did not compromise the work they were doing in the school. Adam used self-reflection and coped with the loss in a positive way. Don talked about the

death of a teacher who had fallen in a classroom and other tragedies he had experienced as superintendent, including accidents and suicides.

It would be incorrect to assume that the consequences of a traumatic event occurring within the organization for which the administrator has responsibility affects everyone in similar situations in a similar way. As an administrator I have personally experienced being locked down at a school with elementary students following a bomb threat that lasted hours. I have had to coordinate crisis response teams following suicides and the loss of my own colleague. Each of these events had a particular impact on me since prior to my work as an administrator I had not had an experience of dealing with such a situation in my life. I began this study because I wanted to unpack what could be done by educational leaders to support people who are dealing with trauma. It was clear to me when I faced the traumatic events that I had to deal with my own grief and stress but not to the exclusion of being there for my colleagues who were experiencing this event with me.

Pre-service and in-service professional development can help administrators learn about best practices in areas of curriculum and instruction and instructional leadership. We learn about strategies for raising student achievement, ensuring equity, providing feedback to teachers about classroom instruction and tools for ensuring continuous improvement. We don't learn about skills and strategies for dealing with trauma. Where do we learn how to separate the very personal and human experience of trauma with the necessity of leading the organization's response to it? Experienced leaders have to work through the elements of the situation with little help unless they are or were fortunate enough that another more experienced leader could provide guidance after having

experienced it. Why is this? If part of human life is contending with trauma and part of the job of a school or district administrator is responding to that trauma then what are the necessary skills needed to do this? What support could be provided to support administrators in the double bind of processing their own response to trauma while managing the organization's response?

*Experienced leaders contend with stress with the support of trusted colleagues.*

The value of administrators being part of a community of learners was another important theme that emerged from the interviews. Part of the benefit of these networks was learning what works for other administrators when dealing with a problem or difficult situations. Experienced leaders develop resilience and benefit from being part of a community of colleagues. Each of the five administrators described the impact of having collegial relationships with the teams they worked with and also the importance of having a network of professionals in similar positions to bounce ideas off of, to learn from, and to get support from. Cindy shared that having the support of the superintendent gave her confidence. Adam and Sharon talked about having networks of people who were doing or had done the same job before to connect with to help problem solve and helped norm the issues that they were facing. Adam, Crystal, and Don all talked about the joy that their executive teams brought to them and how much they valued those relationships.

*Experienced leaders spoke of the importance of having a "go to" process for dealing with difficult or challenging situations or issues.*

Adam, Crystal, Cindy, Sharon, and Don all talked about their processes for dealing with difficult and sometimes stressful situations. Adam and Crystal both referred to "a

triangle” as a three-pronged strategy or road map for accomplishing an objective or for contending with stressful situations. Adam and Crystal made it clear that without such a strategy, accomplishing objectives or achieving good resolutions is not only difficult but likely to be quite stress provoking. They both indicated they had learned about it in professional development years ago. Upon further investigation I discovered a number of leadership articles and organizations that utilize the triangle to describe strategies and approaches for problem and collaborative work. The Interaction Institute of Social Change refers to it as the “RPR Triangle,” which stands for results, process, and relationship (see <https://interactioninstitute.org/change-networks-keep-telling-the-evolving-story/> for the triangle).

Each of the five participants talked about the importance of relationships and processes. This led me to consider the skills that are needed in each of these three areas and how these skills might help administrators contend with stressful situations and even de-escalate potential very stressful situations. As the participants indicated, administrators need to have skills that support building stronger relationships, and the ability to effectively facilitate and lead processes in order to achieve intended outcomes. Adam believes that teaching administrators how to be facilitators and how to establish strong processes is important for getting buy-in from the individuals involved. In all instances, but particularly in sensitive matters, a process that enables participants to honestly share their beliefs and opinions is a technique that can minimize the negative and stressful consequences of the situation. Crystal and Don discussed strategies for building relationships with individuals including their community, boards, administrative teams,

teachers, and unions. Sharon and Cindy talked about building relationships with their teachers, staff, and parents. The strategies the five administrators shared for building relationships ranged from having one to one conversations, being transparent and communicative, prompt, responsive, authentic, using humor, and expressing thanks and gratitude.

## **5.2. Recommendations for Practice**

- School and district leaders should receive training in trauma informed practices. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) concept of the trauma informed approach entails "The Three E's of Trauma: Event(s), Experience, and Effect" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). This could include administrator preparation and training for dealing with trauma and stress the same ways that doctors have had to learn to deal with death.
- School and district leaders should seek opportunities to connect with leaders in similar roles in order to establish networks of support. Through this research, I realized how important networks such as the Association of California School Administrators can be for administrators in providing a network of support. While I have been a member for many years and have attended conferences, I have not been very involved in the organization. This year I plan to reach out to our ACSA Region 8 leadership and identify opportunities to get involved and to provide administrators in my district opportunities to connect virtually, and in person with individuals in similar roles for the purpose of connecting with and providing one another support.

- School and district leaders would benefit from opportunities to receive mentoring and support from other administrators beyond their first years of service.
- School and district leaders should receive training focused on skill development in the areas of facilitative leadership, leading effective community processes, and building and maintaining relationships, including repairing broken relationships with staff and board members.
- School and district leaders should receive training and mental health support for identifying and employing helpful coping strategies for dealing with stress, such as mindfulness, setting healthy boundaries to deal with work intensification, and strategies for depersonalizing personal attacks and difficult situations. During the 2020–2021 academic year and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, our district supported the expansion of our district’s employee assistance program in order to create:

up to five Resilience Groups (in person or virtual) focused on building the resilience of participants and their knowledge base of social emotional learning in the classroom. These experiential professional development sessions for resilience skill management will be facilitated by a senior Resilience Consultant, who will support participants by providing monthly 90-minute sessions for 8–10 educators, site administrators and/or school and district staff beginning with four monthly sessions per group scheduled over the next four months of the school year (November, December, January, February) where remote learning is the focus and isolation is more likely. Staff resilience training content will be based on input from participants and the facilitator. (quoted from the district’s contract for services)

- School and district leaders could benefit from practicing a narrative or storied approach to reflect on their leadership and personal growth.
- University preparation programs for school administrators and Ed.D. programs



could include greater attention to mental health of school administrators and the use of story and narratives to help deal with stress/mental health, and to build community. In Damiani and Wieczorek (2019), the authors discuss the importance of administrators learning about leadership through reflecting on their own professional experiences and stories.

### **5.3. Recommendations for Future Research**

The role of a school or district administrator seems impossible at times. The varying array of complex issues combined with the stressors of dealing with traumatic events, personal attacks, and work intensification are all immense, but each of the participants in this study retired from education after decades of service and would recommend it as a career to prospective administrators. Recommendations for future research include:

- Interviews of administrators who left the job early, or altogether, due to stressors involved. This would provide valuable insight into what issues and stressors became so significant it impacted them enough to leave the field.
- All of the administrators who volunteered to be part of this study were white; therefore, another important area for future research would be to examine the experiences of school and district administrators of color compared to the experiences of white administrators.
- Further research into differences in the way male and female leaders and leaders in serving high socio-economic and low socio-economic communities experience and cope with stress effectively is warranted. This would provide insight for additional strategies and systems of support.

- Action research is needed to examine the impact of providing school and district administrators explicit training in skill development for how to handle and cope with stressful situations.

#### **5.4. Implications**

When I began this study, I had just experienced a tremendous loss with the death of my colleague. I didn't know how to contend with this tragic event and what actions would be helpful to reduce the painful consequences of the event. I was really stressed out and for the first time in my life I did not want to be in a leadership position anymore. I wanted to do something about it, so that this time in my life wouldn't only be marked by the loss, but also by the birth of something good and new.

As I read the literature on mental health and administrator stress, I learned that there was already a significant amount of research on what causes administrator stress, but that there was very little research on how to deal with it effectively. Listening closely to each of the experienced leaders describe their experiences with stress and with managing it, I began to uncover helpful recommendations and insights that I hope will benefit all educational leaders. I can't think of a more stressful time in education than right now in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rethinking how we educate and support our school and district leaders so that they can be healthy and well for our students, families, and staff during these challenging times is imperative.

#### **5.5. A Final Thought**

As I worked on this project, I was struck by how rare it is for practicing administrators to share their experiences contending with the stress of their jobs. The administrators I

interviewed all spoke with candor and were willing to disclose issues and situations pertaining to the emotional and stressful aspects of school and district administration. As a person who has been an administrator at the school and district level for seventeen years, I felt that the conversations I had with the interviewees gave me a great deal of new insight into difficult experiences that were similar to my own. Hearing colleagues speak about the emotional aspect of school administration was a very valuable experience for me, and learning what the persons I interviewed came to implement in their professional practice and lives will be an asset to me as I move forward in my career. My hope is that other administrators in pre-service or in-service may find what is contained in this project helpful to them.

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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**



### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

#### **TITLE OF STUDY**

Administrator Stress and Wellbeing in Silicon Valley: Lessons Learned from Retired Administrators

#### **NAME OF RESEARCHERS**

Carrie Bosco, Doctoral Candidate, San Jose State University.

#### **PURPOSE**

Describe job related stress and ways to manage it.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked questions pertaining to your experience as a school or district administrator and mentor. Answers to the interview questions will be used in order to write stories of your leadership experiences and/or practices related to facing and managing work related stress. I will share the stories with you prior to the dissemination of the work.

Your participation will require approximately two to three interviews of approximately 60-90 minutes each. The interviews will be audiotaped and based on these interviews, a story of your experience will be crafted. These recordings will be erased at the completion of the study. I will use a teleconferencing vendor approved by SJSU, such as Zoom to conduct and record our sessions to assist with note-taking, these recordings will not be shared. A transcription will be made of the interviews utilizing a third party vendor

such as Landmark Associations and may be included in the results and dissemination of the study findings.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. It will not affect you in any way.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS**

Some people may feel nervous about taking part in a research study. However, there are no foreseeable risks with this study.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

While we do not anticipate any direct benefits to individual participants, I believe this research will provide valuable insights that could be utilized to help current and prospective administrators.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation include the opportunity to share your expertise concerning the dilemmas of practice and your experiences as a leader. You will also have the opportunity to share your history and biography.

If you are willing or interested in participating in this research, please contact me via email at [carrie.bosco@sjsu.edu](mailto:carrie.bosco@sjsu.edu) or my cell phone (408) 364-6349.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

While I cannot guarantee that your identity might not be inferred from indirect identifying information that is reported, your name and the name of your districts where you have been employed will not be used. This study will be published and when necessary, pseudonyms will be used when analyzing and disseminating the results in the final report. Your responses will be kept in a password-protected computer.

### **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the entire study or any part of the study without any negative effect. This is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You will

not waive any rights if you choose not to participate, and there is no penalty for stopping your participation in the study.

### **QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, please contact Carrie Bosco at [carrie.bosco@sjsu.edu](mailto:carrie.bosco@sjsu.edu). Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. Bradley Porfilio, Director, Ed.D. at San Jose State, 408-924-3722. For questions about participants' rights or if you feel you have been harmed in any way by your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President of the Office of Research, San Jose State University, at 408.924.2479.

To contact Dr. Arnold Danzig, research advisor, please email [arnold.danzig@sjsu.edu](mailto:arnold.danzig@sjsu.edu).

### **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

Please select from the choices below. If you click agree, it is implied that you have read the information above about the research, your rights as a participant, and give your voluntary consent. Please print out a copy of this page and keep it for your records.

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT**

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age and I am a retired Administrator who has served in the role of Principal or Superintendent.

Signature: Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	
Name	Carrie Bosco

Interview Questions	
#	Question
	Please tell me about your background and experience that led you into becoming a school or district administrator?
	What roles did you serve in and for about how long?
	Why? What are you most proud of?
	I'd like to talk with you, as a retired educator, who has been there/done that and survived. How'd you do it?
	In looking back, what was the impact of the stressors on your personal and professional life?
	What were the bright spots?

	What were the biggest challenges? Could you share a story, an example of a specific challenge, something pivotal for you that you faced and how did you deal with it?
	How did you cope with the stress of the job?
	Did you have any mentors?
	What is your approach in coaching or mentoring new administrators?
	Would you do it all over again?
	What advice do you have for current administrators?
	What advice do you have for prospective administrators?