

**THE PERSPECTIVES OF RURAL OKLAHOMA SUPERINTENDENTS,
SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, AND STATE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION EMPLOYEES: HOW POLICY DISCRETION
INFLUENCES THE FOCUS OF RURAL OKLAHOMA
SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

By

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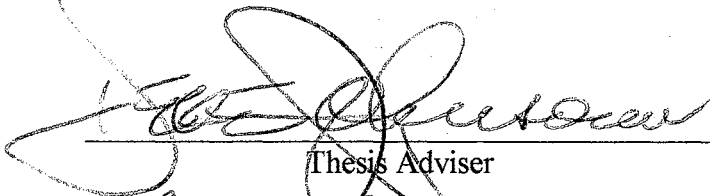
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

Those charged with providing for public schools in local communities are finding that they are beset with mandates, forces and limitations that affect them and their efforts.

Mandates without full funding have proven to be financial burdens for rural school districts (Sher, 1988). With the passage of House Bill 1017 in 1990, Oklahoma school districts have phased in ten years of mandates. Some mandates of HB 1017 were needed and welcomed by school districts. However, others such as class size reduction requirements have proven to be a financial nightmare for some rural districts. This is evident where classes exceed the limit by one or two students and an aide is required.

Mandates such as P.L. 94-142, passed by the federal government in 1973 have been especially hard on some rural districts. These districts lack student populations that justify the hiring of a full time special education teacher.

The only recourse for districts has been litigation. A few cases have gone to the U.S. Supreme Court (Irving

Independent School District, V, Tatro, (1984) in order for districts to obtain some sort of relief (Reutter, 1985).

In addition to mandates there are forces that add to district problems. Competition for students has forced rural districts to skim funds from other necessities in order to better fund sports programs, technology, and strengthened curriculums. Goodlad (1977) noted in his book, In Praise of Education, that education is an inalienable right. By the same right, rural school students should expect their own schools to have the same amenities as schools located in urban areas.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) requires that some paperwork be transmitted by E-Mail, (SDE, 1998) and for some isolated rural districts this has become a problem (Sher, & Rosenfeld, 1977, p. 25). Many districts use out dated 386 and 486 computers that are not capable of internet transmissions (SDE 1998). In addition to the problem with computers, there are very few internet providers available. Those that are available are much more expensive than those found in urban area (Karim, 1994). Technology has become a mixed blessing to districts in rural areas because of high costs and short usefulness. Technology could provide districts with the tools to participate in distance learning education (Sher, 1981;

Dale & McKinley 1986) and research. But, because of excessive costs and the short life span of faster computers (Gates, 1996) other well deserving programs can not be funded.

School consolidation is another force that is always at the forefront of controversy. In Oklahoma, school consolidation is introduced yearly in the legislature. Legislators hint at consolidation as a viable means of trimming budgets. However, (Sher, 1988; Sher, Schalier, Karin, 1986) contend that school consolidation is a very inefficient way to solve problems. They also emphasize that there are no findings that demonstrate consolidation will enhance cost-effectiveness.

Rural school districts are saddled with limitations that do not exist in most urban districts. One limitation is the lack of industry. The second limitation is a tax based on large agricultural holdings which provide limited resources for rural districts (Sher, 1988).

In addition to a low tax base, some rural elementary districts have aging facilities (OSDE, 1999). Many rural elementary school buildings in Oklahoma are WPA buildings, which were built in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Most of these old structures are energy guzzlers and consume a greater share of the district's budget.

According to the Chicago Tribune (Feb. 10, 1995) a federal report asserted that \$112 billion would be required to fix the nation's aging public school buildings. Educators, students, and parents have witnessed firsthand the deterioration of public school facilities across the country over that last 30 years (Kozol, 1995, 1991). Maintenance budgets in public schools across the nation were cut in favor of other needs because the effects of such cuts are not immediately evident (Chicago Tribune, 1995).

President Clinton excluded from his budget proposal a \$100 million appropriation for school repair and replacement included in the U.S. Department of Education budget (Chicago Tribune, 1995). However, according to Thurston & Roe (1957, pp. 51-72) this problem does not lie with Congress but with legislatures and school boards within the individual states. They note that education, school construction and maintenance are not constitutionally a federal function. This responsibility is reserved for individual states.

Funding for education in some states is at record levels. However, funding for Oklahoma school districts, especially rural districts, continues to rate as one of the lowest in the nation. The Annual Report 1996-1997,

Statistical Report on Oklahoma Schools and the State Department of Education relates that there has been a continuous increase in funding since the 1986-1987 school year. In spite of this steady increase in funding, Oklahoma has not even kept pace with other states in the region, let alone the nation.

The lack of proper funding in Oklahoma has caused many rural districts to forgo intensive rebuilding programs for decaying facilities (Thompson, Stewart, & Camp, 1989, p. 75). An extensive rebuilding program would allow all buildings in the district to have internet capabilities. Classrooms and sports facilities could undergo long needed facelifts.

Because of improper funding, districts must either spend small amounts on technology and facilities or decide to properly fund only one of them and then hope that the others survive until the following year or until extra funding arrives (Thompson, Stewart, & Camp, 1989, p. 75).

For this study, mandates were known as non-discretionary items. Non-discretionary items consume at least 85% of rural and urban school budgets. Minimum salary schedules for certified personnel, inclusion of L.D students, librarians, and limits in class size are just a few non-discretionary areas required by mandates.

The remaining part of the budget is used for areas where discretionary funds may be used. These items include fixed utilities, supplies, athletic programs, technology and upkeep for buildings and grounds. In terms of funding, these areas are very costly (Carlson, 1990). With limited funding it is next to impossible for districts to fund all of the discretionary areas that parents and members of the community expect a district to provide.

As we push toward a new millennium, rural communities want all of the amenities of the much larger suburban and urban districts. However, with limited funding, and supplies more expensive in rural districts, it is next to impossible to adequately fund all of the districts' needs properly.

Local administrators and board members must choose among needs. The question as to why some districts' focus is on technology while others focus is ultra modern sports facilities is not easily answered. There is a need to understand the vast differences in spending patterns of rural districts.

Statement of the Problem

Public school districts are charged with providing children with a school that is safe and an environment conducive to learning. However, for many rural school

children these needs are not being met. This problem occurs when similar districts receive the same resources per pupil but have entirely different outcomes.

This study was undertaken in order to better understand what superintendents and board presidents perceived as the logic behind the spending patterns of their districts. This study was an attempt for superintendents and board presidents to relate their personal values, which affect their decisions.

There was an attempt, as well, to understand whether or not OSDE officials were able to look at each district separately and make decisions according to each peculiar situation. Also, there was a need to better understand how the SDE viewed mandates without full funding and how those priorities of the SDE directly affected rural districts.

Purpose of the Study

Oklahoma ranks 44th nationally in regard to educational funding (NEA 1997). The state legislature passed House Bill 2878 in 1998. This bill, titled the Reading Sufficiency Act, required all children not on an individual education plan (IEP) to be reading on grade level by the third grade (OSDE 1998). HB 2878 is not a fully funded mandate. Mandates are not a problem for districts. However, mandates without full funding are a problem.

There is a current push for students to be involved in extracurricular activities in order for them to broaden their horizons and to become more responsible for their behavior. The OSDE is also pushing for more and better technology so districts can connect to the internet (SDE, 1998). Along with these extracurricular activities, and technology, districts are also expected to maintain the appearance of the facilities inside and out. Better maintained buildings promote better health, safety and provide a better learning environment (OSDE, 1998).

As districts endeavor to provide extracurricular activities, technology, and maintain their facilities, they have been required to achieve higher test scores (SDE, 1998). In order to achieve higher test scores on mandated testing programs, districts hire tutors to provide children extra instructional time. This must be accomplished while funding for education in Oklahoma remains near the lowest in the nation.

Individuals who affect districts the most need to understand how their own values, coupled with limited funding, can affect their district either positively or negatively. It is important for these individuals to fully understand their own value system if they are to make unbiased financial decisions.

The interview questions were designed to encourage interviewees to relate their experiences and opinions freely without reservation. Probe questions were used when responses needed to be clarified in order to gain richer, more meaningful data (Rubin and Rubin (1995)).

Grand Tour Questions

Interview Questions for Superintendents/Board Presidents

- Do you feel you have much discretion in complying with state and board policies?
- Do you believe that you gravitate to a certain area of improvement for your district? If so, why?
- How do you influence the board and community that a certain area is more important than another area?
- What background do you have in facilities?
- What background do you have in sports?
- What background do you have in technology?
- What area do you feel you are most qualified in to make financial decisions? Could you elaborate?

Interview Questions for the State Department of Education

- What are the expectations of the OSDE in regard to school districts strictly adhering to mandates?

- Do you perceive OSDE personnel as enablers and helpers, while at the same time being bound by policy and procedures?
- Do financially strapped districts receive more discretion than those with adequate resources?

Definition of Terms

Non-discretionary refers to mandatory policies from the state department of education, that school districts must abide by in order to maintain their accreditation. They represent at least 85% of a district's budget. These items include minimum salary schedules for teachers, 5% extra for special education teachers and counselors, class size for students, inclusion of L.D. students, and many more.

Discretionary refers to areas that are not required by the OSDE. They include but are not limited to extracurricular activities, some technology items, facilities and grounds, buses, utilities, supplies, and other incidentals.

A *superintendent* is the top executive of a school district. His/her duties include budget formation and distribution. Superintendents in this study will include those who are in charge of districts with 1,200 students PK-12 and fewer.

Board President (School Law of Oklahoma, 1998) is the top position of authority in an elected board of education.

Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) (School Law of Oklahoma, 1998) is the state government entity that is responsible for handing down mandates, which affect local districts of education.

Rural districts include school districts with PK-12 student populations of 1200 and fewer.

Spending pattern is an analysis of an area of spending and how much funding that area expended.

Policy discretion refers to latitude of choice given by the OSDE, school board members, and superintendents in following federal, state, or board policies.

Delimitations

For this study, qualitative research methodology was selected. According to Creswell (1994), "Categories emerge from informants that provides rich context bound information leading to patterns or theories that explain a phenomenon" (p.7). The long interview will be the qualitative method used to gather information from respondents. According to McCracken (1988), "This method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world, and to see the content and pattern of daily experience", (p.9). "Interviews provide important insights

into a situation. They can provide shortcuts to the prior history of the situation" (Yin, 1994, p. 85).

In order to confirm the reliability and validity of the interpretations from interviews (Jick, 1979) triangulation was be used. Eight superintendents, three board members, and three officials from the OSDE was interviewed. Triangulation was used because each group affects each other, and the dissonance that exists among them as a result of their values are going to influence what is accomplished.

Superintendents/Board Members

Data was collected from eight superintendents, and three board members serving in rural districts. Criteria for the selection of respondents included the size and location of the district where they served, longevity of administrators and board presidents in their positions, and their willingness to participate in the study.

Superintendents and board members were contacted by telephone to explain the study and then to garner their support in participating in the study. An informational letter along with a consent form was mailed to each of the superintendents and board members to request their participation in the study.

Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE)

Data was collected from three individuals associated with the OSDE. Individuals who have the authority to provide discretion with capital improvement improvements, curriculum/instruction, technology, state aid, accreditation, and school personnel were chosen to participate in the study. Criteria for the selection of respondents included those individuals that had a direct effect on rural school districts and their willingness to participate in the study. An informational letter along with a consent form were mailed to each individual requesting participation in the study.

Data collection and analysis will follow McCracken's (1988) four-step inquiry method. Step (1) will review analytic categories; Step (2) review cultural categories; Step (3) discovery of cultural categories' and Step (4) discovery of analytic categories. "The first step of a long qualitative interview begins with an exhaustive review of the literature" (McCracken, 1988, p. 29). "The review of literature enables the investigator to define problems and assess data and it provides a way to manufacture distance" (McCracken 1988). "The purpose of the literature review is to aid in the construction of the interview questionnaire" (McCracken, 1988).

The main questions were to encourage interviewees to express their own opinions and experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to Merriam (1988) "questions need to be understood in familiar language, using words that make sense to the interviewees" (p.79).

Probes were used when responses lacked detail and clarity. Rubin & Rubin (1995) note "probes encourage the interviewee to elaborate on the matter". Follow-up questions will be asked depending on the interviewee and the response to the main question.

Limitations

The researcher is a fifty-four year old, middle class Caucasian male. He was born and raised in Oklahoma in a small rural community. After six years of teaching social studies he left education and spent eighteen years in construction as a third generation contractor. Upon his return to education he has spent the last four years as superintendent. During the four years of his superintendency, he established rapport with other superintendents and community members who respect his support of education.

Because the researcher has been a superintendent of schools for four years, the differences between the interviewer and the respondents may be lessened due to the

fact that the researcher is viewed as an educator. Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that the long interview can build trusting, open relationships leading to reliable responses to interview questions. It is hoped that the respondents will share information without hesitation.

Significance of the Study

This study expanded the existing knowledge about rural superintendents by identifying how or if their values influence spending patterns within their district. With limited funding in education, it is important for superintendents to recognize that their own value system can and may negatively or positively affect the spending pattern of their district. Understanding these patterns could be an aid to superintendents and boards of education in better directing the focus of those administering district finances.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Who determines policy in educational organizations and how are those decisions reached? What role does the community, superintendent, board members, and state department serve in policy discretion? Researchers have explored these questions by examining how and who determines policy discretion. This chapter reviews research focused on individuals or groups that impact policy discretion. Three strands of research were investigated: Community values, state department, and school district.

Community Values

One of the biggest challenges facing district administrators is determining how and if community values mesh together with school needs. During this critical stage, it is necessary for administrators and community to communicate their goals for the district (Gallagher, Bagin, Kindrid, 1997). According to Wright (1997), administrators need and must seek the support of the community at the very earliest time in order for them to gauge the depth of their intended involvement. At this juncture, administrators can customize reforms to the unique characteristics of their

school and communities. This enables students a better chance to achieve personal and social growth and prepare them for the world of work while achieving the schools' curricular goals.

The Royal Commission on Learning (1994) notes that community support, successful reforms, and discretion are directly linked. Research revealed that superintendents must engage in open dialogue with the community. During this open discussion period it is necessary for administrators to understand the needs, wants and desires of the community. It is also critical for superintendents to make community members feel valued and respected during this process (Damaren, 2000).

Since community values are so closely linked to discretion it is necessary to fully understand particular involvement methods that gain and can lose community support.

Campbell (1985) was a proponent of the need for communities to take adequate time to identify issues, propose options, and develop curriculum in order to meet the needs of all students. Campbell argued that although mandates set parameters, local communities can determine goals and practices for the "excellence components of content, standards and expectations". She also noted that

teachers should not only be involved in the content process but should be accepted as members of the communities that recruit them.

Districts must do a better job of connecting with the public. A lot of community members are uninformed about practices such as inclusion, block scheduling, and dual diplomas. Practices have changed and so has the terminology used in education. These changes in educational jargon have distanced some community members from the school system. They feel as if they no longer can adequately communicate with the district about their children. "Schools have basically become out of touch with the public" (Brandt, 1998).

As district administrators reflect back upon these communicative periods they will "fully understand that all communities have significant differences in beliefs and practices" (Westheimer 1999). What works well in one district may not work well in another.

The curriculum is one area where parents want more input in how and what kinds of programs are best suited for their children. Districts sometimes look to revolutionary new programs to increase their test scores and this brings about conflict between the district and community. Some of these new programs are not always new. Some are recycled

programs that just have a new name attached to them. These programs take into account the many different ways in which children learn. Zenke (1981) suggested that there were a lot of successful efforts being carried out across the country and it was much better to follow their lead than those unsuccessful approaches broadcast by the media.

Bushman and Boris (1998) noted that parental teams chosen to determine better ways to run the schools is the newest vehicle to initiate change at district and school levels. Goal Sharing has become the newest innovation in the Clovis California School District. During the first educational congress hundreds of educators, parents and community leaders convened to determine better ways to run the schools. Goal Sharing has been credited with an improvement in public relations within districts. However, Lare and Cimino (1998) note that programs designed to improve public relations in a district must have adequate two-way public communication. They also revealed that these teams must have an adequate budget and capitalize on new technology in order for them to be successful.

Town meetings have been an American institution for years. New England communities have been taking advantage of this age old institution to enhance community involvement. They have been using the town meeting as an

effective bridge to narrow the gap between the district and community. It has also become an effective vehicle of reform for superintendents. Town meetings should be considered an "honorable, truly democratic forum, not a symbolic gesture to improve public relations" (Uline, 1998).

Communicating the message is the key ingredient in district-community relations. According to Troisi and Kidd (1990) few administrators lack technical skills. The problem is the lack of people skills and the inability to exercise good judgment. Encouraging others to communicate school programs and needs is a must. Scholt (1998) added that administrators should capitalize on school employees as the front line in public relations. "Employees are ambassadors whose words and actions can either build community support or destroy a community's confidence".

Community values as we know them by today were termed "mores" or "habits of the heart" by Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 1800's. "Mores" at the time enhanced citizenship, fostered a sense of connectedness to the community, and supported the practices, basic values, and institutions necessary for the democratic process (Reeher, Cammarano, 1997). It is this same sense of connectedness that is important to communities across the nation today.

Community values bind the citizenry together and they are not something to be taken lightly by administrators in the performing of their craft (Blumberg, 1989).

Mitchell (1989) noted that this connectedness to the values of the parents and the community creates problems for students along with the educational system. Mitchell (1989) added "students expect and want educational programs that prepare them for entry into the labor market". However, there are times when this "alienates students from parental and community norms in order for them to accept the norms of mobility and workplace behavior needed for economic success". Mitchell (1989) also argued schools must do a better job of integrating community values with the world of work in the future in order to "empower rather than alienate the children that come to them".

Superintendents need to work on the image of the district in order to gain and keep community support. There are numerous strategies that schools can implement in order to enhance community support. Newsletters are a very cheap method of communicating a positive message to the community. Newsletters are a great source of information for parents about school events. They are also a great way to inform the community of school district needs. Another effective form of communication with the community is

through the school marquee. The school marquee is a very visible part of the district. Districts are able to use the marquee to project their own positive message to the community. School districts must project their own positive accomplishments to the community and not become victims of newspaper headlines as the only source of information (Carroll, Carroll, 1994).

It is important to understand why communities guard their schools so intensely. Today, many American families live in fear of an onslaught of their values. Why? Because many community members feel the family unit is in serious trouble and values are eroding. As long as the government expects schools to solve society's problems, no one will look elsewhere for ways to strengthen family values (Carnes, 1995).

In a comfortable community environment residents rarely compare their school to those elsewhere. They know what they want out of their school and that is all that matters to them. However, whenever change comes along community members do want to be involved in a meaningful way. These tight knit communities have always found change difficult and probably always will. These communities are prone to reject decisions that do not conform to the old paradigms, and even more so if they are not involved in the

process.

So how does community values affect the implementation process and the discretion given to superintendents? Spillane (1998) conducted a study involving two school districts and 35,000 students in order to explore the implementation process of a statewide reading policy. He noted that educators interpret policies in light of local community standards. Those policies that fit local visions are endorsed, while those that do not are opposed or modified so they do fit. It is not that local policymakers ignore reforms that are inconsistent with their agendas. But, local policymakers sometimes develop new understandings from policy. Their understanding of reform is influenced by the "context of their own sense-making" (Spillane, 1998).

Spillane (1998) noted that there were different school-level responses to a state policy within a school district. Some schools provided incentives to encourage reform while other schools offered nothing. Another problem was the lack of staff development during the implementation process. Based on these facts it was not unexpected to see extremely large variations between the two separate school districts.

In summary of the research reviewed in this section,

researchers (Spillane, 1998; Bushman, Boris, 1998; Zenke, 1981) all note that school districts interpret reform differently. Not only does this occur within individual districts, but among schools in the same district. Research suggests that discretion is used in the implementation process based upon the mores of the community. Loose wording within mandated reform measures allows communities to use more discretion during the implementation process.

Research also indicated that administrators who want more discretion during the implementation process must seek out and use valued community members before reforms are put into place. It is also important to use every means of communication possible in order to allow the community to become an active part of the implementation process.

State Department/Employees

What obligation do state governments have to provide a system of public education? Under the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the states are reserved all powers that are not delegated to the federal government. Since education is not a delegated power, state governments have the primary power and responsibility for public education. School districts, on the other hand, are charged by state legislatures to carry out the educational provisions of

state constitutions. Hence, state governments have the primary responsibility for the oversight and funding of public education.

The past 30 years of educational reform have featured four themes—choice, equity, excellence, and accountability. The reform movements associated with these themes “only tinker with particular aspects of the school system, and the historical record convincingly displays the system’s resistance to reform” (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

A trend is beginning to unfold in schools. Government officials and education policies are becoming hostile to the endeavors of teachers and principals (Loveless, 1998). The success or failure of mandates and reforms have been “measured by how well its stated goals are attained”, leaving the wisdom of such goals unexamined (Loveless, 1998). Governments and their policies respond to political power, whether exercised by business interests, civil rights groups, or organizations extolling family values. As a result, established educational interests like teachers unions, school board associations, and professional groups, apply their own political muscle in vehement opposition to accountability reforms (Loveless, 1998).

Sometimes mandates complement districts’ policy goals.

Policy changes sometimes reflect a clash of values in American education. Each of the two political parties has its own definition of what counts as schooling and how student and school success should be measured. These value shifts lead to policy shifts, but not "automatically to changes in practice" (Cuban, 1990, p.11).

For a decade, school reformers have argued that America's students need to be engaged with more challenging academic content. There is a national trend to implement 4x4 or 4x3 programs in order to accomplish this proposed need. Instructional changes that reformers envision will be difficult to realize because they necessitate changing the "core technology of schooling which is teaching" (Spillane, 1998).

It is going to be extremely difficult for some states to implement certain reforms. Local factors dominate the policy implementation process and recent instructional reforms are even "more dependent on local conditions than previous reforms" (Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994). District administrators' constant and active support for a reform is a necessary condition for local implementation.

Due to the ambiguous method in which state and federal policies are written, school districts can easily construe them in ways that advance their local agendas. Policy

discretion appears to be built into these policies. Policies are changed because of the nature of teachers constructing their own ideas about instruction. Constructs are influenced by policy and their beliefs, knowledge, and disposition.

Since the idea of consolidation appeared, the cultural assumption that bigger is better and one best system for educating children has disempowered local communities politically and economically. The philosophy of education must begin in schools and the educational agenda must return to the local focus (Theobald, Nachtigal, 1995).

According to Elmore (1980) the major problem with mandates from the legislature is an "implementation problem". The legislators traditionally rely on hierarchical control for program implementation and this is "contrary to the need for subordinates to exercise delegated control" (individual responsibility, initiative, and discretion) over their own actions. Since the most important interaction in education takes place between teachers and students, it is only natural that the classroom would be the place to solve implementation problems (Elmore, 1980). Elmore (1980) noted that this system was based on delegated control and service delivery rather than a regulatory view that relies on "hierarchical

control and compliance". In this way implementation begins at the bottom rather than the top.

The Arizona legislature initiated a pilot program in 1990 involving 15 schools. This program was to identify local and state barriers to reforms. During the first two years of this four year project the most common local barriers included: knowledge concerning state laws, lack of resources, lack of training and limited discretionary funds allocated to the local level. State barriers included: excessive and redundant reporting requirements, school board rules, and mandates without adequate financing and support (Sheane, Bierlein, 1992).

During the third year Bierlein, and Sheane, (1993) noted that the top state, local, and school barriers still included lack of "state funding, excessive paperwork, and lack of adequate discretionary funds". They also determined that requiring school board members to attend training sessions was another great need.

Hansen, (1981), studied the Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 in order to determine why so much of the available discretionary funding from the federal government ended up as non-discretionary funding from the states. During this study he found that federal law specified that some of the available funds would go to the

local districts and some could be allocated directly to the state. However, Hansen, (1981) found that the states retained broad discretion concerning such matters as how they will distribute the funds to local districts, how they will regulate local district accountability, how they will set priorities, and what technical assistance they will provide. Hansen, (1981) also notes "the state agency must recognize that a new relationship exists between the state and the local district as a result of the shift in responsibility for fund allocation from the federal government to the state".

According to DeMeester, (1986) the logic behind legislative mandates and policy discretion is connected to the wording within the laws. "Laws are intentionally vague in order for more lee-way during the implementation process". It is this vagueness that allows local district administrators more discretion during the implementation process.

The amount of policy discretion from the SDE depends upon the bureaucratic pressures put upon them concerning accountability and standardization. Some SDE employees advise local districts to "tailor their programs to the main purposes of programs" rather than routinely adopting technical and standardized procedures (DeMeester, 1986).

OSDE employees are often former educators and as educators realize mandates are not always created in the best interest of the children, parents, or community.

Lawrence, 1998) expanded on the idea of mandates, noting that "mandates were far from perfect". She noted that culture and history in rural communities negatively influence many rural students' academic aspirations. Mandates such as school consolidation exacerbate the problem. Consolidated schools increase the effect by separating students from their parents and communities and alienating them in school. SDE employees correspond with districts under their control often, either by phone, letter, or in person. These employees know the personnel in many of their districts personally. Policy discretion is determined more by the "situation rather than by the law" (DeMeester, 1986).

The state of Kentucky mandated extensive reform in 1990. This reform became known as the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act. The first step in the synthesis of the Reform Act was a narrative analysis of the implementation process. Lindle, (1998) compiled research about what transpired during the implementation process. She noted that the state gave broad discretionary power to the districts, and the districts gave discretionary power

to the teachers. Problems arose from this process because she found that the teachers did not have the "knowledge base for implementing most components of the statewide reform" and they were to be evaluated in ways they were poorly prepared to meet (Lindle, 1998). Lindle, (1998) noted that if reforms are to be administered properly, then the SDE must assume a more activist leadership role in regard to supervision, management and control of schools. Research indicated that when the state gave districts wide local discretion, it allowed the growth of many intradistrict inequities. Findings also pointed to the need for more general aid bills rather than categorical (Lindle, (1998)).

The Pennsylvania State Department of Education in 1982 conducted a six month study identifying mandates that limit the discretion of the local school districts and school administrators. These mandates ranged all the way from school construction to gifted students. During this study it was found that some mandates were unnecessarily costly and too restrictive. The SDE also found that many of these mandates needed mechanisms for returning decision making authority back to the local school officials.

Fullan(1998)also noted that for reform to be successful they must have "top and bottom half rapport and

coordination".

The Michigan SDE began a special program for state-aid grants to local districts in 1968. The SDE and the local school districts were given broad discretion in implementing and administering programs. Political pressure brought constant revisions of administrative rules. Reforms underwent a gradual "metamorphosis" (Crowson, 1975). Research indicates "due to the broad discretion the state and school districts were given contributed to the failure of the policies never actually being put into practice" (Crowson, 1975).

In the late 1980's there was a significant growth in state policymaking along with a significant increase in the state share of educational spending. During this time period "24% of state operating expenditures went for elementary and secondary education" (Fuhrman, Elmore, 1990). Much of this increase in expenditures by 1986 went for mandated minimum salary schedules (Fuhrman, Elmore, 1990).

Today, it is much easier than before for the SDE to keep track of new reforms and mandates within school districts. Technology has made enormous leaps during the 1990's. Because of this great technology boom, many states began to rely heavily upon this new, better, and faster

technology to enhance their oversight capacity.

"Implementation and performance" was easily monitored (Kaagan & Coley, 1989). In turn SDE agencies were able to cut staff positions. Fuhrman and Elmore, (1990) noted that there was some evidence that "state agencies treated districts differently". Much of this variation was due to the lack of adequate staffing within the SDE. Districts that requested assistance and those in deep trouble were usually the only ones that received assistance. This was further evidence that the states lacked the capacity to assure compliance with the reform policies. Because of the lack of personnel, there had to be more discretion at the local level to compensate for the lack of direct enforcement (Fuhrman, Elmore, 1990).

Tuneberg, (1996) researched 157 urban school superintendents' perceptions of the methods by which the Ohio SDE influenced their school districts during mandate implementation. Tuneberg, (1996) used Etzioni's Compliance Theory (1975) as the conceptual framework. Etzioni argued "because schools, like religious and political organizations, are normative organizations, coercion may be considered incongruent with the psychological disposition of teachers and administrators". Research indicated that the Ohio SDE would be better served by being an advocate

for school districts rather than a hindrance. Tuneberg, (1996) indicated "coercive power by the SDE was incongruous with the needs of a normative organization".

Kelly, (1991) also indicated that the make up of state mandates is wrong. He also noted "no external force or authority can make an organization excellent". The SDE role is to persuade an organization's members to strive for excellence. These are the reasons why coercive state mandates for teacher evaluation, testing, and academic standards have been a hard sell. The actions of educators suggest that the way in which power is interpreted must be examined as well as the way in which it is imposed (Kelly, 1991). Until the SDE and districts learn about each other's work real change will not happen.

In summary of the research presented in this section, researchers have illustrated how state mandates are viewed and enforced by SDE employees (Loveless, 1998, Tyack & Cuban, 1995, Spillane, 1998, Fuhrman, Elmore, 1990, DeMeester, 1986, Tuneberg, 1996, and Kelly, 1991). State department employees are usually former educators who know how districts operate. Research on policy discretion suggests that the working of mandates allows state department employees and superintendents some discretion during the implementation process.

School Board Members/Superintendents

Local boards of education are an American invention. The New England colonies came up with the district system. Local districts emerged partly because of difficulties in isolation, transportation, and communication in the colonies. Mainly, local districts came about because of the belief in the value of local control and opposition to higher authority. As school districts became separate from municipal government they became a "distinct governing body" (Faber, 1990). Because of this process we now have school boards that are elected to represent the values and cultures of the community that they represent.

Although the local board of education concept is far from perfect, it does not appear that it will disappear in the future (Faber, 1990). The local board is "steeped in tradition and it is an essential part of representative democracy" (Faber 1990). Burlingame (1988) noted "essentially local boards are the channels through which citizens affect educational policy"

Boards of education do not have total discretionary powers. Some policies mandated from the state can not be changed to fit local district values. Accreditation requirements limit the authority of boards of education Requirements such as length of school day and year,

graduation requirements and course requirements are mandated out of local board control.

Over the past 30 years local boards have been bombarded by mandates that have chipped away at local control of schools. "Mandates rely upon rules and regulations to secure compliance or behavior consistent with what the regulations prescribe" (Faber, 1990, p.33). Johnson (1988) also noted "statehouses across the nation have functioned to reduce the discretion of local boards". Mandates assume an "adversarial relationship between enforcers and objects of the enforcement" (Johnson, 1988). The major responsibility for assuring compliance rests at the level that makes the policy. Since most mandates set minimum standards, districts appear to be discouraged from exceeding those standards. State mandates bring about a negative relationship with local boards of education. The "us VS. them" atmosphere is intensified (Faber, 1990). Local boards relate that the "state" does not understand our community and it is not interested in our kids (Faber, 1990).

There is an abrasive relationship that exists between state policymakers and local boards of education. State policymakers rely on formal authority to implement most mandates (French & Raven, 1959). This causes local boards

to seek avenues to "circumvent rules and procedures" (Faber, 1990) they view as inappropriate for their community.

According to Hess (1994) the SDE should focus more on developing the capacity to assess whether schools meet state standards, "rather than on controlling how they meet state standards". Today only the most affluent school districts have the resources to go beyond state mandates and exercise local control over the discretionary aspects of schooling (Hess, 1994). There are some limits as to how far a state legislature and a SDE can push mandated reform down to all schools and into the "hearts and minds of educational professionals" (Goldman, Conley, 1994).

Boards of education at the local level accept mandates depending upon the level of change involved. According to Cuban (1988c,p.228), first-order changes that spell out objectives and competences are easier to legislate than are second-order changes, which require altering organizational structures. Boards of education tend to allow more discretion for superintendents with policies that are too expensive for the district, and do not have a good fit with the community.

According to French (1979), the U.S. is experiencing a change in the balance of power between local, state, and

federal policy-makers in who should control public education. Local control is being threatened. Local boards of education do not maintain the discretion to control mandated policies that they once had. The courts and national interest groups have made "home rule more of an antiquated illusion than an actuality" (Kirst, 1979). Strings attached to federal/state funds and mandates have served to further reduce discretion and flexibility at the local level (Kirst, 1979). Funding in each state has been toward more direct state influence rather than with local school board discretion and flexibility. A person only has to look at the "growth of state educational agencies" to understand their new expanded role in administering complex mandates (Cuban, 1984). Local boards of education are able to deal with mandates. Local boards however, have problems with mandates when they are not fully funded. Financially strapped local districts are being held responsible for meeting the mandates in both "policy and finance with state support" in the vast majority of cases (Lane, Prichett, 1990). Hess (1995) also noted that with the absence of additional funding, mandates must be considered as replacements for existing programs rather than as new initiatives. At this point districts use a greater amount of discretion during implementation.

Superintendent Discretion

Political theory suggests that communities elect board members who set educational policy consistent with the values of the community. The board will also select a superintendent who will administer the school according to the intentions of the board (Hosman 1990). Carver (2000) added that the central task of the board is to "assimilate the diverse values of those who own the system, to add any special knowledge from staff and experts, then to make decisions on behalf of the owners". However, Carver (2000) noted that rarely do boards hear from a representative sampling of owners. The next step is to hire a superintendent to ensure system performance. However, sometimes this system is flawed. According to (Zeigler, Jennings, Peak, 1974) school governance is undemocratic because of the low participation in the electoral process and a lack of discernible differences between candidates. They also noted that sometimes board members and superintendents who are "different in values" are elected and hired because the "attention of participants is elsewhere".

According to these researchers, the superintendent and school board relationship is propelled by two models: the democratic model and the professional model. The

democratic model "defines effectiveness in terms of democratic criteria". Each group is responsible to the other. The superintendent is now a policy implementer rather than a policy originator. The professional model puts trust in the superintendent because he/she is the expert capable of making decisions most advantageous to the students (Zeigler, Jennings, Peak, 1974). At this point the superintendent has the discretion to change policy in order to meet the needs of the district.

Research indicates boards and superintendents often fail to ascertain the needs of their community with little participation in policy-setting. Boards of education put their trust in the superintendent and follow his/her lead in policy making and implementation (Zeigler, 1976).

The superintendent must understand his/her board and community. Policy discretion comes from this better understanding of community and district. Blumberg (1989) describes this process as "learning the craft on-the job". This on-the-job process produces a better understanding of what is important to the community and the board. As the board and community changes so should the working knowledge of the superintendent (Blumberg, 1989, p.174).

According to research, policy discretion increases for superintendents due to a number of factors. The strength

of the board and the mutual respect board members have for each other is a determining factor in policy discretion (Dyer, 1973). Porter (1975) suggested that superintendents should demonstrate what schools are about and determine whether or not these ideals are being accomplished in his/her district. However, Carver (2000) suggested that implementing a governance policy in the beginning of a new relationship enables superintendents to have broad discretionary powers. He noted that once this policy is in place the board should "speak with one voice rather than multiple voices". Through this policy the superintendent is responsible to the board and the board is responsible to the owners of the district.

Research done by Greene (1992) noted that superintendents' need to understand that boards of education act out of two arenas. They simultaneously act as "professional organizations depending on the expertise of the superintendent, and as representative bodies", who respond to the needs of parents and community. Tucker and Zeigler (1980) noted that boards act out of two styles of governance: hierarchical and bargaining. Hierarchical assumes the superintendent is a professional and has expertise, while the school board acts as a communicative link between the superintendent and the community.

However, the bargaining style assumes that the administration, board members, parents, and community share governance to reach decisions. Politics thus reflect the wishes of the superintendent and the community.

Lutz and Gresson (1980) offered another view of school boards. They noted that boards are either elite or arena. Elite boards rely on superintendent advice and expertise and seek consensus on issues. Arena boards, however, do not rely on the superintendent and board members represent special interest groups.

A report by the Institute for Educational Leadership, (1986) noted that board/superintendent relationships fall under the professional and political models. The professional model treats board members as trustees of the public interest and relies on the expertise of the superintendent to develop the agenda and recommend policy. Under the political model board members tout their responsibility to the community and interfere in the management of the district.

Whether or not a superintendent has the discretion to administer policies to his/her liking depends upon the model a school district is operating. The amount of or lack of discretion in most districts depends upon several factors. Researchers noted (Adkison, 1982; Drachler, 1977,

Yee, Cuban, 1996; Chance, 1991; Iannaccone, Lutz, 1970; Hosman, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Underwood, 1985) that policy discretion depends upon the perceived expertise of the superintendent, his/her successful tenure, amount of change involved, expense of change, whether change is state generated or local, verbal communication skills of the superintendent, amount of competition for seats on the local board, and areas of proposed change. Underwood (1985) reported that board members wanted responsibility in the areas of curriculum, personnel, administration, and finance. Underwood (1985) emphasized board members who operated out of the political mode would assert more authority in these areas than members who operated out of the professional arena.

Zeigler, Jennings, Peak (1974) noted superintendents could increase their discretionary power with the school board by setting their own agendas because they would be able to define problems and control issues. They also noted rural districts mirror the reverse image of urban districts. Since rural districts have a more homogeneous population and shared social values, boards will tend to be more consensual, rather than political (Zeigler, Jennings, Peak, (1974)

Wirt and Christovich (1989) also noted that although

the demands of citizens have increased, the ability for superintendents to implement policy has not lessened. They also share the same feelings as Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak, (1974) concerning superintendents' expertise. Both groups noted boards acceptance of superintendent's claim of expertise as a prime factor in policy discretion.

A crucial part of policy discretion appears to be tied to the perceived role of the board member. Brubaker and Shelton, (1995) noted board members tend to "micromanage school systems: they can't see the big picture, and they don't grasp how roles of administrators and board members should differ".

In conclusion, Burlingame (1977) noted superintendents as individuals and school boards as units are unclear about their respective roles and conflicting expectations occur (pp. 11-13). The true "test of an administrator's skill today is no longer the ability to manage the internal operations of the school system. The real test is his/her ability to relate effectively to pressure without becoming a puppet" (Corwin, 1974, p.41).

In summary of the research presented in this section, researchers have expounded on the different philosophies out of which school boards operate (Zeigler, Jennings, Peak, 1974; Greene, 1992; Tucker, Zeigler, 1980). Depending

upon which philosophy a board operates determines the amount of discretion given to the superintendent.

Research illustrates superintendents' verbal communication skills, perceived expertise, tenure success and board/community mesh as indicators of increased policy discretion.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore policy discretion and its effect on spending patterns of rural Oklahoma districts. This qualitative study is not guided or constrained by a theory. A theory will be developed as categories that form a pattern emerge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This chapter begins with a discussion of two research methodologies and a rationale for the selected method. Criteria for the selection of participants and the method for data selection will be discussed in this section. The last section discusses techniques that will be used to establish trustworthiness of the study.

Rationale for the Study

There are important differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods as well as reasons why individual researchers use a particular paradigm.

Creswell (1994) notes:

One approaches a qualitative methodology by using a deductive form of logic wherein theories and hypotheses are tested in a cause-and-effect order. Concepts, variables, and hypotheses are chosen before the study begins and remain fixed throughout the study. The intent of the study is to develop generalizations that contribute to the theory and that enable one to better predict, explain, and understand some phenomenon. These generalizations are enhanced if the information and instruments used are valid and reliable.

Alternatively, in a qualitative methodology inductive logic prevails. Categories emerge from informants, rather than are identified a priori by the researcher. This emerges patterns of theories that help explain a phenomenon. The question about accuracy of the information may not surface in a study, or, if it does, the researcher talks about steps for verifying the information with informants or "triangulating" among different sources of information.

Although both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in the social sciences, qualitative methods are used to collect the thick data which will demonstrate their interrelationship with their context (Guba, 1981).

Merriam (1988) notes that "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education. Naturalistic inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited for this task-and best when using methods that make use of human sensibilities such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing" (p.3). Merriam also noted that there are several characteristics of qualitative research worth stressing. First, qualitative research is concerned more with process and meaning than outcomes or products. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for data

collection and analysis. Third, qualitative research involves fieldwork. One must physically go to the people, setting, site, and/or institution. (Merriam, 1988, p. 19). Crabtree and Miller (1992) also noted that "qualitative designs are best characterized as unique and flexible. This flexibility maximizes the likelihood of gathering data rich in detail" (p.232).

This study was an attempt to better understand discretion and how it affects the spending patterns of rural Oklahoma districts. "The long interview was used to take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world" (McCracken, 1988, p.9). The long interview revealed how superintendent discretion affects the spending patterns and direction of their districts.

Selection of Participants

The purpose of this study was to better understand how policy discretion influences spending patterns of rural Oklahoma School districts.

Due to the nature of the long interview, the recommendations for the size of the sample are different than that of a quantitative study. Therefore certain characteristics in regard to size and scale were considered in the selection of participants. School districts

included in this study were located in the southeastern quadrant of Oklahoma bounded by Highway 69 on the west, Interstate 40 on the north and natural state boundaries on the east and south. Rural schools for this study included a maximum student enrollment of 1200 students in grades PK through 12.

In regard to selection of respondents McCracken (1988) determined that "less is more" (p.17) respondents should be limited to fourteen. Eight superintendents, three board members, and three members of the OSDE were interviewed and the respondents were perfect strangers to the interviewer (p.37). The ratio of 8-3-3 for interviewees was used for triangulation in order to support better trustworthiness. Gay (1987) also felt that the number of subjects for qualitative studies is considerably smaller than the number for quantitative studies.

The 1999-2000 Educational Directory, the 1998-1999 Annual Statistical Report published by the SDE were used to develop a list of potential school districts and respondents. The educational Directory lists all of the school districts and the names of administrators within each district. The Statistical Report identifies the average daily membership (ADM) for all districts in the state.

A map of the state of Oklahoma was used to outline the proposed area. Then geographical locations of the potential districts were plotted on the map. Superintendents from these districts were contacted by telephone to determine their interest in participating in the study. The sample of board members consisted of those whose superintendents were chosen for the random sample and their willingness to participate in the study. Respondents from the OSDE included those willing to be interviewed and who had specific characteristics for the study. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995) selection of participants include their willingness to participate in a study.

Prior to the interview, an introductory letter was sent to potential participants explaining the study. The respondents were again contacted by telephone to again determine their willingness to participate in the study. A number of respondents were less willing to participate after the introductory letter and their district was eliminated from the list of candidates. From the remaining list eight districts were selected to participate in the study.

Prior to each interview each respondent was given the consent form informing them of their right to refuse to answer questions and confidentiality procedures.

Respondents were interviewed at their own district using the long interview method developed by McCracken (1988). The average interview was 45 minutes in length.

Data Collection

The researcher was the primary instrument in the collection of data. Information from each participant was recorded by audio-cassette recorder. Verbatim transcripts were created by the interviews. Next, transcripts were analyzed to determine categories of data that related to the respondents' views of the world (McCracken, 1988 p.42).

Through the interview process, themes gradually develop into analytic categories. Miles and Huberman (1984) note that when working with recurring patterns "something 'jumps out' at you, suddenly makes sense".

According to McCracken (1988) the first step of the interview process is the construction of the questionnaire. The main objective is to entice respondents to "tell their own story in their own terms" (p.34). McCracken also advocates the use of planned prompts in order to give respondents an opportunity to consider and discuss phenomena that do not come readily to mind or speech (p.35). McCracken noted the importance of the "contrast prompt," the "recall prompt", and the "auto-driving prompt" (p.36).

McCracken felt the interview itself was the most important opportunity to search for categories and relationships. He also noted the importance of interviewing correctly since information lost during the interview process was lost forever (p.38).

Trustworthiness Criteria

Trustworthiness was a major concern for this study. Miles and Huberman (1984) use a series of questions to aid the researcher with trustworthiness.

- Was negative evidence sought? Found? What happened then?
- Have rival explanations been actively considered? What happened to them?
- Were conclusions considered to be accurate by Original informants? If not, is there an explanation for this?
- Did triangulation produce conclusions? If not, is there an explanation for this?
- Are areas of uncertainty identified?
- Have findings been replicated in other parts of the database than the one they arose from? (p.279).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest triangulation as an activity to strengthen credibility. Triangulation of

methodology, of sites, and questions were used during this study so the different facets of the phenomenon could emerge (Greene et al.1989). Triangulation looks for repetition to clarify meaning and interpretations

Data Analysis

Patton (1980) noted data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous. The researcher must reduce this information to certain patterns, categories, and themes. The process entails the taking apart the whole into smaller pieces and it emerging as a consolidated larger picture (Tesch, 1990, p.97).

McCracken's (1988) framework developed for the long interview was used to reduce the voluminous amount of information. Five stages are used in the analysis process. "The first stage treats each utterance in the interview transcript in its own terms, ignoring its relationship to other aspects of the text (p.42). This stage treats each utterance as a useful, important, observation. The second stage takes these observations separately according to the evidence in the transcript and according to the previous literature and cultural review (McCracken, 1988, p. 42). The object of analysis is the determination of patterns of inter theme consistency and contradiction. The benefit of these stages is the virtue of creating a record of the

processes of reflection and analysis in which the investigator engaged (McCracken, 1988, p.43).

Summary

This chapter presented a rationale for the method chosen. The long interview research methodology was used for this study. The sample included eight school superintendents, three school board members, and three members of the OSDE. The interviews took place in a naturalistic setting, usually in the participants' local surroundings. Procedures for data collection and analysis followed McCracken's (1988) framework. The data were then categorized and classified for analysis and interpretation.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Superintendents are hired to lead school districts. They are able to implement changes due to circumstance rather policy when discretion is given to them from school board members and state department employees. Policy discretion has a profound effect upon the direction and success of school reforms.

The previous three chapters outlined the purpose of the study, reviewed relevant literature, and explained the methodology used in this study. This chapter presents the data and then provides an analysis of the data.

The long interview revealed numerous themes and categories common to superintendents, state department employees, and school board members. Analysis of the data revealed patterns of relationships, and identified similarities and differences regarding policy discretion in rural school districts.

Superintendent Participants

Ron

Ron is in his fourth year as superintendent. This is his first year in Twin Pines. He served as an elementary principal on the outskirts of a large urban center prior to

his superintendent duties and he has served a total of 29 years in education. Twin Pines School District is located in southeastern Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 460 students in grades PK through 12. The school district is the largest employer in town. However, work in a nearby prison facility provides employment for some of Twin Pines residents.

Ron succeeded a career superintendent who had spent 13 years in the district. During the last five years the district "carry-over" (amount of funds left over in each account at the end of the fiscal year) averaged less than 3% of the budget. The bus fleet consisted of one 93 model and five other buses that had been in use for over 25 years. Almost all of the buildings had leaking roofs. At least 90% of the budget went for personnel wages. Stagnant growth and overstaffing were a primary reason for the lack of funds necessary to provide maintenance for facilities and the purchase of new buses and technology. Due to the pressure for change, three new school board members urged the former superintendent to retire.

Mike

Mike is in his fourth year as superintendent of Mountain Fork. He also serves as the high school principal and assistant football coach. Mike has worked twelve years

in education in three school districts with one district being out of state. He is Native American and at 37 was the youngest superintendent interviewed.

Mountain Fork School District is located in southeastern Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 180 students in grades PK through 12. The school district is the largest employer in town. Many of Mountain Fork residents are financially dependent upon the oil and gas industry. Mountain Fork is a small town with a business section consisting of a café, post office, and a convenience store.

Mike succeeded a short-term superintendent in a district with three percent carry over. Out of four buildings, two WPA, and one newer building were in need of new roofs. Years of continual school board conflict brought about a declining enrollment which has resulted in overstaffing. Two of the school board members are newly elected, three have served less than three years, and four of the members dwell on controversial matters.

John

John has served as superintendent and elementary principal in Prairie School District for 12 years. He has served 24 years in education and hopes to retire in three years. Prairie School District is located in southeastern Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 150 students in graded PK

through 8. The school district is the largest employer in the community. Prairie is a very small town with three churches, a post office, and convenience store. Most of the residents of Prairie are employed in a larger town located twelve miles away.

Prairie School District is growing and has a very stable school board. School board members usually serve until they decide to leave rather than being voted out of office. The district has had maximum carry over (40% of the budget) for a number of years even after major renovations each summer.

Hank

Hank, a 57 year old Native American, is in his 15th year as superintendent. He has served in three different school districts. This is his first year at Whispering Pine where he serves as superintendent and elementary principal. He has served a total 26 years in education. He plans to stay at Whispering Pine until his retirement. Whispering Pine is located in southeastern Oklahoma and has a PK-8 enrollment of 100 students. The district has had four superintendents in eight years. All four superintendents left of their own free will and went on to larger districts. Whispering Pine is deemed as a great starter school for aspiring superintendents.

A new building was built two years ago and it is internet wired and connected. The addition doubled the space for classrooms. The new building contains the new library and computer lab. Both buildings house students in K through 8.

Whispering Pine is a small rural community with very few businesses to support employment. Residents drive 30 to 50 miles to seek employment.

Bob

Bob is 55 and has served as superintendent of Crossroads for six years. He has served in education for 29 years and is nearing retirement. Crossroads School District is located in southeast Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 500 students in grades PK through 12. The school district has 50 employees and is the largest employer in town. Crossroads is located near the state line and residents drive 30 miles across the state line to find employment.

Bob succeeded a superintendent who had been principal and then served 13 years as superintendent. Over the last five years the district has completed many roofing projects as well as remodeling other areas. Due to a declining enrollment and many staff members on the upper end of the pay scale, the district has not had enough funds to begin

the new fiscal year.

Rick

Rick has served as superintendent for four years and is in his first year at Mountain View. He has been in education for 10 years. Mountain View is located in southeastern Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 300 students in grades K through 12. There are only five businesses in Mountain View. Residents either work in the local gas industry or they drive 60 miles to a larger city for other employment.

Mountain View is a very stable school district. Prior superintendents had long careers before voluntary retirement. Superintendents are hired partially due to the length of time they will be able to stay in the district. Mountain View is sound financially with 40% carry over balances each year. The district has grown steadily over the past five years, thus overstaffing did not occur.

The school board is very stable. The board consists of two new members and three members with long tenure. There is little controversy and members stay until they decide to leave the board. All board members have children or grandchildren in the school system.

Harvey

Harvey has served in Prairie View as superintendent for four years. He was principal in another district for fifteen years before being hired as superintendent of Prairie View. Harvey is retiring at the end of the current year, after spending 30 years in education. Prairie View School District is located in southeast Oklahoma and has an enrollment of 170 students in grades K through 12. The district is the only employer in town. The town consists of a post office and a very small convenience store.

Harvey replaced a superintendent who had served 15 years in the district. The former superintendent encountered many board member problems and was unable to budget funds for major repairs to the facilities. The facilities suffered under his years in office. The district has a declining enrollment and is overstaffed with numerous teachers nearing retirement.

The school board has argued among themselves and with the community for the past 10 years. The board makes decisions contrary to legal advice and the district pays for a lot of lawsuits. There have been quite a few changes on the board during the past four years due to resignations and elections.

Debbie

Due to the limited number of female superintendents in Oklahoma and an even smaller sampling in southeastern Oklahoma, strict anonymity will be observed. Descriptive material concerning personal information and demographics will be avoided.

Debbie has been a superintendent for a few years. She started as a teacher fresh out of college. She then served as principal and moved on to superintendent. Debbie applied for a number of positions and received token interviews; which would eliminate the hint of discrimination before being chosen for her present position.

State Department Employees

Due to problems with confidentiality there will not be a lot of descriptive information concerning OSDE employees. The three employees of the OSDE did request anonymity and their wishes will be followed.

Three OSDE employees were interviewed. They were Jack, Jerry, and Judy. All three employees had previously worked in public school systems and they were all very knowledgeable concerning school district operations.

School Board Members

Roy

Roy has been a member of the Mountain View Board of Education for nine years and has worked with three superintendents. He currently serves as president of the board. Roy is 39 and is a product of the Mountain View school system. He has an elementary and a high school student attending Mountain View.

Roy did not attend college but he feels it is very important for students to receive a degree especially in southeastern Oklahoma where jobs are scarce. He owns his own construction company and he has a very good working knowledge of constructing buildings and upkeep of facilities.

Ruth

Ruth has served on the Whispering Pine School Board for 11 years, and with 5 superintendents. She has served as president, clerk, and member of the board. At the present time Ruth serves as member of the board. Ruth has lived in Whispering Pine all of her life. She is 38 and has an elementary student enrolled in school. Ruth did not attend college. However, she wants her two sons to attend. Ruth has never worked outside of the home. Her knowledge

of school systems comes from attendance in state meetings and her experiences on the board of education.

Dana

Dana has served as member of the Mountain Fork Board for one year. Due to the fact she does not work outside of the home, she has ample time to visit the school during the day. Dana attended Mountain Fork as a student and has two daughters that attend the elementary school. Both daughters play basketball and Dana attends all of the games. Dana hopes her daughters will receive a scholarship to play basketball in college.

Most Knowledgeable Grand Tour Question Areas

Superintendents

When asked about the area in which they have the most expertise, four superintendents (Hank, Rick, John, Ron) all reported that they had worked construction during the summers while attending college. Ron commented, "I was in education for a while and then got out. During that time I was a paint contractor and I was around a lot of construction for five years" (11-2-99, p.1). Rick also reported:

Not only did I work construction during the summers. I also took odd jobs while I was teaching. You know back then teachers weren't paid a lot. With a new

family I had to do more than just teach to get by.

(12-2-99, p.2)

All superintendents noted that they had either built new buildings during their career or refurbished existing ones. Debbie stated:

When it is time to build, experience or no experience you just have to do it. It is a scary thought when you are spending \$150,000 for a new building and you have not been around construction. That is when you search for everyone you know with experience. Especially, old graduate college friends who are now superintendents. (11-2-99, p.2)

Rick also noted, "even with a lot of experience it is scary. There is a lot more red tape with school construction. Plus your job and your future is riding on how well you do" (12-2-99, p.2). Bob also reported:

I thought I could get by the construction part. The part that worried me was the wiring for technology. This is all new to me. I'm 55 and I don't know a hub from a server. The way technology is I could pay \$5000 today and it would be one of those pieces out of date. Technology is a good way to get cheated. (11-20-99)

John, Rick, and Debbie both identified good

maintenance personnel as a key to facilities. John explained, "We have an old WPA building and it can eat you up. My maintenance man has worked on old stuff all of his life. So his knowledge is more important than mine" (10-18-99, p.1). Rick notes, "I was fortunate to inherit a great maintenance man. His knowledge keeps this place going...and I would trust him on any new construction" (12-2-99, p.2).

Debbie related her experiences with facilities:

Before I took this job I knew I did not have a lot of experience in facilities. The Board knew that I did not have as much as the male candidates. However, I met the maintenance man the day I was to interview. We talked a while and I knew the school was in good hands there...The Board also knew it. That's why it wasn't a big problem during the interview. Their main concern was declining test scores and I knew that area well. They needed...someone skilled in that area...so everything worked out. (11-2-99, p.3)

Harvey, Mark, and Bob identified sports as their strongest area. All three had played sports in high school and coached some during their careers. According to Mark:

I know sports better than anything else. I played in high school, then college, and I also coached. I

help coach football just because it is in my blood.

It is...my therapy. There is so much that goes on in a school...you just have to have time out.

This school has so many problems. I have a new board member up here every day. The Board wants to micro manage everything. This is one area (sports)where they know they don't know everything. (12-2-99, p.1)

According to Harvey and Bob sports was their strong area. Both had coached for a number of years and they had some success at the state level. Harvey stated, "This team has gone to state a number of times in basketball. You don't realize what sports can do for a school. Everyone wants to be a winner" (11-20-99, p.1). Bob also explained his efforts as a winning coach. "You do not realize what sports can do for your school. Winning in sports brings a lot of pride to the students and the school. Our campus is even...cleaner during a winning season. It helps us". (11-20-99, p.2)

Least Knowledgeable Grand Tour Question Area

The superintendents were all asked for their weakest area. All eight superintendents related this area to be technology. Ron, Rick, Harvey, and Hank were the oldest.

All of them related that age probably was the reason technology was more difficult. Ron pointed out:

I have older principals that are not very knowledgeable. They went to college when computers were not in the library. They can not...do anything with them. I hate to use them for advice. Especially when I need to know what a switch, hub, server, cable,...you know what I mean?

My job is to run the school. Technology changes too much. About the time I know what something is...it's out of date. There's...way too much to keep up with, that also makes me...vulnerable. I have to seek out others who know more than me. What makes it worse is my Board knows less than me. (11-2-99, p.3). Rick also noted his lack of knowledge in the area of technology:

I'm dumber than a rock on technology. I use my technology person to clue me in. But...you know they even make it difficult. I just say, 'make it simple', OK. I'm too old to learn all that...it takes to keep up with it (12-2-99, p.3).

Hank explained, "I do a lot of reading on technology. But...by the time we are able to buy it, it is out of date, and way too expensive for my small district"(11-2-99, p.1). Harvey also identified technology

as his weakest area. Harvey noted:

I'm in my fifties and retiring. There's...too much to understand about technology. We can't afford it. Our building is crumbling down about our ears. Why worry about technology when you...can't even plug the holes in the roof. That's our main problem (11-20-99, p.2).

Hank had a similar experience with technology:

Who worries about technology? Rural districts...just try to keep the doors open. You know? I have one building that was built by the WPA, you know. Our funds have to go to keep...this old building from eating us out of house and home. That's all there is to it (11-2-99, p.2).

The younger superintendents, especially Mark, Debbie, and John all felt they were weak in technology. However, they went to workshops to further their knowledge. Mark commented:

Superintendents rely on people within the organization for help with technology. I...go to a lot of meetings. Technology scares me. We got a distance learning grant...and by the time it was installed it was out of date. Fifty thousand dollars...now we don't have the money to update it. Now my Board...is giving me heat about...what am I going to do about it. Technology gets

me in a lot of trouble here. It's...like candy.

Everybody wants it (12-2-99, p.2).

John explained: "I was lucky. I...didn't know a lot about computers. But this guy moved to town and he...knew everything...Even going to college and all. I latched onto him...Now other schools want him" (11-20-99, p.2). Debbie recalled: "I am not...totally computer literate. It changes...too much. But I see what it does for test scores...and other areas. I also have a...void in sports. But I have good people who...have that expertise" (11-2-99, p.3).

All superintendents related a lack of technology knowledge. However, Ron stated his concerns best:

You know I don't know a lot about the...connecting this to that and inter phasing...this line...But I have people hired for that...and all. My strength is people. Plain and simple. Get the...right people for the right job. When we write a grant...we just figure in the experts...to keep us from being...taken. I can't be an expert in all areas. This job is...too big for that. (11-2-99, p.3)

Superintendent Policy Discretion

All eight superintendents related experiences concerning discretion with their boards. Mark recalled:

I'm kept on a pretty short leash. Of course...I am the expert so I don't always tell them everything...I know

how they would...You might say react. I make my own agenda. I put on...and leave off.....some things.....But it's always legal. Just don't give them.....ammo to shoot you with. It's better than last year. I.....was evaluated every month last year. Yeah...try working with those board members. (12-2-99, p.3)

Harvey also reported:

My Board calls me...umpteen times a day. If I have discretion it's about things they know...nothing about. I mean...I keep it quiet...and just do it. Some...time you just have to...run this job the way you were trained to do it. I am retiring out of this hell hole...let someone else fix it...If that's possible!

(11-20-99, p.3)

Although these appear to be the worst examples of extreme boards, Rick, Ron, and John felt they had discretion to make needed decisions. Ron explained: "My board hired me to do the job. If I need their help...I'll call and ask...Usually I just do it" (11-2-99, p.2). Rick also noted: "My Board butts out. No one on the board...has any college. They don't feel they are...you might say qualified" (12-2-99, p.3). John summed up his thoughts: "I have been here 12 years. What I have been doing...works. My Board works for a living...They want me doing my job. That's

not calling them for every...comma, and dot...you know" (11-20-99, p.3).

Hank, Debbie, and Bob all had similar experiences with discretion. Hank recalled: "This place pretty well runs itself. My Board...backs up and leaves me to make the decisions...I do consult them...when I need to know their feelings (11-2-99, p.3). Debbie also explained: "At first my board was...you might say reluctant to give me the reins. Now...I advise them first,...They go along (11-2-99, p.3).

Superintendents/SDE Policy Discretion

Superintendents related experiences with the SDE.

Rick related his experiences with the OSDE:

I use the State Department to the max. Those...girls know me by name when I call the city. First,...always be nice.

My Regional Accreditation Officer (RAO)...I use...like an advisor...He's paid to

help us. I call him a lot. He realizes...we aren't cookie cutter schools (12-2-99, p.3).

Mark explained: "When you have a Board like mine. You need your RAO...I mean a lot. If I have any doubt about it...I call the lawyer...Then the city. Sometimes I want the RAO to say no...so this Board will...shut up" (12-2-99, p.3).

Ron also explained: "I use my RAO...for all my

correspondence. He is like...The superintendent above me. We work together...To get the job done" (11-2-99, p.3).

John, Hank, and Bob all had similar comments concerning policy discretion. John reported: "I don't try to put things over on them...They work with us...I mean a lot" (11-20-99, p.3). Hank explained: "There are rules...Then there are rules. We know which ones...can be bent. You know" (11-2-99, p. 3). Bob summed up his thoughts: "They need us...We need them. We all have to work together. We need them more...than they need us" (11-20-99, p.3)

Jack, Jerry, and Judy from the State Department all had similar experiences with superintendents. Jack explained: "We prefer to motivate rather than regulate if we can. I usually tell superintendents what is wrong the first time. However, we have a job to do also. It must be corrected by our second visit" (10-15-99, p.1).

Jerry also recalled an experience with one of his schools: "I have this one school...The Board is so bad there...You know I do it for the kids. The superintendent is OK... but this Board is...Nuts

This school is a full time job...It's bad" (11-18-99, p.1).

Judy described an experience: "It's amazing. Some schools are...You might say a clock. Others...This one in particular. I hate to even go there. The Board does so much that is

borderline illegal. The poor superintendent...I'm glad he's retiring" (11-3-99, p.1)

Jack summed up the thoughts of all three SDE employees: Most of our trouble comes from...school board members. The problem...I guess...comes from the fact they have 15 months to get some training. That's a long time...Imagine driving a car for 15 months before a license is required. The kids...They lose...They lose big time (10-15-99, p.2).

Judy also had an interesting comment: "Some districts...I mean a small number...Spend more money on lawyers and lawsuits than they spend on the kids. Adults, you know, board members...I don't know why they bother" (11-3-99, p.2).

Districts Over Time

Each superintendent was asked to respond to the question: How has your district changed over time?

Mark related his thoughts:

When I came here as principal 6 years ago things were bad. We built a new gym but...it never was finished. I have a...lot of trouble with board...involvement...But you know I do it for the kids. In the last two years I have put on two roofs. We started...football this year and...and we got our distance learning lab running. Although...only one student uses it and it cost 50 grand

(1-12-00, p.1).

Hank and Ron also commented on their districts. Hank explained: "Our new building was done...last year. We are just maintaining now"(1-12-00, p.1). Ron related his thoughts:

Nothing has been done for 12 years...I mean nothing. Every building leaked. Our bus fleet was awful. Plus we were broke. Imagine paying a superintendent 79 grand a year plus 12 grand car expense and him doing absolutely nothing. We now have roofs on two buildings and a new bus...And this is my first year here...we're getting there (1-12-00, p. 1).

Bob, Harvey, and Rick all reported different situations.

Bob noted: "Some things were done when I got here.

However, I feel...Things have been accomplished...And well. We have a program where sports, facilities, and technology all advance. Nothing is left...behind"(2-3-00, p.1).

Harvey recalled his experiences:

We need so much here we really don't have the money to do anything major. The former superintendent let things go...and go...and go. All I can do is keep it from crashing in around...me...I guess the correct term is around us(2-3-00, p.1). Rick explained: "This school was in great shape. Superintendents...stay until retirement.

Things don't change. I have the best of both possible...worlds. Great facilities, and carry over. Can't beat that, can you" (2-3-00, p.1)?

John and Debbie had similar experiences. John noted: I have a great maintenance man. He's...gung ho. He's good about seeing...great ideas...You know...Covered walkways...With motion lights. But I tell him how much funds we have and he works with that. This WPA building is in it's best shape ever (2-20-00, p. 1).

Debbie explained her new experiences:

I inherited a school in great shape. We add technology...But we just maintain what we have. Being small we don't have a lot of sports. We keep it under...control...you know it can get out of hand...You would think we were playing with the big boys.

Bats...\$200...Now they are changing the size...What do we do with \$200 bats? And we thought technology was expensive...yeah, right (2-20-00, p.1).

Board Members

The three board members were asked how they viewed giving superintendents discretion with school policies. Roy, Ruth, and Dana all had interesting comments. Roy explained:

Our Board takes their jobs seriously. We probably

spend more time interviewing superintendents than most schools. They...go through a three stage interview process. I've been on the board for nine years. I own a construction company...I need someone who knows how to think...You know. The superintendent has the degrees. I try not...to make decisions for him. I firmly believe he does things...for the kids. I work with him. That's my job...I take it serious...It can't be any other way and succeed. Don't you think so...Don't you (3-10-00, p.1)?

Ruth and Dana both had similar views but not as professional as Roy. Ruth commented:

This school is a...landing pad for superintendents. They don't stay here long. Three years is the longest. I...think we have to monitor them a little more because of that...you know. Of course if they can convince me...I'm all for it...I have a child here...so if it helps him...I'm for it.

You know all four superintendents were good...They all did what was right. They have the knowledge...But I know this town. When they leave...I still have to live here (3-5-00, p. 1).

Dana is a new board member and she had a much different lens to view boards than either of the other two

board members. Dana commented:

This school has had trouble...for a lot of years. I ran to help fix the problem. The only way I can...learn is come up here and...ask the superintendent about things. He has been here a while, but things are still the same. I think we...the board should be notified about everything.

We were elected...you know voted in office.

It's our job to be visible...To let the town know we are taking care of business. I call our attorney...once in a while to make sure the superintendent...you know...knows what he's talking about. You know we have some people we need to get...rid of.

The superintendent is gone some. When I drop by...I can let him know if they are not doing a good job while he is gone(3-3-00, p.1).

Summary

There are many individuals that affect the direction of our public schools. Superintendents can lead or be led. Board Members can assist or be intrusive, while State Department Employees either motivate or regulate.

All superintendents that participated in this study were male except one. The majority of superintendents had a good working knowledge of school facilities. Most of this

knowledge was gained while working construction during the summers in order to earn money for college tuition.

Superintendents reported it was crucial to hire a good maintenance person to provide upkeep for facilities.

Superintendents reported the least knowledgeable area was technology. Problems with technology were associated with terminology, expense, and the short lifespan of technology equipment. All superintendents interviewed felt the need to consult professionals when wiring and purchasing equipment. Three superintendents related age and nearing retirement was a negative factor concerning technology. They did not have the time nor desire to learn about technology or keep up with all the new changes.

State Department employees felt that some school districts deserved a helping hand and those districts were given some discretion to correct problems. All employees were products of administration within public school systems and tried to assist districts with needed advice. All three employees interviewed declared the interest of the children was their number one priority. They also reported that uninformed school board members created many problems for district superintendents.

Board Member attitudes were varied. One board member was knowledgeable in school board functions and ethics.

The remaining two board members interviewed lacked the knowledge of school business and school board member ethics to eliminate the day to day micro managing of their district.

Superintendents Revisited

During the analysis process, certain themes and categories were revealed. An unexpected common thread revealed by the superintendents was the board agenda. According to some superintendents, the board agenda was being manipulated to provide themselves with more policy discretion.

According to Ron, Rick, and Debbie, the numerical order of items placed on the agenda could be manipulated to positively affect policy discretion. For example, Ron described how he acquired a new sound system for the auditorium:

Our sound system was shot. It was about seven years old and that is old for new technology. I knew this board had bought the system and probably would not be interested in buying a new system for...ten grand. So I placed the item after the GT...I mean gifted and talented financial report. We received an extra 30 grand from it. After the GT report, the item for a new speaker system was next. I noted how we...could use

funds from GT to pay for the system and still have 20 grand left over. Five-o vote and we have a new system. I send in a change on our GT report and we are in business. (3-20-00)

Rick also indicated how he used numerical placement on the agenda to give him more discretion in certain areas. He discussed how he softened the impact of bad news:

If I know we have a problem and I have extra time to explain it to the board. I use the old oreo approach that I learned in some psych class. First, you sandwich the problem between two good items on the agenda. Second, you are home free. The bad news is outweighed by the good. Bam, that problem is history. (3-22-00)

Debbie also related how she tried to spread bad news out over a few months rather than on one agenda:

One month our test scores came in and there was not a lot of improvement. We were...how would you say, having financial problems. I was waiting on some Title I money and it was late. So I held off on the problems with test scores until the following month. It worked out all right. You know, boards know women can do the job, but they are a little nervous to put 100 percent trust in us. Back then I had to do everything to fend

off too much negative news at one time. You must know what I mean? (3-20-00)

Two superintendents discussed how numerical placement on the agenda probably saved their jobs. Bob explained how he averted problems with his board:

I have a tough school and a tough board. If I did not regulate what goes on the agenda and the numerical its numerical order...I know I would have been gone a long time ago.

This board is very wishy washy. Last year about the end of school. No, it was after school was out when the auditor comes and does the exit report. I had fixed a lot of problems but we still had a few to fix. I received the report weeks before the board meeting. Well...we were going to have good carry over...so I told the treasurer to have his report before the meeting. Believe it or not the good news far outweighed the minor infractions on the audit report. If I would not have had...the figures that night. I might not be talking to you right now. Boards are sometimes flaky.

We have to manipulate some. (3-27-00)

Harvey also related a similar experience with placement of items on the agenda:

This board is very unstable. It is not a good idea to place very much negative on any one agenda.

Otherwise, I will be history. You can not help students in problem schools if you do not use your head. Kids suffer when superintendents are always coming and going. You lose your focus. (3-24-00)

According to five superintendents, manipulating the agenda is common place with superintendents. John explained his philosophy of agenda placement best:

You asked about policy discretion. To me...that means can I manipulate things to help me and these kids. Sure, I do it all the time. Policies are not all written in stone...like the Ten Commandments. We deal with kids. Policies may be black or white. But kids come in all shapes and colors. Whatever it takes. We are not dealing with some abstract thing. We deal with kids. That's all. If it takes changing the agenda to fit the need. I'll do it. Otherwise, they could just get a big computer and run it from Oklahoma City. They would not need poor little old me. It would read like a menu. (3-27-00)

SUMMARY

The findings presented in this chapter included data collected using the long interview research methodology

with eight superintendents, three school board members, and three SDE employees. Data from individual interviews were synthesized into common categories. The study suggests that there are three perspectives with which to view policy discretion. First, superintendents by way of their position may increase his/her own policy discretion. Second, new school board members are not adequately trained to fully understand the meaning and implication of policy discretion. Third, OSDE employees view each district and superintendent through multiple lenses and adjust discretion accordingly.

The implications of these themes will be discussed in Chapter V. In addition, Chapter V will include interpretation of the findings and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER V

OVERVIEW, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Examined in this study were policy discretion and its effect on spending patterns of rural Oklahoma districts. For the purpose of this study, policy discretion was defined as the latitude of choice in following federal, state, and school board mandated policies. This study examined policy discretion and its long-term effect on rural districts. Chapter I introduced the study and presented researchers whose works were influential in areas of policy discretion.

Chapter II provided a review of the literature associated with policy discretion and its effect on spending patterns in sports, technology, and facilities in rural school districts. Research related to community values, state department employees, superintendents, and board members were reviewed. The review revealed that community values impact policy discretion due to the mores of the community and the sense of connectedness board members have with the district. Research also indicated the SDE, by way of its employees, allows policy discretion. Mandates, written with loose wording, automatically permit some degree of discretion. Research also revealed OSDE employees, who were former educators, tend to be more

inclined to be helpers than enforcers during initial problems. Interviews also indicated superintendent tenure was an indicator of increased policy discretion during the initiation and implementation policy stage.

Chapter III presented the methodology that guided the study and rationale for the methodology. A qualitative study was used because it offered more flexibility in order to gather data rich in detail. It offered a better understanding of districts over time and how people make sense of their experiences. The long interview was selected as the most appropriate methodology in order to reveal the mental world of the individuals used in this study. Chapter III also explained the selection of participants, data collection, trustworthiness criteria, and the method used for data analysis.

Chapter IV presented and analyzed data. Data that emerged from informants were synthesized into common categories. Research indicated the amount of policy discretion allowed at the district level was dependent upon the type of policy and whether or not it was in conflict with community values. Research indicated SDE employees were more interested in allowing policies to work for the betterment of the districts rather than enforcing policies that would negatively affect the education of children.

FINDINGS

Schools are a reflection of the superintendent and their school board members. Superintendents must obtain a Masters degree, additional graduate hours, and certification from the state in order to be hired as a superintendent. School board members however, are elected from the community in which they serve. They must keep abreast of changing needs of the community and adopt policies in accordance with those needs. Educationally, board members are only required to have a GED. These contrasting differences occur in 544 school districts in the State of Oklahoma.

Board members indicate superintendent turnover was a problem in some districts. Turnover has become so common, board members do not have an adequate chance to get to know, let alone trust, the expertise of the superintendent before they leave. Board members indicated superintendents are able to leave at anytime, especially during times of great turmoil. However, interviews with board members indicated that as community members, they have a high degree of connectedness with their community. Board members need and want this connectedness. Board members, as community members, do not have the option of leaving their community during times of turmoil the same way a

superintendent does. They however, must remain in the community after the fast departure of the superintendent.

The findings of this study also revealed board members were not always representative of their community. Politics have engulfed a few local boards so that community members are reluctant to serve on the local board of education for fear of retaliation. There are great school board members who truly are interested in their community, school, and students. However, interviews indicated some school board members were motivated and even fascinated by the politics of school boards. School board vacancies in a few situations ultimately present an opportunity to correct some perceived wrong or injustice and a greater opportunity to micro manage the district. Findings also indicated the requirements for the training of school board members were flawed. School board members, upon being sworn in, are able to vote on extremely complicated and expensive issues. Although members are required to receive 12 hours of in-service within 15 months of office, none of the training is required to be completed until the 15th month of service.

Findings from the study suggest superintendents acquired some discretion due to the perceived expertise of their position and their former positions. Degrees and certificates permit a certain amount of expert power to be

exhibited. Superintendents also gained discretion over time when, and if, they were able to gain acceptance from the community and their boards of education. Interviews indicated the agenda was used as a tool that could be manipulated by the superintendent to accentuate or suppress items according to time and need. Policy discretion was enhanced according to the numerical order and month particular items were placed on the agenda.

Superintendents indicated the superintendent's report on the agenda was a valuable tool to gently inform the board of impending problems or changes to prevent major problems at a later date.

Based on the findings, interviews with superintendents revealed a positive relationship with the Regional Accreditation Officer (RAO) was mandatory if you wanted to survive in the field of education. RAO's, depending on the relationship with a district, had the authority and discretion to allow an infraction to slide or issue a deficiency. Superintendents work directly with RAO's regarding the adhering of certification requirements, class size, library expenditures, gifted and talented programs, transported students, and a host of other areas. Interviews with superintendents revealed RAO's more as helpers rather than enforcers. However, superintendents

noted RAO's were still to be feared. Districts with chronic accreditation problems were not given any discretion. Districts who were advised to correct a problem, and made a major effort to correct the problem, were allowed more discretion than those districts that did not make an attempt to correct their problems.

RAO's are reluctant to penalize school districts. Rural districts make up the bulk of all districts in Oklahoma. Due to the isolation of these districts, large scale consolidation is not practical. Costs due to transportation, increased travel time for students, and community support, cool consolidation proponents. In addition, research on school consolidation does not support large scale savings (Sher, 1988).

So why do RAO's allow more policy discretion with rural districts?. There are a number of factors which support this theory. First, RAO's note rural districts do a good job with limited funding in relation to their urban counterparts. With limited funding, rural districts must be very creative in order to provide needed teachers for mandated classes.

Second, rural districts make up the bulk of the OSDE budget and employees. Mass consolidation would force layoffs within the OSDE and would be economic chaos for

hundreds of rural towns supported by the local schools. A large portion of RAO's are products of rural districts. RAO's interviewed were strong believers in rural schools.

Third, RAO's do not view their position as that of enforcer, but as an enabler. They now have the formal power to alleviate problems which plagued many of them as administrators.

Recommendations

The findings of this study can be beneficial to superintendents, board members, and the OSDE. Based on the findings of this study, four recommendations for further research are included.

Additional studies in policy discretion should be explored. The first study should explore the notion that a relationship between board member gender and policy discretion may exist. Information gained from this study revealed female board members with a large amount of available time spend much of the time interfering in district affairs. A study on board member employment would be an aid for superintendents and could be used to increase superintendent tenure.

A second study, could explore whether a relationship exists between board member employment and board member discretion. The study would examine whether there is a

relationship between board member free time and the amount of discretion given to a superintendent. Findings from this study indicated board members who did not work had more time to spend in and around the school and interfered more than they helped. If, a positive finding is found, superintendents would be able to make better choices before accepting new positions in school districts.

A third study could determine the relationship between superintendent gender and policy discretion. Due to the limited number of women superintendents, their need for confidentiality, and the small sample willing to participate, a study could encompass several states. The findings from this study indicated female superintendents are not readily accepted as experts in sports, or facilities. However, findings may indicate the degree to which curriculum and instruction, and personnel matters are also included.

A final study could examine the relationship between the age of the superintendent and policy discretion. Findings from this study may indicate older superintendents were regarded as wiser by their boards of education and gained discretion because of their age. Information gained from further study would reveal whether or not this is myth or fact.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

OSDE

The 15 month timeline for school board member training should be changed. This is evident in districts where controversy and board member turnover is a problem. The SDE must adopt new procedures for board members and a shorter timeline for completion of the training. The SDE must have a faster method of removing board members who do not complete their training on schedule.

The OSDE should monitor more closely districts which have three or more new board members. RAO's are usually former educators and would be a valuable resource for new board members.

The RAO's interviewed in this study were knowledgeable and fair to their districts. RAO's should continue to be chosen from the ranks of experienced former educators. All RAO's should accept the title of helpers rather than enforcers.

Superintendents

Although this research noted instances where superintendents consulted other superintendents for advice, it may not be a common practice. All new superintendents need to have mentors that could advise them and point them in the direction of knowledgeable superintendents.

Superintendents need to keep in contact with other superintendents, so they can be helped when they need it. The OSDE is more than willing to put superintendents in contact with districts in their area who are building or remodeling. Superintendents need to develop a phone bank for contact persons in technology, sports, and facilities. The network of 544 Oklahoma superintendents is a valuable resource.

The district RAO is a valuable connection to the SDE. They are always available for advice. Most RAO's have been in education for years and can be used as a sounding board. RAO's are able to allow some discretion if they are asked.

Board Members

New board members need to complete their training as soon as possible. All new members are given materials to make them more knowledgeable. Read the materials, learn the terminology, and ask questions during board meetings. Board members are not expected to be experts, especially new members. But, new members are expected to be open minded and do what is in the best interest of the students and the district.

Board members should let the superintendent do the job he/she was hired to do. It is important to ask questions during a board meeting when a clarification is needed.

Board members should stay out of the school. It is not the job of a board member to be a nuisance.

The superintendent is a professional. Board members should feel free to ask the superintendent questions. The superintendent will gladly provide board members with names and numbers if it helps a board member become more informed.

REFLECTIONS

Many areas have been covered during this research concerning policy discretion and how it connects to the community, superintendent, school board members, and the SDE. Since the research is completed, I will connect these areas and describe how the results appear to me.

Community Mores'

Superintendents have an extremely difficult position in rural communities. They must understand not only the feelings of the community, but also the traditional areas that are considered "sacred and off limits". Traditional elements offer limited discretion. Administrators must become a part of the community during the early years so that they can become familiar with all aspects of it. Spending long hours working in the office will not accomplish this task.

School funding in Oklahoma is very tight. Superintendents have to stretch every dollar to keep the doors open. Many rural districts have FFA chapters. One administrator who was interviewed related how he had 60 students enrolled in FFA. Two teachers were hired for this area when there were 140 members. Because the school board and community liked both teachers, and thought the program

would make a come back, they kept both teachers on staff in the same position. This expense now included two twelve month teachers, maintenance and utilities on a large show barn, trucks, trailers, scales, and many other items, plus gasoline for only 60 students. The superintendent knew the situation could not be changed, so he accepted the fact, and went on. Discretion in the matter was zero. He had only two choices: swim with the current or find another stream. Communities are not going to change until they decide they want to change.

Two very tumultuous school districts were also observed. The community as a whole constantly bickered with the superintendent and other school personnel. These districts had been split and arguing so long that I felt it had become almost normal to them. I attended a few board meetings just to satisfy my own curiosity about the situations. One particular board meeting included three county deputies (with guns) to keep the peace. It really made me appreciate my nice, calm board meetings.

I observed first hand how good community relations can be and how destructive they can become. Superintendents need to do their homework and check out districts before they commit to a position. Communities that have been in turmoil for years will not change and policy discretion

will be limited. All of these issues need to be considered before accepting a position in a feuding district.

OSDE

The OSDE has its own policies that deal with school districts. Individual departments within the organization have their own agendas and their own personalities. Individuals within each department personify the personality of their department. Administrators who acquaint themselves with the departments and the individuals in those departments are better served and given more discretion by the OSDE. The bottom line: Get to know these individuals because they control most of the funding that is received by the district. It is much easier to debate a proposed cut in school district funding when OSDE employees know you and your district at the local level.

It is important to remember that all OSDE employees have feelings. Everyone interviewed made some comment about rude district administrators (superintendents). Superintendents need to remember to use their personal relation skills when talking with OSDE employees. These employees work with 544 school districts. Let them know personally through a note or card that you appreciate them.

They do not receive a great deal of praise, but they do receive a lot of criticism.

I have learned that RAO's are districts' lifeline to the OSDE. Although RAO's change positions often, try to get acquainted with them. It is very important to send reports to the OSDE on time. Administrators must use the RAO as their first source of information. When something has gone wrong, call them. They know who to get in touch with first and most often can go to bat for the district. It appears that more discretion is gained through the RAO's than any other OSDE department.

Superintendents

Throughout this research I found evidence of superintendents who needed more skills in personal relations. Many appeared to be burning out. It appeared limited policy discretion was granted, due to the hard stand that superintendents took on some issues. Most of the superintendents wanted to continue talking after the interview had ended. The majority related that they had not taken vacations in years. Perhaps this has become part of the problem. Two superintendents took their vacations every year, and it appeared they were less stressed and had more of a positive attitude than the other six.

The superintendents interviewed related how they used other superintendents as confidants. Due to the time consumption of their position they related they did not have many close friends. The close friends they did have were other superintendents. Meetings within driving distance of the district were viewed as a welcomed day out. Luncheons allowed them the freedom to discuss new and old business without reservation. Information between districts was freely given and freely taken.

Last, I want to mention pride. Superintendents are a different lot. The districts observed were all unique. Some were consumed by immense problems. All of the superintendents thought they had made tremendous strides and were extremely proud of their districts - maybe not the individuals within the district (board members, parents), but of the district itself.

School boards

I have acquired much knowledge concerning school boards during this study. Some knowledge has been obtained through regular attendance of board meetings in four districts, while the interviews supplied further knowledge. Through both of these processes I have become more educated concerning board members, superintendents, communities, and school personnel.

Policy discretion coincides with the sacred traditions of the district. In those areas where tradition is not involved, discretion appears to be readily given. But, in traditional areas, discretion is not freely given. It appears to be more ingrained where board members have lived in the community all of their lives. The rhetoric is the same in most districts: It has always been done this way, and it will continue.

Although only an observation, I have seen board members who were unemployed as more intrusive as well as more negative toward the school than those who were employed. It would be an interesting study for some bright doctoral student. I do know that I will conduct an employment survey of board members in any new position for which I happen to apply.

During this research a few problems were revealed. These few problems are not a condemnation of rural school districts. It only reveals that rural districts have problems similar to the urban and suburban districts and there is always a need for educated, caring, and resourceful superintendents and board members.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A
Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

I hereby authorize Ron L. Ledford to conduct an interview(s) with me. I understand that participation in the interview(s) is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time without penalty after notifying the project director/dissertation advisor.

I understand that the interview will be conducted according to commonly accepted research procedures and that information taken from the interview will be recorded in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

I understand the interview will not cover topics that could reasonably place the participant at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participant's financial standing or employability or deal with sensitive aspects of the subject's own behavior such as illegal conduct, drug use, sexual behavior or use of alcohol.

I may contact the dissertation adviser, Dr. Deke Johnson, Department of SES, College of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, or by calling (405) 744-7244.

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: _____ Time: _____ (a.m./p.m.)

Signed: _____

I certify that I have personally explained all elements of this form to the subject or his/her representative before requesting the subject to sign it.

Signed: _____
Project Director

APPENDIX B

**Institutional Review Board
Human Subjects Review**

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Date: August 27, 1999

IRB# ED-00-144

Proposal Title: "ENVIRONMENTAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS
INFLUENCING SPENDING PATTERNS OF RURAL
SUPERINTENDENTS"

Principal Deke Johnson
Investigator(s): Ronnie L. Ledford

Reviewed and
Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Signature:



Carol Olson, Director of University Research Compliance

August 27, 1999

Date

Approvals are valid for one calendar year, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any modification to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval. Approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review Board.

VITA^N

Ronnie L. Ledford

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: THE PERSPECTIVES OF RURAL OKLAHOMA SUPERINTENDENTS, SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, AND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION EMPLOYEES: HOW POLICY DISCRETION INFLUENCES THE FOCUS OF RURAL OKLAHOMA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Major Field: Educational Administration

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Walters, Oklahoma on September 5, 1945, the son of Jesse and Ruth Ledford. Married to Linda S. Ledford; children Kim and Kris.

Education: Graduated from Muskogee High School, Muskogee, Oklahoma in May 1963; received Bachelor of Arts in Education and Master of Education degrees from Northeastern State College and Northeastern State University in May 1971 and May 1991, respectively. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Oklahoma State University in December, 2000.

Experience: Employed by Muskogee Public School as a social studies teacher 1972 to 1978; owner of Ledford Concrete Construction from 1978 to 1996; employed as Elementary Superintendent of Whitefield School District from 1996 to 1999; employed by McCurtain School District as superintendent from 1999 to present.

Professional Memberships: Kappa Delta Pi, Board Member for Northeastern State University's Oklahoma Institute for Learning Styles (OIL).