

A COMPARISON OF THE CHALLENGE OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS
TO TRADITIONAL JOB STRESSORS OF NORTH CAROLINA SUPERINTENDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Shane M. Morrison: A Comparison of the Challenge of the Common Core State Standards to Traditional Job Stressors of North Carolina Superintendents

(Under the direction of Fenwick English).

The purpose of the study was to examine the levels of stress, and the impact of the Common Core State Standards on stress, of superintendents in North Carolina. Secondary analysis addressed demographic differences and any relationships between stress and the independent variables. The researcher collected data through the survey research method and used descriptive and correlation statistics. One open ended question was administered at the end of the survey to allow for superintendents to express any stress concerning federal and/or state mandates.

A survey was emailed to all 115 superintendents in North Carolina, and 56 responded. The survey questions consisted of the Administrative Stress Index (ASI), which included 33 stressor items that superintendents traditionally encounter on the job. Other questions consisted of five questions designed by the researcher to obtain necessary demographic information. The respondents in this study reported, on the Administrative Stress Index, on a scale from 33-132, a mean score of 81.69. The findings suggest that district level superintendents in North Carolina were moderately stressed in their jobs.

The data also indicated that superintendents are not feeling excessive stress due to the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards. The key findings from the data in

this study show: (1) North Carolina superintendents are experiencing moderate job-related stress; (2) the top three reported stressors were: attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests, imposing excessively high expectations on myself, and preparing and allocating budget resources; (3) there were no significant differences between the variables of gender, years as a superintendent, education level, size of the district, and district poverty when compared to the superintendents' reported Common Core stress levels; (4) superintendents with 4-10 years of experience as a superintendent reported significantly higher overall stress than superintendents with more than 10 years of experience as a superintendent; (5) there were no significant differences among superintendents' mean stress indexes in terms of gender, education level, size of the district, and district poverty; and (6) the top three responses superintendents reported, in their open ended responses, were: funding issues, stressful new policies, and federal intrusion into education.

For Dad, Mom, Megan, John, and Aunt E. Each of you has contributed a great deal to my life in your own irreplaceable way. Your accomplishments, ideals, and love have taught me more than I can express. I hope to make all of you as proud of me as I am of you.

And for my wife, Maria, whose unwavering support and selflessness give me deep purpose. You have always believed in me, and I believe in you. And when you believe in someone it isn't for a minute, or just for now. It's forever.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The role of superintendent has been called the undoable position. As education policy undergoes major and minor recalculations, the responsibilities and stresses of the superintendent shift as well. One could say that the educational leader's primary pressures underwent a radical shift after 2002, when *No Child Left Behind* introduced a wave of new stressors (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003). While this new era in education brought new stressors to educational leaders, it did not shed the stressors of the past. Generally speaking, responsibilities have increased, and so have the perceived stress levels.

The job description of the superintendent has traditionally been shaped by demands such as managing employees, responding to parent concerns, and acting as the district's vocal and visible leader (Brock & Grady, 2002; Gmelch, 1982; Gmelch & Chan, 1994; Lane, 2000; Sanchez, 1997). The aforementioned responsibilities have been some of the most frequently cited sources of administrator stress prior to *No Child Left Behind*.

The new challenges that educational leaders face, in addition to the traditional ones, involve multiple pressures due to increased accountability standards. Mandates from *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* legislation have been commonly reported as the leading causes of administrator stress. Superintendents and other educational leaders, such as principals, work long hours, shoulder massive responsibilities, and fret over rising accountability standards (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Sogunro, 2012; Welmers, 2005).

A great deal of the research on educational leader stress has focused highly on the sources and causes of stress (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003; Queen & Queen, 2005;

Robbins & Alvy, 2009). We know that the traditional stressors of time constraints, managing employees, and handling parental concerns have been compounded by new stressors stemming from increased accountability standards. What we do not know enough about is the impact of some of the newest changes to education, particularly the Common Core Standards. In North Carolina, these changes have come coupled with state budget cuts, and while this study does not draw a link between the two, research is warranted to investigate the impacts felt by educational leaders in the state.

Statement of the Problem

Educational leaders face stress stemming from their work. Much of the research in education has been highly focused on identifying the common causes of this stress. The problem that was investigated here was the impact of the Common Core Standards on the perceived stress levels among North Carolina superintendents. We know a great deal about the traditional causes of administrator stress, but not a lot about the ways superintendents feel the Common Core standards have impacted their stress levels.

Some of the most cited scholars of educational leadership stress claim that when educational leaders lack the skills to cope with stress then it results in less effective leadership and increased problems in their physical health (Boyland, 2011; Queen & Queen, 2005). The current climate in American education, given No Child Left Behind, the Common Core State Standards, and Race to the Top, indicates a significant amount of instability. The concurrent political backing and contempt for Common Core has caused some states to embrace the standards, and others to halt implementation. What began as a bipartisan effort to improve public education has since fragmented into complex camps with atypical allies.

The educational leaders charged with implementing changes, or with resisting those same changes, face potentially stressful environments, which can lead to poorer performance, physical ailments, and leaving the job altogether. Instability in leadership and policy, including superintendent tenure length, has been shown to have negative effects on school communities (Marzano & Waters, 2007). In other words, consistency in leadership, goals, and morale have practical impacts on individuals in leadership positions and on communities of learning.

Research regarding stress and stressors must be consistently reexamined to report and reveal contemporary and shifting stressors. By recognizing the potential stressors, such as Common Core and other new policies, superintendents may serve longer tenures, potentially leading to better health and better professional performance.

Research Questions

This study examined the perceptions of North Carolina school superintendents concerning their stress levels and what specific things cause the most stress. The research was guided by using the following research questions:

- 1) How stressful is the job of superintendent in North Carolina?
- 2) What are the greatest job stressors of current North Carolina superintendents?

The research specifically measured how stressed North Carolina superintendents are, as reported through the Administrative Stress Index. The first major research question was guided by sub-questions such as:

- 3) What is the overall stress index of North Carolina superintendents on the ASI?

These sub-questions are important in multiple ways. First, it is important to discern the stress levels of North Carolina superintendents in light of the impact stress has been shown to

have on leadership performance. Excessive stress can negatively impact leaders' relationships, decisions, and personal health. Also, it is important to understand the challenges superintendents are facing in order to best serve the students, schools, and all stakeholders of the community. Any information that can assist in painting a picture of the stress climate among school leaders is helpful in evaluating policy and procedures.

The second guiding question for this research centered on which stressors were the most prevalent among North Carolina superintendents. This question aimed at identifying the top stressors of superintendents and were guided by sub-questions such as:

- 4) Has Common Core impacted superintendent stress?
- 5) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress level and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch?
- 6) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the gender of the superintendent?
- 7) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the education level of the superintendent?
- 8) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the size of the district?
- 9) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress level and years of experience as a superintendent?

Superintendents are expected to present a positive view of themselves to the public, but certain demands of the job can be causes for excessive stress. This is not a new assertion, but rather is consistent with the research on educational stress. These sub-questions, however, sought information on stress from a new angle. Much of the existing research focuses on the

stress of principals and other building site leaders. This research adds to the body of literature and adds to the discussion further by reporting on the stress levels of school superintendents, and by examining the impact of new policy on stress, particularly the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards.

Conceptual Framework

Theories of stress point to the idea that there are adverse effects to one's mental and physical health from exposure to prolonged or high levels of stress. Individuals who work in upper level jobs, such as the superintendent, tend to experience high levels of stress; Gmelch established that significant stress exists for public school administrators (1996). This study used Gmelch's theory of stress to examine the stress levels of North Carolina superintendents, to discern the major stressors of North Carolina Superintendents, and explore whether new policy (Common Core State Standards) has impacted the stress levels of North Carolina superintendents.

Gmelch's work on stress fits best with this research due to the development and use of the Administrative Stress Index and the fact that this framework has formed over time to specifically measure the stress levels of educational leaders. The challenges facing leaders in education, and the highest stressors reported in this study, apply specifically to education, and are not as relevant under other models of stress. For example, in 1984 Gmelch and Swent developed the four stages of stress. While this study is not directly related to the four stages, the results bear out the notion that this framework fits nicely in this research. In Stage 1 (stress traps), work causes stress, such as meetings, policies or additional encounters (Gmelch, 1996). In this case, superintendents would potentially report feeling stress from standardized testing pressure and new policies. Stage 2 involves the individual and how the individual perceives the

stressors. In Stage 3, the individual is responding to the stress (i.e. coping). Stage four involves the consequences, as the individual under stress may find ways to cope with the stress or face physical illness and/or a decrease in professional performance, resulting in an impact on the individual and the situation (i.e. burnout).

This study primarily addressed stages one and two of Gmelch's framework of stress, and provided information potentially useful to superintendents in terms of identifying top stressors, and acknowledging that some superintendents may feel significantly less stress based on their years of experience. Stages three and four could potentially be viewed in light of recommendations and implications of the study. Based on Gmelch's theory of stress, superintendents, in retreats and reflection activities, could have the chance to anticipate common stressors and reach out to colleagues for support in these stages. This could help to ensure longevity and physical health, as well as a more fruitful job performance.

In short, Gmelch's theory of stress provided a framework for common stressors of educational leaders, as well as explained the impact of possible new stressors, and the process by which educational leaders experience, perceive, and can respond to inevitable job related stress. By using Gmelch's framework for stress, the researcher framed the survey to elicit the most useful responses in terms of adding to the body of literature.

Assumptions

This study assumed that North Carolina superintendents were experiencing some level of stress from their job; the literature suggests that stress among educational leaders is prevalent, and a high level position such as superintendent seems to warrant attention in terms of stress. The study also assumed that North Carolina superintendents were at least somewhat aware of the recent controversies surrounding some conservative policies from the General Assembly in

Raleigh. State budget cuts to education have, in part, sparked a backlash from more progressive groups in the state, such as the North Carolina NAACP, educators from UNC-Chapel Hill, and other citizens. Arrests were made during the summer of 2013 for acts of civil disobedience; the researcher assumed the superintendents in North Carolina had a rudimentary understanding of these events. The researcher also assumed the superintendents were familiar with the Common Core State Standards, and how North Carolina's political leaders have delivered mixed messages concerning the support for, implementation, and future of Common Core in the state.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the study was limited to a specific geographic location. The study was limited to only superintendents in North Carolina. Districts in North Carolina differ in many ways, but all North Carolina public school superintendents face some level of job related stress, and all are dealing with new policy, including the Common Core State Standards. Also, not all states across the country have adopted the standards, so a study done elsewhere may produce different results concerning the Common Core State Standards and stress. The results yielded from the research are not necessarily applicable to all educational leaders everywhere. The study does not include educational leaders other than superintendents, such as principals, assistant principals, administrators of higher education, or teachers.

Another limitation is the number of superintendents that chose to respond to the survey. The response rate in this study was 48 percent. While a higher response rate was more desirable, the responses offered in this study were sufficient in order to analyze North Carolina superintendent stress levels. The sample in this study was representative of the North Carolina superintendent population in several ways. Superintendents were represented in terms of gender,

education level, the size of their district, district poverty level, and years of experience as a superintendent.

The gender breakdown included 43 males, which made up 81 percent of the respondents. Statewide, males make up 78 percent of North Carolina superintendents. Ten females participated in this study, which made up 19 percent of the respondents. Statewide, females make up 22 percent of North Carolina superintendents. This is highly representative and very close to the norms of the superintendent population in North Carolina.

The sample was typical in terms of education level as well, as 43 participants reported they have a Doctoral degree, which made up 80 percent of the respondents. Statewide, superintendents with Doctoral degrees make up 73 percent of the population. Eleven participants reported they have a Master's degree, which made up 20 percent of the respondents. Statewide, superintendents with Master's degrees make up 27 percent of the population. The education variable closely reflected the superintendent population in North Carolina reasonably well. Superintendents with Doctoral degrees were slightly over-represented, while superintendents with Master's degrees were slightly under-represented.

The sample was also typical in terms of the poverty of the district. The mean percentage for students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch in North Carolina is around 56 percent. In this study, 58 percent of the participating superintendents work in a district where 50-75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. The percentage from the total population of superintendents in the same category is 61 percent. Around 26 percent of superintendents that participated in this study work in a district where less than 50 percent of the students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. The percentage from the total population of superintendents in the same category is 17 percent. Around 15 percent of the participating superintendents in this study

work in a district where more than 75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. The percentage from the total population of superintendents in the same category is 20 percent. In short, wealthy districts were a bit over-represented in this study, and high poverty districts were slightly under-represented. However, superintendents that work in high, medium, and low poverty districts were all represented in this study, and in proportions that were reasonable and worth analyzing. These differences were taken into consideration when analyzing and interpreting the data.

Although North Carolina has some very large school districts, such as Wake County and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the state is made up primarily of school districts with less than 10,000 students. State-wide, 52 percent of superintendents work in a district with 1,001-7,000 students. Around 46 percent of superintendents work in a district with more than 7,000 students. And in North Carolina there are 2 districts with less than 1,000 students.

DEFINITIONS

This section offers key definitions to terms used frequently throughout this study.

AASA: American Association of School Administrators.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS): Documents and policies that outline what students K-12 should know and what skills they should have as a result of their public school education. 44 states have adopted the CCSS, plus Washington, D.C. The CCSS were developed by the nation's governors and educational commissioners, through their representative organizations.

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind. Legislation signed by President George W. Bush in 2001. NCLB supports standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. Each individual state develops its own standards.

RTTT: Race to the Top is a \$4.35 billion United States Department of Education contest created to spur innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education. It is funded by the ED Recovery Act as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Stress: The anticipation of one's inability to respond adequately to a perceived demand accompanied by one's anticipation of negative consequences for an inadequate response (Gmelch, 1996).

Superintendent: The chief executive of a school district.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

General Discussion of the Topic

The stress levels of educational administrators is a well-researched topic in education literature. Scholars in education have defined stress and identified the typical causes of administrator stress. Much research has been conducted since the 1970's to illuminate the impact of stress on educational leaders, to measure stress among educational leaders, and to analyze the ways those leaders choose to handle the stress involved with leading in a high stress environment.

Superintendents balance a formidable amount of responsibilities. Even those with vast experience in leadership positions have struggled to create a successful tenure as superintendent. Some scholars have made the case that turnover at the position of superintendent is in part due to the high stress associated with the job (Trimble, 2013). And stress has been a significant factor concerning superintendents' job descriptions. One study found that, of the superintendents studied, over 50 percent reported high levels of stress (Hawk & Martin, 2011). Statistics like these indicate that stress is an issue that provokes questions from students and scholars of leadership that will guide inquiries into the stressors of superintendents all over the United States; one such question is: have superintendents always felt that their job was stressful?

Over the past three decades, the superintendent has taken on multiple roles and has experienced a shift in responsibilities and stress levels. Statistics from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) provide valuable long term information regarding the

increasing stress levels of school superintendents. Ten year studies reveal that school superintendents are riding a “disturbing but largely predictable trend” (AASA, 2000).

In the 1982 AASA study, superintendents perceived their job as moderately stressful. 84.6 percent of participants said that some stress was present. In 1992, AASA reported that 84 percent of superintendents said they felt considerable or moderate stress. Only a mere 7.8 percent reported very great stress. These statistics from the 1980’s and early 1990’s indicate a consistent level of stress stemming from traditional stressors such as managerial tasks and budget issues.

In 2000, AASA reported on a superintendency in a new age of technology and information explosion. Superintendents in this study reported about the same amount of stress as did the participants in the 1992 AASA study. According to the study done in 2000, it was difficult to determine whether the reported stress levels were disabling and interfering with superintendent job performance, and the topic needed much further study. The 2000 report also pondered just how high stress levels would be in a 21st century superintendency (AASA, 2000).

In 2007, the AASA reported that 44.3 percent of superintendents described their job as very stressful. Fifteen percent even reported very great stress. In 2007, these were the highest stress levels of any AASA state of the superintendency study, as superintendents “faced the pressure of meeting increasing expectations with dwindling resources”(AASA, 2007). The 2007 study also reported that 59 percent of superintendents felt No Child Left Behind had a negative impact on schools (AASA, 2007).

In 2010, AASA reported that, as was the case in previous 10-year studies of the superintendency, job-related stress continued to be a byproduct of the position and its excessive

time requirements. Stress reached an all-time high in 2010, as close to 50 percent of superintendents viewed their job as very stressful (AASA, 2010). The AASA reports from the past thirty years bear out the notion that stress is rising for educational leaders. The statistics indicate that stress significantly increased during the era of No Child Left Behind and increased accountability standards.

The two guiding questions for this study focus on the stress level scores of North Carolina superintendents as measured by the Administrative Stress Index, and what specific stressors emerge as the major stressors of superintendents. In order to best frame this study, a review of the current literature was conducted, seeking a definition of stress, organizing the stress literature into relevant and useful categories, and providing a summary of relevant literature on the Common Core State Standards.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief history of the superintendency, and also information regarding the North Carolina superintendency. The next section provides a working definition of stress, and also presents the rationale for why stress matters. Next, this section provides a brief history of educational leadership stress, including the major stressors of educational leaders. The fourth section of this chapter presents the relevant Common Core literature as it relates to the stress of educational leaders. Lastly, this chapter provides a summary of studies on administrator stress in North Carolina.

The Superintendency: A Very Brief History

Superintendents are no longer only stewards of school districts. Superintendents are expected to make change and continuous improvement for the students and families under their care (Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013). The position has evolved into

one of the most difficult and most high stress jobs in America. A glimpse at any superintendent job description will likely induce feelings of challenge, excitement, and potentially stress. But it has not always been so, as the superintendency has developed over time into a position with increased responsibilities and expectations.

1865, for a number of reasons, remains a watershed year in American history. Many Americans likely conjure up images of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, signaling the end of the Confederate States of America and the end of a bloody Civil War. However, 1865 was also a new beginning. Reconstruction commenced so that a nation conceived in liberty might live. Probably a lesser known fact, the American Association of School Administrators also formed in 1865 (Houston, 2007). Much like the nation as a whole, the superintendency would begin to find its place in American life.

According to Mintz (2004), a new phase in the history of child welfare arose in the 1890's. "Invoking the principles of professionalization, scientific expertise, and rational administration," the Progressive era expanded the role of the state in addressing the education of children. This era witnessed the first effective compulsory school attendance laws, curriculum revisions, and the swift growth of the high school (Mintz, 2004, p. 172-173).

The role of the superintendent was shifting as well, from curator of systems to dynamic participant in children's learning. When Francis Parker became superintendent in Quincy, Massachusetts in the late nineteenth century, he sought to integrate direct experience and activities into learning, rather than just pure memorization and discipline. He called on the classroom teachers to take an interest in their students as individuals, and to incorporate history and nature into the curriculum (Mintz, 2004, p. 174). Parker's efforts reflect an attempt to inject

humanist sentiment back into public education, allowing for more individuality and child-centered pedagogy.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, industrial organization and progress influenced a number of fields, including education. As cities sprang up, superintendents filled newly created positions, charged with leading new cities of schools. Between 1870 and 1915 the number of children attending school increased from seven million to twenty million. School expenditures grew even more rapidly, from \$63 million to \$605 million. By the end of World War I every state in the union had enacted compulsory school attendance laws (Mintz, 2004).

Progressive educators, led by John Dewey, carried the charge started by Superintendent Parker and others. Respect for diversity, critical thinking, and developmentally appropriate instruction became relevant aspects of progressive pedagogy. But a dichotomy was also forming. This era witnessed a rise in standardized tests, placing students into different curricular tracks. And according to Mintz (2004), racial or ethnic minorities almost always received lower test scores and were tracked into vocational courses of study.

By mid-century, superintendents were expected to play an integral role in expanding education for more citizens than ever before. Between 1946 and 1964 more than seventy-five million children were born. American women averaged 3.6 babies, which was nearly twice the rate of the depression era 1930's (Mintz, 2004, p. 276). The baby boom was in full swing, which meant more children in school. In 1952, 50,000 new classrooms were built, and average daily attendance rose by two million students (Mintz, 2004, p. 287).

In post-war America, many turned their attention toward domestic social issues that took a back seat to defeating Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan a decade before. Issues such as Civil

Rights, women's liberation, and other causes for social justice became intertwined with America's perceived image around the globe. No longer were superintendents expected to ensure the education of wealthy white males only; women, blacks, students with disabilities, and others gained further protection from the federal government in terms of having access to a quality education. *Brown v. Board of Education*, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and Title IX signaled a sense of progress in society and in public education. The superintendent's responsibilities thus changed with the new mandates and responsibility of protecting the educational rights of more segments of society than ever before. Superintendents were expected to promote and ensure interaction across class, and later, racial lines. Around 1960 more than 100,000 small high schools closed in favor of consolidated larger high schools. The size of the average high school increased 300 percent, with many urban schools swelling to well over 3,000 students (Mintz, 2004, p.290).

The 1980's and 1990's were a time of increased stress for superintendents. *A Nation at Risk* served as an educational Sputnik, triggering much concern about the state of American achievement. The rebuttals against the arguments in *A Nation at Risk* were largely dismissed. Critics of the report asserted that American achievement had not eroded, but that the proportion of economically disadvantaged students, as well as students with limited English proficiency, had risen quickly, and the extra money being spent went largely to their needs (Mintz, 2004, p.367). The argument all but fell on deaf ears, as many Americans only saw that spending was up, and achievement was flat.

As America appeared to lag behind in reading and math, the age of information explosion yielded a new, yet familiar, way of measuring student progress: high stakes standardized testing. This philosophy, climaxing with No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, added yet another

layer of responsibility for the superintendent, and another expected skill set. On top of that, the child poverty rate at the beginning of the new millennium was higher than it was three decades prior. In 2002 the child poverty rate was 16 percent, roughly 14 percent higher than the lower end of the 1970's (Mintz, 2004, p. 344). Superintendents were now charged with educating more children, with higher standards, and with less economic resources than ever before.

School violence is an issue that the modern superintendent must face on a daily basis, and is a relatively new phenomenon for superintendents and other educational leaders. During the 1992-1993 school year, almost fifty school children and adults were killed in a school-related act of violence (Mintz, 2004, p.376). Superintendents are faced with competing notions of why mass shootings occur in schools; a lengthy list of issues to consider include bullying, social rejection, mental illness, and others (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

Though school violence related deaths remain relatively rare, instances like Columbine, Newtown, and others remind everyone that school violence is an issue in rural, suburban, and urban schools (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Elementary, middle, and high schools, each day, can be infiltrated by individuals seeking to inflict harm. School violence and shootings add yet another responsibility to the plate of the superintendent, and highlights the ever increasing demands of the position over time. Today's superintendent faces daunting challenges. He or she must be a public speaker, a bridge builder, a politician, a consoler, and a statistical consultant. This extensive set of requirements often make for a highly stressful job atmosphere, and a position nearly unrecognizable from its nineteenth century origins.

The superintendency in North Carolina has been shaped by issues such as race, economics, and politics. An exhaustive history is not presented here, but rather a framework involving race and class centered on the issue of school consolidation and how that impacted the

job of the superintendent. The debate over school-district size goes back centuries, and efforts to reform small school districts had their start in the early nineteenth century. As presented earlier, educating children was predominantly a local endeavor for many years. But as states began to take more responsibility for local education systems, many chose to “institutionalize town and city structures as local education agencies” (Boser, 2013). During the early 20th century, the push to consolidate schools and districts grew more aggressive, and as a result, the number of school districts in the United States shrunk from about 117,000 districts in 1940 to about 14,000 school districts today (Boser, 2013).

In North Carolina race and class undoubtedly played an important role in deciding which districts consolidated and which districts did not. Wake County, now the state’s largest public school system, grew out of a merger in the 1970’s between the former Wake County school system and the Raleigh City schools. It should be noted that this consolidation took place amidst the process of desegregation, and is representative of merging black students (Raleigh City schools) with white students (Wake County schools). This merger serves as an example of how the number of students under the span of one superintendent has grown in some areas of North Carolina. Today, Wake County has 171 schools and serves over 155,000 students. The Wake County Public School System is not only the largest in North Carolina, but the 16th-largest in the nation. The student population has almost tripled since 1980, and about 40,000 additional students are projected by year 2022 (Wake County Public School System, 2015).

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has undergone a series of consolidations as well. The county school system, which had previously been led primarily by committees and allowed individual schools a good amount of control, began to change around the mid nineteenth century. At the time, there were more about eighty schools in the county enrolling more than 3,500 students. As

the twentieth century commenced, one-room and two-room schools were consolidated (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2015).

In 1949, Dr. Elmer Garinger became superintendent of the city schools. In that same year, the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recommended the consolidation of the Charlotte City Schools and Mecklenburg County. The University institute claimed that consolidation would result in several advantages, most notably equal educational opportunities for all children (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2015). In 1960, the Charlotte City Schools and Mecklenburg County Schools merged, joining the two largest school districts in the state at the time to form a new city-county school district. Dr. Elmer Garinger, who was the superintendent of the city schools, was appointed superintendent of the new consolidated system. Today, Charlotte-Mecklenburg serves over 145,000 students throughout 145 schools, and has an operating budget of \$1.3 billion.

But not all regions in North Carolina underwent massive consolidation, and not all led to swelling populations in one district. In Halifax County, for instance, there have been three separate school districts operating for more than one hundred years. Two of Halifax's school districts are nearly 100 percent nonwhite, while Roanoke Rapids has a student population that is 70 percent white. Some argue that these three small districts have not merged into one school district partially because of racial reasons (Boser, 2013).

School consolidation in North Carolina has led some districts, such as Wake and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, to swell to well over 100,000 students. Superintendents in large districts oversee large student body populations, large staffs, and enormous budgets. However, plenty of school districts in North Carolina remain moderate in size. The superintendency in Wake County is not identical to the superintendency in Roanoke Rapids, and stress levels may vary

among superintendents. With a background of the superintendency established, both nationwide and locally, the next section of this chapter addresses the definition of stress, why stress matter for the superintendency.

Defining Stress and Why Stress Matters

In order to examine the major stressors of superintendents in North Carolina, it was vital to examine the history of stress in educational leadership, to provide a working definition of stress, and explore how stress has been measured in past studies. This section offers a definition of stress based off the work of past scholars, and also presents an analysis of why stress matters in educational leadership.

Definition of Stress

When examining the major stressors of superintendents, the need for a working definition of stress is evident. The term “stress” is quite subjective and can be construed in any number of ways. Stress can be viewed as positive or negative, desirable or undesirable, and relevant or trivial. While some may use the term stress to describe specific feelings of anxiety or grief, some may think of stress as any uncertainty about one’s personal shortcomings or of society’s circumstances. In truth, the concept of stress, like other concepts, remains a rather imprecise one.

With this in mind, it should be noted that not all stress is bad. Some stress can be motivating and even healthy (Gmelch, 1991). However, some stress indeed can be negative and lead to health problems, which has been well documented in the medical field and in the study of business executives (Tutton, 2010). Ultimately, all stress cannot be avoided and is a natural part of life. These distinctions are worth noting, as both healthy and unhealthy stress infiltrate the

lives of educational leaders. The researcher chose to use, in this study, the definition of stress put forth by Dr. Walt Gmelch.

Gmelch (1996) defined stress as "the anticipation of your inability to respond adequately to a perceived demand accompanied by your anticipation of negative consequences for an inadequate response." A similar definition was offered by Halbesleben (2010). Both scholars emphasize that stress is a concept that describes the feeling of a person when they think they have inadequate means to respond to an imposed demand. The researcher used this definition of stress throughout the study.

The researcher chose to include Gmelch's older research, even though it is dated. Gmelch is still referenced by scholars today and the research tools established by Gmelch (1982) are still influential in the current research, such as the Administrative Stress Index. The Administrative Stress Index was developed specifically to measure the stress levels of educational administrators, and was the primary survey instrument in this study.

Now that a definition of stress has been established, it is relevant to explore the literature that examines why stress is an important avenue for research. Multiple scholars have argued, for various reasons, why stress is a relevant topic for education leadership. The next section of this chapter analyzes the existing scholarship on why stress matters.

Why Stress Matters

One of the assumptions of this study was that stress is negatively affecting educational leaders. In order to justify this assumption, a review of the scholarship on stress was necessary. This section explores why stress matters and why further research into the major stressors of superintendents was warranted.

Several scholars consider stress to be a relevant and vital aspect to maintaining a competent leadership (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003; Queen & Queen, 2005; Robbins & Alvy, 2009). These researchers have discerned that stress is prevalent among educational leaders and that learning more about the stress phenomenon is pertinent. Glass (1992) argued that when leaders confront excessive negative stress, organizations "generally do not perform well when they are more preoccupied with handling stress than with developing the organization's potential." (Richardson, 1998, p. 17). In other words, when stress is too high, both the individual leader and the community can experience negative consequences.

Numerous studies also suggest that stress has grown steadily over time (Brock & Grady, 2002; Cushing et al., 2003; Queen & Queen, 2005). This body of research reflects an interest in the stress levels of many types of educational leaders, including principals and superintendents. The majority of leaders studied have reported discernable patterns in terms of the causes of their stress: managerial tasks, and the rise of increased accountability pressures. Managerial tasks tend to dominate the literature prior to 2001. After 2001, stress seems to be stemming significantly from standardized testing and accountability pressures.

In short, the research suggests that stress stemming from their work is a significant issue for educational leaders. It is also increasingly evident that the traditional stressors faced by educational leaders are increasingly accompanied by new stressors stemming from increased accountability standards and new policies. The next section of this chapter examines the evolution of stress for educational leaders, which can be divided into two categories: managerial and boundary-spanning stress (Gmelch & Chan, 1995) and accountability stress.

Managerial, Boundary-Spanning, and Accountability Stress

The literature suggests two broad categories of stress: managerial and boundary-spanning stress, and accountability. Educational leaders have reported that managerial tasks such as answering phone calls, attending lengthy meetings, responding to emails, and managing employees are major sources of stress. In the case of the superintendent, dealing with the board of education has been a consistent source of stress as well. Boundary-spanning stress refers to the stress stemming from dealing with agents within the organization and with agents outside the organization. External agents can include parents, community members, business owners, and others (McGarity, 2004).

Educational leaders have also reported, since 2002, that accountability pressures contribute a great deal to their stress. No Child Left Behind mandates and high stakes testing have been common stressors for educational administrators in several studies (Carlin, 2010; Carson, 2010). This section will review the research on the aforementioned two categories of stress, the historical major stressors of educational leaders, and how new policy contributes to stress.

Managerial and Boundary-Spanning Stress

Several studies used the Administrative Stress Index to measure stress during the 1980's. Foster's (1986) study utilized the Administrative Stress Index by surveying principals in Kentucky. This study found that the top sources of administrator stress were complying with state, federal, and organizational rules and policies, and feeling that the workload is too heavy. This study supports the notion that stress is not a new problem for educational leaders, and that time constraint is a major stressor. It also provides evidence that while the No Child Left Behind

era brought increased attention to mandates, even prior to NCLB, educators felt stress from mandates outside their control.

Another study of educational leadership stress surveyed principals in Maryland. Wright (1987) used the Administrative Stress Index and found that the top stressor for the participants was completing reports and submitting paper work on time. Too heavy a work load, meetings, high expectations, and interruptions from phone calls were also reported as highly stressful. Wright's (1987) study supports the notion that traditional stressors, such as paperwork and time constraints, caused significant stress for educational leaders prior to 2002.

Buzelli-White (1988) conducted a study of Colorado administrators using the Administrative Stress Index. She found that, according to the 30 participants, they were feeling moderately stressed, and that the amount of experience and number of hours worked indicated higher stress levels. Less experienced leaders had higher levels of stress, as did those who worked more hours.

The 1990's yielded similar results in terms of causes of administrator stress. Atwood (1996) used the Administrative Stress Index and found that the top stressors of California administrators were too heavy a workload, meetings, and paperwork. Sanchez (1997) used the Administrative Stress Index in California as well, and found that 276 administrators reported stress stemming from workload, not having enough time to think, paperwork, and solving conflicts (Sanchez, 1997, 57,).

In 1998, Richardson used the Administrative Stress Index to study the stressors of superintendents in Connecticut (Richardson, 1998). The significant stressors were heavy workload, time constraints, and board relations. Other stressors cited by the Connecticut

superintendents were mandates, personnel problems, and public demands and criticisms (Richardson, 1998, p. 14). These findings are consistent with the notion that managerial tasks and boundary-spanning stress significantly impacted educational leaders prior to 2001. Shumate (1999) used the Administrative Stress Index to measure administrator stress in Washington State, and found similar results still. 221 administrators cited workload and time constraints as the top stressors.

The literature reviewed here suggests that managerial and boundary-spanning caused a significant amount of stress for educational leaders throughout the 1980's and 1990's. There is also evidence that some stress from federal and state mandates appear prior to 2002. However, studies conducted after 2002 show that stress stemming from mandates, accountability standards, and new policy increased since that date. The next section of this chapter examines some of the research on educational leadership stress stemming from increased accountability standards and new policy.

Accountability Stress

Accountability stress is not a new concept to those in leadership positions. Leaders in different fields are accountable to varying persons, groups, and laws. Some parts of the business culture are well known for environments that inflict intense stress for CEO's and other leaders. Some argue that being CEO is stressful partly because of the changing environment and the complexity of the job (Tutton, 2010). As of late, the same can be said of educational leaders as well. Around the clock working hours are not restricted to corporate America any longer. Educational leaders are expected to produce results, both statistically and qualitatively. The literature since the arrival of No Child Left Behind suggests that educational leaders are experiencing more stress from accountability standards than prior to No Child Left Behind.

Bowers (2004) surveyed Pennsylvania superintendents and found that the top stressors had to do with funding, state mandates, and No Child Left Behind. Carlin's (2010) qualitative study investigated administrator stress and the impact of *No Child Left Behind*. Ten middle school principals were interviewed from urban, suburban, and rural schools. Carlin (2010) found that educational leaders and students have all experienced a highly stressful atmosphere as a result of high stakes testing and accountability. "Nationally, recent research has borne out an increase in principal turnover across the country over the past 5 years" (Carlin, 2010, 22). This study provides valuable insight into 10 administrators and their perceptions of stress during the No Child Left Behind era.

However, this study does not address the most current policy impacting education: the Common Core State Standards. While Carlin (2010) contributed a great deal in terms of educational leaders dealing with mandates and new policy, more research is needed to investigate the stress of educational leaders as a result of the newest policies, such as the Common Core State Standards.

Boyland's (2011) study sought to examine the stress of educational leaders in Indiana. The opinions sought came from 193 elementary principals in order to gain a better understanding of what administrators feel is stressful, as well as to "deepen understanding of the evolving climate surrounding public school leadership" (Boyland, 2011, 1). The study used a mixed methods approach. Boyland (2011) used a survey to gather the participants' demographic information (age, experience, education) and to reflect the stress levels of the principals. The participants were asked to rate their levels of job stress as "low stress," "medium stress," or "high stress." The responses were assigned a numerical value (1, 2, & 3) and analyzed to determine the reported stress levels of the participants. Open ended questions were added to the

quantitative questions in order to gather information on principal methods and techniques for coping with job stress. 193 Indiana principals responded to the survey. Of those that responded, 38.5 percent reported high job stress, 53.6 percent reported moderate job stress, and 7.8 percent reported low job stress. No statistically significant relationships were found between demographics and reported stress levels. For the qualitative data, principals reported an overwhelming feeling of chronic task overload. Paperwork, deadlines, and budget cuts were cited as very stressful (Boyland, 2011, 5).

Sogunro's (2012) qualitative study does a remarkable job of explaining and exploring the multiple sources of stress for educational leaders. This study consisted of interviews with 52 principals in Connecticut over a span of 2.5 years. Sogunro found that 96 percent of the participants experienced work-related stress at a level they believed was affecting their physical health, work habits, and productivity (Sogunro, 2012, 664.) One principal remarked, "There are so many things to do within a limited time frame" (Sogunro, 2012, 679). Other principals voiced their concern over time constraints, with over 70 percent of the principals referring to unrealistic deadlines imposed on them by the central office as a source of stress.

The principals who participated in this study cited unpleasant relationships and people conflicts as the greatest source of stress for educational leaders (Sogunro, 2012, 676). Time constraints was a close second as the most stressful factor among the participants. 98 percent of the participants cited time constraints as the second most stressful aspect of educational leadership (Sogunro, 2012, 679).

Sogunro (2012) also found that "about 90 percent of the participants claimed to feel pressured in dealing with internal and external demands of their schools, especially at the instance of a barrage of policy demands and unrealistic mandates from state government and

local school boards” (pp. 680). 85 percent of the participants in this study cited budgetary constraints as a source of stress, and one principal commented that “since the budget is always fixed by the central office, budgetary issues are virtually out of our control” (Sogunro, 2012, 681).

What we still do not know enough about is the impact of the most current policies on the stress of educational leaders, particularly on superintendents. Educational leaders are facing budget cuts in the midst of implementing new policies, and this critique is one that warrants further study into the stress levels of superintendents. The next section of this chapter examines the relevant literature on the Common Core Standards. It is appropriate to analyze whether the Common Core Standards present changes to education, and to what extent.

Relevant Common Core Literature

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed in 2009. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers collaborated to write the standards, which are intended to “improve student achievement and college and career readiness (corestandards.org). They are not curricula and do not direct teachers on how and with what resources to teach” (Wagner, 2013). This distinction is necessary and relevant due to the controversy and, for some, ignorance of what Common Core actually is. The issue of federal involvement in public education enters here as well, and will be discussed further in this section, and in chapter 4.

The literature to be reviewed here does not seek to measure the effectiveness of the Common Core State Standards, nor to make an argument for or against the Common Core State Standards. The literature to be reviewed here was chosen as relevant to framing the changes

educational leaders may or may not be facing as a result of the new policy, thus being an avenue of interest for research on stress. It was not the goal of the researcher to present literature on Common Core to make a case for its implementation, nor for its repeal. The primary goal was to present a balanced account of the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards, and why this emerging narrative is relevant for examining the stress levels of educational leaders.

Some on the political right call it Obamacore (Martin, 2014). Some on the left call the Common Core State Standards and their impact on students “unconscionable” (Murphy, 2014, p. 42). According to one Florida lawmaker, Common Core will attract every one of your children to become as homosexual as they possibly can (Murphy, 2014, p. 38). Despite these curious comments, such as the one from Florida State Representative Charles Van Zant, the Common Core State Standards began as a bipartisan effort to strengthen public education, with support from those of all political stripes. Tim Murphy’s article in *Mother Jones* magazine, entitled “Tragedy of the Common Core,” crafts a current synopsis of the political roots of the Common Core controversy. Despite initial consensus, several Republican governors, particularly those with potential Presidential hopes, are backing off Common Core (Martin, 2014). Back in 2009, it seemed as though Democrats and Republicans had found a common cause in public education, but some state lawmakers in multiple states, including North Carolina, are now trying to halt the Common Core State Standards.

According to Murphy (2014), the Common Core State Standards “emerged from the ashes of No Child Left Behind” (p. 38). The Bush-era NCLB policy tied federal funding to standardized tests, but lacked uniformity from state to state. Proponents of the Common Core State Standards argue that under NCLB, it was difficult to determine how well students were

performing, given the lack of consistency in assessments (Kendall, 2011). The solution? The CCSS aim to create benchmarks of concepts and of skills, but not curricula (corestandards.org).

Education reformers have invested time and money into the Common Core State Standards, including Bill Gates, who has given \$200 million toward the implementation of the standards (Layton, 2014). Non-profits and philanthropists are not the only ones throwing their support behind Common Core. For profit textbook and testing companies, including Pearson, lobbied for Common Core, and stand to benefit monetarily from the new CCSS (Murphy, 2014, p. 38).

Beyond the money and political side shows is the heart of the issue. According to Murphy (2014), Common Core is about who controls what kids learn and how they learn it (p. 38). The introduction and adoption of Common Core commenced in the midst of the Great Recession, a Wall Street Bailout, and the argument over the Affordable Care Act. In 2009, all but two governors were on board with Common Core (Sarah Palin and Rick Perry). The American Federation of Teachers supported Common Core. But in 2011, with the rollout of the CCSS, both sides of the political aisle voiced their concerns (Murphy, 2014).

Common Core's critics have found some seemingly unlikely allies. Some on the far right claim Common Core seeks to indoctrinate America's children with progressive values. Some on the left liken the CCSS to NCLB, in that it turns urban students into "lab rats" (Murphy, 2014, p. 42). They contend that the problem with public education is not standards, but overwhelming economic inequality. This peculiar partnership against the CCSS can be summed up in one particular case in Indiana. In 2012, Republican superintendent Tony Bennett, a supporter of Common Core, lost to Democrat Glenda Ritz. Ritz benefitted from Tea Party support, and halted

plans for Common Core in Indiana. North Carolina, Missouri, Oklahoma, and South Carolina soon followed Indiana's lead (Murphy, 2014, p. 42).

The United Federation of Teachers withdrew its support for Common Core in 2014. The union turned because states would not release versions of the tests to be used to judge teacher performance, and a lack of funding for ESL students and students with learning disabilities. Common Core proponents, meanwhile, assert that the CCSS have exposed the fact that children, including suburban and middle class children, were not held to high enough standards in the No Child Left Behind era (Murphy, 2014, p. 68).

Common Core Studies

Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) compared the alignment of the Common Core Standards to each individual state's content standards for math and language arts. Their analysis addresses how much change the Common Core standards represent for content standards and assessments. For each state, a formula determined how closely aligned the new Common Core Standards are with the former standards of that particular state. For this study, I will focus primarily on the data from North Carolina because my research is specific to superintendents in North Carolina.

According to the data presented by Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011), the alignment between North Carolina's state standards and the Common Core Standards for math in grades 3-6 was 0.30, 0.21, 0.16, and 0.16, respectively. Nationally, the mean was 0.35 for math. In other words, North Carolina's math alignment is slightly below the national mean for grades 3-6. I chose to reference these specific grades because the table in the study is missing the data from K-5 in North Carolina. For language arts, North Carolina's alignment in 5th grade was 0.28.

The national alignment mean was 0.27 for language arts. I used 5th grade because there was no data for K-4 or for grade 6.

The authors of this study concluded that “the Common Core standards represent considerable change from what states currently call for in their standards and in what they assess” (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011, 114). These are relevant findings when exploring the impact of the Common Core standards on the stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina.

Beach (2011) responded to the work of Porter et al. Beach argues that Porter et al.’s (2014) documentation of the lack of alignment between the Common Core standards and current state standards and assessments is a significant and important finding in that implementation of the Common Core Standards “will involve challenging curriculum transformations given teachers’ familiarity with the current state standards, challenges exacerbated by lack of resources to implement these changes” (Beach, 2011, 181). In other words, Beach argues that the Common Core signals at least some change and newness for administrators, teachers, and students.

Beach (2011) offers additional insights into the lack of alignment and comprehensive funding issues through the lens of the language arts curriculum:

The state standards’ focus on expository writing and the CCSS focus on argumentative writing represents one of many areas that will require substantive curriculum changes over the next few years, given teachers’ familiarity with their current state standards. Unfortunately, teachers may receive little professional development support for making this transition, given state and district budget reductions, resulting in implementation like that of No Child Left Behind a decade ago, when policy changes were never adequately funded (Beach, 2011, 179).

Kober and Rentner (2013) authored a quantitative study that surveyed deputy state superintendents of education in the 46 states (and Washington, D.C.) that adopted the Common

Core standards. 40 of the states responded to the survey. These authors' conclusions are relevant to this study for the information they provide in terms of educational administrators and their perceptions about implementing the Common Core standards. Kober and Rentner (2013) found that "nearly all CCSS adopting states recognize that implementing the Common Core will require substantial changes in curriculum and instruction in their state" (pp. 16.). The authors also concluded that many states lack adequate resources to effectively carry out all CCSS-related activities; 34 of the 40 participating states reported that resources were either a major or minor challenge to CCSS implementation (Kober & Rentner, 2013, 16).

The survey responses in this study were anonymous, so it is not possible to discern specifics about the perceptions of educational administrators in North Carolina or in any other state. While Kober and Rentner (2013) provided valuable data to the Common Core literature, further research is needed within individual states to flesh out the particular challenges educational leaders are facing with regard to their local fiscal realities, politics, and populations. The final section of this chapter will examine the recent studies on educational administrator stress conducted in the state of North Carolina.

North Carolina Administrator Stress Studies

North Carolina school leaders currently face a number of divisive issues. One recent controversy involves the Common Core State Standards. Governor Pat McCrory has endorsed the Common Core State Standards, but in the summer of 2014 called for a review of the standards, casting doubt on the future of Common Core in North Carolina. Lieutenant Governor Forest has also expressed concern about the Common Core State Standards, particularly with the cost and the technological needs to make them work.

Tea Party activists have, in some places like Indiana, Michigan, and North Carolina, driven a movement against the Common Core, fearing a federal intrusion into education. State superintendent Dr. June Atkinson has commented that “the Common Core is nothing more than guidelines identifying what students should know and be able to do in math and English language arts as a result of being in our public schools.....nothing more or nothing less than that” (Wagner, 2013).

This is a snapshot of contemporary educational politics in North Carolina. The stress felt by educational leaders in the state today is shaped by multiple sources. It is relevant to frame today’s issues with a review of the literature that examined administrator stress in North Carolina in the past. Doing so will provide a solid setting for my study of the stress levels and causes of stress for North Carolina superintendents.

Thompson (1985) conducted a study of principals in North Carolina, focusing on stress and coping strategies. He used the Administrative Stress Index to survey elementary principals and found that the most cited stressors involved managerial tasks, similar to previous findings of other scholars of stress. Physical exercise was the coping strategy most used by the participants. Blanks (1990) found similar results among North Carolina educational leaders, as managerial tasks were reported as the most frequent causes of stress.

Welmers (2005) sought to investigate the relationship between North Carolina educational leader demographics and stress as measured by the Administrative Stress Index. Welmers (2005) found no relationship between demographics and reported stress levels, but noted that many respondents reported increased stress levels due to new programs such as No Child Left Behind.

Carson's (2010) quantitative study of educational leaders in North Carolina sought to provide data on the stress and stress coping preferences of North Carolina elementary principals. 222 principals responded to the survey. Carson (2010) used the Administrative Stress Index to determine the stress levels of principals; the Roesch Coping Preference Scale (RCPS) was used to obtain the coping preferences of the participants. The principals that participated in the study reported a mean score on the ASI of 93.01. Carson's findings suggested that elementary school principals of North Carolina were "moderately stressed in their jobs" (Carson, 2010, v).

Carson also concluded that the top four stressors for the respondents were: too heavy of a workload, feeling that meetings take up too much time, failing to complete reports or other paperwork on time, and daily interruptions from staff members (Carson, 2010, v-vi). Findings from the RCPS suggest that principals cope with stress by taking work home, working on weekends, and collaborating with colleagues. In addition, there were no significant differences among new and veteran elementary principals' mean stress indexes (Carson, 2010, vi).

There is plentiful evidence that educational leaders are experiencing stress stemming from their work (Carson, 2010). It is less clear what many superintendents feel is stressing them out the most. Additionally, the research is underdeveloped in terms of assessing the impact of new policy, such as the Common Core State Standards, on the stress levels of educational leaders. The underdevelopment of such research has contributed to the research questions posited for this study.

Summary and Need for Further Research

The literature suggests that the stress levels of educational leaders have increased over time (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Sogunro, 2012; Welmers, 2005). The reviewed

literature provided definitions of stress, the history of stress for educational leaders, the patterns and causes of administrator stress, and the impact of new policy on stress. This framework provides the background information for new stress studies that engage in areas where the research is underdeveloped. The stress levels of the school superintendent is one of those areas where new research can add to the stress report in an ongoing evaluation of the stress atmosphere among educational leaders.

While the causes of stress have, since 2002, tended to be associated with increased accountability standards and new policy, more research is needed to investigate the impact of the newest educational policies on the stress levels of educational leaders. This is especially true of superintendents. Much of the recent research has focused primarily on principals. Superintendents are faced with a job that requires a vast skill set, including the ability to be “on” all of the time. Educational leadership is not confined to inside classrooms and schools. This study is intended to provide needed research on what the major stressors of superintendents are, as well as to assess the impact of the Common Core State Standards on their stress levels.

The research that currently exists addresses the causes of stress and the stress coping preferences of educational leaders, but is chiefly devoted to principals (Carson, 2010; Boyland, 2011; Sogunro, 2012). These are important matters, to be sure, but provide an incomplete picture of the modern stressors of the educational leader, particularly from the perspective of the superintendent.

Ronnie Devon Carson’s 2010 dissertation provided an exceptional starting point in terms of stress of educational leaders in North Carolina. While Carson, and others, have conducted research on the stress levels of North Carolina educational leaders, no studies were found that

examined stress from the perspective of the North Carolina superintendent, and none have sought to investigate the impact of the Common Core State Standards on their stress levels.

Past research has effectively established the stressors of educational leaders and the trends that have emerged in such research. However, there is a gap in the research related to the major stressors of North Carolina superintendents, and how the Common Core State Standards have impacted their stress levels. The underdevelopment of research in these spaces led to the guiding questions for this study, and these are discussed in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the research design, methodology, and instruments used. The chapter is divided into sections that review the purpose of the study, research questions, research design and rationale, population and sampling, and significance of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of North Carolina superintendents concerning their stress levels and whether the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards impacted their stress levels. This study investigated whether a relationship exists between personal and demographic variables and stress levels. The stress of educational leaders has summoned the attention of scholars and researchers in an effort to better understand the challenges those stressors pose to leadership performance and physical health. Because the superintendent is accountable to the public in a visible and significant way, and because new policies impact the leaders that carry out those policies, research into the stress levels and major stressors of superintendents was warranted.

Research Questions

The research is guided by using the following research questions:

- 1) How stressful is the job of superintendent in North Carolina?
- 2) What are the greatest job stressors of current North Carolina superintendents?
- 3) What is the overall stress index of North Carolina superintendents on the ASI?
- 4) Has Common Core impacted superintendent stress?

- 5) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress levels and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch?
- 6) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the gender of the superintendent?
- 7) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the education level of the superintendent?
- 8) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the size of the district?
- 9) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress level and years of experience as a superintendent?

The first part of this research specifically looked at how stressed North Carolina superintendents are feeling as a result of their job. This first major research question used guiding sub-questions to further explore the stress climate of North Carolina superintendents.

The second major research question was guided by sub-questions designed to identify the top stressors of superintendents. Specifically, the research explored which items on the Administrative Stress Index scored highest among North Carolina superintendents. Also, the research gained the perspectives of superintendents on how new policy impacts stress. Specifically, this research question explored the perspectives superintendents hold regarding the impact of the Common Core State Standards on their stress levels. Further questions examined the extent to which experience impacts perceived stress levels, and if relationships exist between other personal and demographic variables and reported stress levels.

Research Design

This study used correlation research design, using cross tabulation with chi squared. The design of the correlation study sought to identify a relationship between groups. It should be noted that no attempt by the researcher was made to influence the attitudes of the participants.

An electronic survey using correlation design was appropriate for this research for several reasons. First, it allowed for the collection of data from a large number of human participants in a relatively short period of time. It also allowed the researcher to report the response rate and descriptively report the aggregate responses to each item on the survey. According to Creswell (2005, p. 375), “this process helps to discern general patterns of responses and variation (variance and standard deviation) in results.” This design also allowed for the researcher to test hypotheses and research questions using inferential statistics.

A broad number of participants (i.e., more than 40) was essential to make sure variances and similarities were properly represented within the sample. A frequency number and percentage was calculated for each item on the Administrative Stress Index. The cross tabulation with chi squared was used to compare the differences between superintendents concerning size of the district, district poverty, and years of experience as a superintendent. A t-test was used to compare the differences between superintendents in terms of gender and education level.

Survey Instrument

The survey format was most appropriate for this research for several reasons. “Surveys help describe the trends in a population or describe the relationship among variables or compare groups” (Creswell, 2005, p. 377). For this study, the aim was to learn about the attitudes or perceptions of North Carolina superintendents in terms of their stress. Other advantages of

surveys are that they can be administered in a short amount of time, are economical, and investigate populations anonymously (Creswell, 2005). It should be noted that surveys rely on self-reported information, which is subjective to the perceptions of the participants. Given that this study aimed to gain data regarding the perceptions of superintendents, this weakness of surveys was not particularly troubling.

As this research measured the perspectives and perceptions of North Carolina superintendents, the survey consisted of the Administrative Stress Index, which used a Likert scale, and had 33 questions. The Administrative Stress Index (ASI) was first developed in 1977 by Gmelch and Swent. For this study, one question was deleted from the ASI: the increasing accountability and expense of NCLB and other federal mandates. The researcher also added a question: the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards. Given the evolving role of the superintendent and the well-established notion that NCLB has caused an increase in stress, this question replacement was warranted and was rooted in exploring the impact of Common Core on stress.

The survey also included one open ended question to allow superintendents to share supplementary information regarding the impact of any federal or state mandate on their stress. This question allowed for a rich exploration and analysis of the responses. The answers were coded and analyzed in light of previous literature and established claims by other scholars of stress.

This researcher obtained permission from Dr. Gmelch to use the Administrative Stress Index in this study. Based on the research previously reviewed, this section of the research focuses on hypotheses such as:

1. Superintendents will report their jobs are stressful.
2. The greatest stress levels will be concerned with resources to support a quality educational program.
3. Student body composition (i.e. free/reduced price lunch) will be positively correlated to stress.
4. There will be no significant differences that NC superintendents report by gender, tenure, size of the district, or education level.
5. Recent legislative and policy initiatives such as NCLB, RTTT and CCSS will add to the stress level superintendents' report.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following approval from IRB, an email was sent to each of the superintendents in North Carolina. The email addresses were obtained from the online database which contains every email address for every superintendent in the state. The online survey format allowed for low cost and high efficiency. Another benefit to the online survey was the increased likelihood for high participation among superintendents across the state of North Carolina.

Analysis of the data included both descriptive and inferential testing and analysis. The descriptive analysis included determining the overall mean score, the top stressor items, and tests of statistical significance. The inferential testing included assessing the relationship among variables (Creswell, 2012). The variables tested were: gender of the superintendent, education level of the superintendent, years of experience as a superintendent, size of the district, and district poverty.

The open ended question responses were analyzed with the assistance of qualitative methods, including coding (Creswell, 2012). Relevant themes for coding were: funding issues, new policies, federal intrusion into public education, the Affordable Care Act, and civil rights

issues. The responses were categorized and analyzed in light of the survey responses, as well as in light of previous research.

Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the survey is the degree to which the results demonstrate stability and consistency. This research was administered using a well-established instrument: the Administrative Stress Index. Gmelch and Swent first developed the Administrative Stress Index (ASI) in 1977 and they revised the instrument in 1984. The instrument was field tested with 25 educational leaders to check the reliability and validity. The ASI was revised again and tested on 20 educational leaders and a reliability coefficient of .70 was established. Gmelch and Swent increased the internal validity by sending surveys to more than 1,100 educational leaders in the state of Oregon and found no significant differences with regard to age or years of experience (Blair, 2010).

The online format of the survey ensured objectivity and identical conditions of administration. Computer based statistical analysis programs were used to score and interpret the results in order to ensure the highest degree of objectivity possible.

Population and Sample

Surveys were sent to all 115 North Carolina superintendents. While the researcher sent the survey to all 115 superintendents in North Carolina, all 115 did not respond. A total of 56 superintendents completed the survey and the results were analyzed. In other words, for this study, the response rate was 48 percent. Of the 56 superintendents that filled out the Administrative Stress Index, 22 chose to offer open ended responses to the additional question. An analysis of the data from the survey and the open ended question can be found in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The contents of this chapter include an analysis of the sample population data and of the research questions data. The data presented for the sample and each of the research questions are reported in both narrative and table format. These tables report data from the superintendents and provide demographic information such as gender, number of years as a superintendent, education level, district size, and district poverty. The means and standard deviations for job related stressors as perceived by North Carolina district level superintendents are shown in the tables in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Demographic Data Findings

The study was conducted by surveying public school superintendents in North Carolina who served during the 2014-2015 school year. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 115 superintendents in North Carolina listed in the superintendent Directory (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015).

The population for this study included 115 superintendents, and 56 participants chose to complete the survey. The response rate of the superintendents who participated in this survey was 48.7 percent. Shih and Fan (2008) asserted that representative response rates can and do vary substantially. They analyzed 39 web-based surveys and found that response rates varied from 7 percent to 88 percent, with a mean of around 43 percent. Given this finding, the researcher for this study was content with the response rate of 48.7 percent.

Out of the 56 respondents, 3 chose not to indicate their gender. Of the 53 that reported their gender, the data indicated that 43 (81 percent) were male and 10 (almost 19 percent) were female. The education level of the superintendents who were sampled was split into either Master's degree or Doctoral degree. While 54 respondents reported their education level, 2 did not. Eleven (20 percent) participants had received his or her Master's degree, and 43 (almost 80 percent) reported having a Doctoral degree.

The superintendents that responded to the survey were reasonably balanced in terms of experience in the position. Those that had 0-3 years of experience as the superintendent totaled 19 (more than 35 percent). Those with 4-10 years of experience totaled 21 (almost 39 percent), and 14 superintendents (almost 26 percent) indicated they have more than 10 years of experience as a superintendent.

The sizes of the school districts were divided into three categories. Two superintendents (almost 4 percent) reported that they serve in a district with less than 1,000 students, while 29 superintendents (almost 53 percent) reported that they work in a district serving between 1,001-7,000 students. Finally, 24 superintendents (almost 44 percent) work in districts with more than 7,000 students.

The data show that 31 (almost 59 percent) of the respondents in this study work in districts where 50-75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. Fourteen (almost 27 percent) work in districts where less than 50 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch, and 8 (15 percent) work in districts where more than 75% of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch.

Additional information on the participants is presented in Tables 1 through 5. The information for each table includes the frequencies and percentages of responses. The data in Table 1 indicate the largest percentage of responses were in the 4-10 years of experience group (almost 39 percent). The years of experience were grouped into three different categories by year intervals.

The data in Table 2 report the number of students in each of the respondents' district. Most superintendents that responded serve between 1,001-7,000 students (almost 53 percent). Table 3 indicates the largest percentage of participants was male (81 percent). These data reflect the population of North Carolina superintendents closely, as 90 of the superintendents in the state are male (78 percent). The data in Table 4 indicate the highest level of education completed, which was Doctoral degrees. The educational degrees were grouped into two different categories: Master's and Doctorate. Most (81 percent) of the respondents in this study held Doctoral degrees. Of the 115 superintendents in North Carolina, 84 hold Doctoral degrees (73 percent). The data in Table 5 indicate the district poverty level for each superintendent. A majority (almost 59 percent) of the respondents reported they serve in districts where between 50-75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch.

Demographic Tables

The years of experience as a superintendent of the participants was utilized as an independent variable in this study. As indicated in Table 1, the largest percentage of responses were in the 4-10 years of experience group. All but two of the participants reported their years of experience in the survey used for this study. The tenure of the superintendents were grouped into three different multiple-year intervals.

Table 1

Years as a Superintendent

Item	Frequency	Percentage
0-3 years	19	35.19%
4-10 years	21	38.89%
More than 10 years	14	25.93%

Table 2 contains data concerning the size of the district in which the participating superintendent serves. The respondents provided data that indicated that 2 superintendents (3.64%) serve 1,000 students or less, 29 superintendents (52.73%) serve between 1,001-7,000 students, and 24 superintendents (43.64%) serve more than 7,000 students.

Table 2

Size of the District

Item	Frequency	Percentage
1,000 students or less	2	3.64%
1,001-7,000 students	29	52.73%
More than 7,000 students	24	43.64%

Table 3 indicates the gender of the respondents. The data indicate that 43 of the respondents (81%) were male and 10 (almost 19%) were female.

Table 3

Gender of the Superintendents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Male	43	81.13%
Female	10	18.87%

Table 4 includes the level of education of the superintendents that responded to the survey. All but two chose to provide their education level, which was an independent variable in this study. Of the superintendents that participated in this study, 42 (almost 80%) reported that they held a Doctoral degree. Eleven (more than 20%) reported an education level of Master's degree.

Table 4

Education of the Superintendents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Master's Degree	11	20.37%
Doctoral Degree	43	79.63%

Table 5 indicates the percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch in the respondent’s district. The poverty level of the district was another independent variable in this study. All but three of the respondents indicated the free/reduced price lunch data for their district. The greatest percentage of free/reduced lunch in the sample was 90%, while the least reported was 25%.

Table 5

Percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 50%	14	26.42%
50-75%	31	58.49%
More than 75%	8	15.09%

Research Questions Findings

Research Question 1

Research question 1 examined how stressful the job of school superintendent in North Carolina is. The data gathered via the Administrative Stress Index indicated that North Carolina superintendents are experiencing some job related stress. The mean stress levels per question for the respondents in this study, on a scale of 1-4, was 2.476. The mean overall score for the respondents, on a scale from 33-132, was 81.696. The lowest reported stress score was 49, and the highest reported stress score was 108. The results of this data can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

North Carolina Superintendent Stress Scores

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Mean Stress	56	2.476	.383	1.484	3.27
Sum Stress	56	81.696	12.680	49	108

Research Question 2

Research question 2 examined the major perceived job stressors of North Carolina superintendents as measured by the Administrative Stress Index. North Carolina superintendents' top five identified sources of stress had mean scores ranging from 2.93 to 3.16. The top stressor items were: (1) Attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests; (2) Imposing excessively high expectations on myself; (3) Preparing and allocating budget resources; (4) A lack of time to thoroughly respond to all forms of electronic communication; (5) Issues related to school safety and security. The results are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7

Administrative Stress Index for North Carolina Superintendents

Stressor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
The controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards	56	2.303571	.8072319	1	4
A lack of time to thoroughly respond to all forms of electronic communication.	56	2.928571	.7829349	1	4
Supervising and coordinating the tasks of many people	56	2.785714	.7796103	1	4
Feeling staff members don't understand my goals and expectations	56	2.107143	.5932521	1	4
Knowing that I can't get information needed to carry out my job properly	56	2.357143	.7960944	1	4
Thinking that I will not be able to satisfy the conflicting demands of school board members	56	2.392857	.7550694	1	4
Being able to balance professional and personal responsibilities	56	2.821429	.8550841	1	4
Having my work interrupted frequently by staff members who want to talk	56	2.303571	.736568	1	4
Imposing excessively high expectations on myself	56	3.142857	.7960944	1	4
Feeling pressure for better job performance above what I think is reasonable	56	2.446429	.7843849	1	4
Working to resolve conflicts between school board members	56	2.285714	.7314813	1	4

Trying to resolve differences with the school board	56	2.410714	.7077952	1	4
Speaking in front of groups	56	1.607143	.561769	1	3
Not knowing what the school board thinks of me, or how they evaluate my performance.	56	1.892857	.6231466	1	3
Having to make decisions that affect the lives of individual people that I know	56	2.696429	.7114554	1	4
Issues related to school safety	56	2.928571	.7593572	1	4
Feeling that I have too much responsibility delegated to me by the school board	56	1.75	.7198485	1	4
Trying to resolve parent/school conflict	56	2.5	.6324555	1	4
Preparing and allocating budget resources	56	3.053571	.7241206	1	4
Feeling that I have too little authority to carry out responsibilities assigned to me	56	1.982143	.7743871	1	4
Handling student discipline problems	56	2.053571	.6444065	1	4
Attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests	56	3.160714	.7574307	1	4
Evaluating staff performance	56	2.357143	.58554	1	3
Feeling that I have too heavy workload, one that I could not possibly finish during the normal work day	56	2.571429	.8915185	1	4
Complying with federal, state, district and organizational rules and policies	56	2.785714	.7559289	2	4
Feeling that the progress on my job is not what it should or could be	56	2.5	.7385489	1	4
Responding to grievances and complaints	55	2.454545	.6329877	1	4

Removing professional staff members who do not meet evaluative expectations	56	2.607143	.7052677	2	4
Feeling that meetings take up too much time	56	2.714286	.7559289	1	4
Trying to complete reports and other paperwork on time	56	2.5	.7627701	1	4
Trying to resolve differences between/among staff members	56	2.196429	.5194278	1	3
Trying to influence the school board's decisions and actions that affect me	56	2.25	.6941312	1	4
Trying to gain public approval and financial support for school programs	56	2.892857	.8017837	1	4

Research Question 3

Research question 3 examined the mean overall stress index for North Carolina superintendents. The participants completed a stress survey, and responded by selecting 1, 2, 3, or 4 on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 being "never" bothers me and 4 being "almost always" bothers me. Hence, for this study, the lowest possible overall stress index was 33 and the highest possible overall stress index was 132. Each of the 56 respondents' overall stress indexes were scored by finding the sum of their individual answers on the 4-point Likert scale. Each respondent's sum was divided by 33 to find an individual mean score. The 56 respondents' mean scores were then used to determine an overall mean of 81.69 and standard deviations of 12.68. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Stress Index of North Carolina Superintendents

Mean Overall Stress Index	81.69
Possible Range of Scores	33 to 132
Standard Deviation	12.68

Research Question 4

Research question 4 dealt with whether Common Core has impacted superintendent stress. The mean score on the Common Core question, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4, was 2.30. This was slightly below the overall mean stress index for superintendents (2.47). Many respondents (48 percent) indicated that the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards respondents “rarely” bothers them. A smaller number, 31 percent of the respondents, reported that the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards “usually” bothers them. Fourteen percent indicated that the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards “never” bothers them. Seven percent indicated that the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards “almost always” bothers them. These results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Stress of Common Core compared to traditional stressors

Item	Mean	Range
Common Core Stress	2.30	1 to 4
Overall Stress	2.47	1 to 4

Stress of Common Core; Breakdown of Responses

Item	Almost Always	Usually	Rarely	Never
The Controversy Surrounding The Common Core State Standards	7%	31%	48%	14%

Research questions 5 through 9 examined the stress level of superintendents as measured by five selected independent variables on the Administrative Stress Index. Tables 9 through 13 indicate the influence of perceived stress on the certain demographic variables such as: number of years of experience as a superintendent, size of the district, poverty of the district, superintendent education level, and gender of the superintendent.

When selecting an appropriate test of significance, one must determine whether a parametric or nonparametric test is used. A parametric test is used when the variable measured has a distribution that is normal, and the data represents an interval, and the participants in the study are independent (Ware, Ferron, & Miller, 2013). Conversely, a nonparametric test is used when samples are not distributed normally or when the distribution is from different populations

(Ware, Ferron, & Miller, 2013, p. 254). A Shapiro-Wilk test was used to determine if the distribution was normal and to determine whether parametric or nonparametric tests were appropriate. The results indicated that the variables had normal distributions and parametric tests could be used.

Research Question 5

Research question 5 explored if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch. The poverty levels for the district were divided into three categories: less than 50 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch; 50-75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch; more than 75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups in terms of the percentage of students, in the superintendent's district, that qualify for free/reduced price lunch. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .1045, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for school poverty are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Analysis of Variance of Common Core Stress Levels by District Poverty

Free/Reduced Lunch	N	Mean	SD
Less than 50%	14	2.428	1.016
50-75%	31	2.419	.764
More than 75%	8	1.75	.462

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	3.07	2	1.535	2.36	0.1045
Within Groups	32.47	50	.649		
Total	35.54	52			

Research Question 6

Research question 6 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the gender of the superintendent. The male respondents totaled 43, and 10 respondents identified as female. A test for equality of variance assumption for gender was run and the results indicated that equal variance could be assumed for a t-test. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the male and female groups. The t value was .6025, which is greater than .05. The results of the t-test for gender are shown in Table 11.

Table 11

Two Sample t-test with equal variances for Common Core Stress Levels by Gender

Group	N	Mean	St. Err.	SD	[95% Conf. Int]
Male	43	2.348	.119	.783	2.589
Female	10	2.2	.290	.918	2.857
Combined	53	2.32	.110	.803	2.542

t= 0.5241
degrees of freedom= 51
Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.6025

Research Question 7

Research question 7 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the education level of the superintendent. Doctoral respondents totaled 43, and 11 reported that they have a Master’s degree. A t-test was used to test for differences in Common Core stress levels by education level. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the two groups. The t value was 0.9157, which is greater than .05. The results of the t-test for gender are shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Two Sample t-test with equal variances for Common Core Stress Levels by Education Level

Group	N	Mean	St. Err.	SD	[95% Conf. Int]
Master's	11	2.272	.272	.904	2.880
Doctoral	43	2.30	.122	.802	2.549
Combined	54	2.296	.110	.815	2.518

t = -0.1064
 degrees of freedom = 52
 Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.9157

Research Question 8

Research question 8 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the size of the superintendent's school district. The sizes of the school districts were divided into three categories: 1,000 students or less; 1,001-7,000 students; more than 7,000 students. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .3503, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for school district size are shown in Table 13.

Table 13

Analysis of Variance of Common Core Stress Levels by District Size

District Size	N	Mean	SD
1,000 students or less	2	1.5	.707
1,001-7,000 students	29	2.310	.849
More than 7,000 students	24	2.375	.769
Total	55	2.309	.813

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	1.41	2	.706	1.07	0.3503
Within Groups	34.33	52	.660		
Total	35.74	54	.661		

Research Question 9

Research question 9 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the years of experience as a superintendent. The tenures of the superintendents were divided into three categories: 0-3 years; 4-10 years; more than 10 years. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, no significant differences were

found between the groups. The p value was .3390, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for years of experience as a superintendent are shown in Table 14.

Table 14

Analysis of Variance of Common Core Stress Levels by Years of Experience as a Superintendent

Years of Experience	N	Mean	SD
0-3 years	19	2.368	.760
4-10 years	21	2.476	.813
More than 10 years	14	2.071	.828
Total	54	2.333	.800

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	1.41	2	.706	1.11	0.3390
Within Groups	32.59	51	.638		
Total	34	53	.641		

Tests were run to explore the relationship between Common Core stress and five independent variables. The variables were: gender of the superintendent, education level of the superintendent, number of years of experience as a superintendent, district size, and district

poverty. Similar tests were performed to explore the relationship between overall stress levels and the same independent variables.

An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups for district poverty. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .6094, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for school poverty are shown in Table 15.

Table 15

Analysis of Variance of Overall Stress Levels by District Poverty

Free/Reduced Lunch	N	Mean	SD
Less than 50%	14	79.214	15.227
50-75%	31	82.290	13.008
More than 75%	8	84.75	7.869

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	170.548	2	85.274	.50	0.6094
Within Groups	8524.244	50	170.484		
Total	7.959	52			

A two sample t-test was used to test the differences among the two gender groups. A test was conducted and the results indicated that equal variances could not be assumed for a t-test.

At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .8718, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for gender are shown in Table 16.

Table 16

Two Sample t-test with unequal variances for Overall Stress Levels by Gender

Group	N	Mean	St. Err.	SD	[95% Conf. Int]
Male	43	82.139	2.114	13.862	77.873
Female	10	81.6	2.543	8.044	75.845
Combined	53	82.037	1.772	12.901	78.481

t= 0.1631
 degrees of freedom= 51
 Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.8718

The tenures of the superintendents were divided into three categories: 0-3 years; 4-10 years; more than 10 years. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, a significant difference was found between the group of “4-10 years of experience” and the group “more than 10 years of experience.” The results indicate that the group “4-10 years of experience” reported significantly more stress than the group “more than 10 years of experience. The p value for the ANOVA of total stress was .0483, which is less than .05. A Bonferroni post-hoc comparison was run to compare the mean stress by years of experience as a superintendent. The results of the ANOVA for years of experience as a superintendent are shown in Table 17.

Table 17

Analysis of Variance of Overall Stress Levels by Years of Experience as a Superintendent

Experience as a Superintendent	N	Mean	SD
0-3 years	19	82.894	12.174
4-10 years	21	85.666	13.528
More than 10 years	14	75.071	10.209

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	969.448	2	484.724	3.22	0.0483
Within Groups	7683.384	51	150.654		
Total	8652.833	53			

Post-hoc Pairwise Comparisons (Bonferroni)

Row Mean- Col Mean	0-3 years	4-10 years
4-10 years	.08026 1.000	
More than 10 years	-.240808 0.214	-.321068 0.046

Data were collected to determine whether a relationship existed between reported overall stress levels and the education level of the superintendent. Doctoral respondents totaled 43, and 11 reported that they have a Master’s degree. A t-test was used to test for differences in overall stress scores by education level. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the two groups. The t value was 0.1928, which is greater than .05. The results of the t-test for gender are shown in Table 18.

Table 18

Two Sample t-test with equal variances for Overall Stress Levels by Education Level

Group	N	Mean	St. Err.	SD	[95% Conf. Int]	
Master’s	11	77.272	4.074	13.513	68.19	86.35
Doctoral	43	82.976	1.924	12.617	79.09	86.85
Combined	54	81.814	1.753	12.884	78.29	85.33

t = -1.3194
degrees of freedom = 52
Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.1928

Data were collected to determine if a relationship existed between reported overall stress scores and the size of the superintendent’s school district. The sizes of the school districts were divided into three categories: 1,000 students or less; 1,001-7,000 students; more than 7,000 students. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .9652, which is greater than .05. The results of the ANOVA for the size of the district are shown in Table 19.

Table 19

Analysis of Variance of Overall Stress Levels by District Size

District Size	N	Mean	SD
1,000 students or less	2	82.5	2.121
1,001-7,000 students	29	82.068	13.429
More than 7,000 students	24	81.166	12.815
Total	55	81.690	12.797

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between Groups	12.05	2	6.025	0.04	0.9652
Within Groups	8831.69	52	169.840		
Total	8843.74	54	163.773		

Open Ended Responses

The survey in this study included one open ended question to allow superintendents to share supplementary information regarding the impact of any federal or state mandate on their stress. This question allowed for a rich exploration and analysis of the responses. Of the 56 respondents in this study, 22 chose to offer responses to the following open ended question:

Have any federal or state mandates or polices impacted your job stress in any way that you would like to share?

The researcher coded the 22 responses into five categories. Nine were related to funding issues, which was the highest reported category. The next highest coded category was the stress of new policy, which included seven responses. Three superintendents referred to federal intrusion into local education as stressful. Two superintendents cited the Affordable Care Act, and one superintendent cited civil rights issues as stressful. A more detailed analysis of the responses is included in the following sections.

Funding

Funding was a dominant issue among the 22 respondents in terms of the open ended question. One superintendent reported that “funding continues to be an issue and the recent legislations (i.e. Read to Achieve, School Performance Grades, etc.) cause great concern, especially when the rules change.” This response offers insight into one superintendent’s perceptions in terms of stress. Funding serves as the main focus, while issues of new policy are intertwined as well.

Other respondents also cited shrinking funds from both the local and federal government as a major source of stress. One superintendent cited “the ever shrinking funds from both state and federal [government]” as stressful. The respondent went on to add that “the lack of funds impacts everything else that I do, from having to cut positions, to eliminating programs that I know are working.”

Another response indicated that a lack of funds, coupled with high stakes accountability, makes for a high stress work environment. One superintendent noted that stress is impacted by

“unfunded mandates!” The respondent also cited the “legislature making laws that go beyond their scope, creating the impression that they are wanting to see public education fail” was stressful. The respondent went into further detail about specific policies: “Everything they have thrown at us from the 25 percent mess to the one grade assigned to each school based on 80 percent performance and only 20 percent actual growth is punishing schools with high poverty and that is not only wrong for children but very stressful for superintendents trying to make it all work!”

Race to the Top and other new initiatives were connected with funding issues for one North Carolina superintendent. The respondent reported that “the State of North Carolina has not adequately funded schools for several years while requiring schools to implement a number of new initiatives. The State Board of Education accepted a large federal grant (Race to the Top) that had a number of strings attached. In order to qualify for the money several initiatives were undertaken without much forethought or planning.”

Other superintendents simply reported that “there is never enough funding. Therefore we need to find the funding elsewhere.” Another respondent similarly remarked that “unfunded mandates, poorly designed initiatives and legislation are troubling.” Additional feedback included perspectives that viewed stress stemming from “budget cuts that are deep, causing me to either have to RIF employees or cut valuable programs” as well as [not enough] “highly qualified candidates, unfunded mandates, and too much testing.” The final response concerning funding included a comment about the charter school movement and the larger issue of the privatization of public education. The respondent cited “reduced funding, for profit charter schools, [and] vouchers” as sources of stress.

New Policies

The second most common theme among the open ended responses was the stress of new policies. Some respondents who cited funding issues, reported above, included some comments concerning new policies. Others, such as the ones reported below, placed the stress of new policies and initiatives at the forefront of their responses.

One respondent reported that the “A-F grading system” in North Carolina was stressful, and was not the only one to report this. One respondent named no less than four policies that impact their stress: “Read to Achieve, A-F, credit by demonstration mastery analysis of student work, and reauthorization of ESEA.” Another respondent felt that the list of stressors was anything but short. “The list is long, but here are a few: Affordable Health Care Act, Read to Achieve Legislation, Calendar Laws, School Performance Grades, multiple other unfunded mandates.” These responses included results of federal policy, funding concerns, and local issues. Perhaps these are fitting examples of how the superintendent’s responsibilities span multiple groups and interests.

Another superintendent claimed that “the implementation of Read to Achieve was somewhat stressful. Additionally, initial implementation of Common Core and North Carolina Essential Standards was stressful. The area of exceptional children continues to provide challenges as federal regulations change. At times I believe the folks in the Department of Public Instruction do not hear our concerns when we are implementing new mandates.”

Multiple superintendents cited Race to the Top as a stressful new policy. “Race to the Top has created unreasonable expectations and demands. Where do I start with the stress created

by DPI?” Another respondent reported “having no voice in mandated Race to the Top initiatives and other DPI initiatives has caused stress for many school districts.”

Another respondent cited “constantly changing state policies- made without thorough investigation of the impact on school districts” as relevant to their stress levels. Another superintendent reported stress from new policy, specifically from “legislation approved without the review and/or comment by qualified professionals.” This respondent reported that a problem persists in the “interpretation of policies and statutes by people with no field experience to understand how schools operate.”

Federal Intrusion

Three superintendents specifically cited federal intrusion into education as a stressful part of their job. One superintendent reported that “the federal government means well and I am sure have only the best intentions. However, they are too far removed from the everyday reality of schools to have any effective influence or impact. We would be better served by their removal from the local educational environment.”

Another respondent offered that “many of the federal and state mandates create way more work than they are worth when one looks at the return on investment. It would be great to have fewer regulations and evaluate based on bottom line performance measures. Accountability is not a problem, as long as events leading up to the evaluation are logical.”

Finally, one superintendent reported that “federal intrusion in a ‘one size fits all’ approach into local school operation is destroying public education. We are losing respect for the art and craft of teaching and instruction. The assumption that qualified administrators cannot determine teacher effectiveness or of fellow administrators is ridiculous. If that is the case, then

allow administrators to rate the performance of politicians, doctors, lawyers, etc. and let their rating determine effectiveness. In the end, students are not lifeless products on an outdated assembly line. And North Carolina should not be penalized for ineptitude in Chicago or Boston or elsewhere.”

Civil Rights and the Affordable Care Act

Two superintendents reported that the Affordable Care Act impacted their stress.

They reported that “compliance with the Affordable Care Act and retirees” is an area of stress. One superintendent reported that there were “constant complaints filed to the Office of Civil Rights.”

The open ended question responses reflected past literature in terms of causes of stress for educational leaders. Funding issues, accountability standards, and new policies top the list for this group of North Carolina superintendents, and other reports indicate similar trends. The 2007 AASA study reported that superintendents “faced the pressure of meeting increasing expectations with dwindling resources” (AASA, 2007). Bowers’ (2004) study of Pennsylvania superintendents found that the top stressors had to do with funding and state mandates. For this group of North Carolina superintendents, 22 chose to identify funding issues and new policies as areas of concerns and stress. The coded results of the open ended question are reported in Table 20.

Table 20

Open Ended Question Coded Responses

Response	N	Percentage
Funding	9	41%
New Policies	7	32%
Federal Intrusion	3	14%
Affordable Care Act	2	9%
Civil Rights Issues	1	4%
Total	22	100%

Summary

This chapter analyzed the data and reported the findings from the stress survey, which was returned by 56 North Carolina superintendents. This study explored the relationship between Common Core stress levels and variables such as the gender of the superintendent, years of experience as a superintendent, size of the school district, poverty of the school district, and education level of the superintendent. The results suggested there were no significant differences in terms of these variables. This study also gathered data on the relationship between overall stress levels and the same variables. The results suggested that superintendents with 4-10 years of experience as a superintendent feel significantly more stress than superintendents with 10 or more years of experience. The 22 open ended responses suggested that funding issues and new

policies, such as Race to the Top, A-F grading, and Reach to Achieve, are stressful for this group of North Carolina superintendents. A complete discussion of the findings is presented in the next chapter, along with recommendations and conclusions.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter five presents a summary of the entire study, which includes the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, major findings, and implications. Chapter five also presents conclusions and implications for North Carolina district level school superintendents and recommendations for the further research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of North Carolina superintendents concerning their stress levels and whether the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards had impacted their stress levels. This study investigated whether a relationship exists between personal and demographic variables and stress levels. The stress of educational leaders has summoned the attention of scholars and researchers in an effort to better understand the challenges those stressors pose to leadership performance and physical health. Because the superintendent is accountable to the public in a visible and significant way, and because new policies impact the leaders that carry out those policies, research into the major stressors of superintendents was warranted.

This study measured how much stress superintendents in North Carolina were feeling, which things caused them the most stress, and whether there were significant differences among groups with regard to Common Core stress, and to overall stress scores. The variables included: gender of the superintendent, years of experience as a superintendent, education level of the superintendent, poverty of the district, and size of the district. The major research questions for this study were:

- 1) How stressful is the job of superintendent in North Carolina?
- 2) What are the greatest job stressors of current North Carolina superintendents?
- 3) What is the overall stress index of North Carolina superintendents on the ASI?
- 4) Has Common Core impacted superintendent stress?
- 5) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress levels and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch?
- 6) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the gender of the superintendent?
- 7) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the education level of the superintendent?
- 8) Is there a relationship between Common Core stress levels of superintendents in North Carolina and the size of the district?
- 9) Is there a relationship between reported Common Core stress level and years of experience as a superintendent?

Findings Summary

The demographic data collected for the study suggested several things. First, the highest tallying items consistently fell in the middle range of the answer choices and reflected a typical distribution when compared to the entire North Carolina population of district level school superintendents. For example, almost 40 percent of the respondents have between 4-10 years of experience as a superintendent. In terms of district size, more than 50 percent of the respondents work in a district with 1,001-7,000 students. Around 43 percent of the respondents work in a district of over 7,000 students, and 3 percent work in a district with less than 1,000 students. Almost 60 percent of the respondents work in a district where between 50-75 percent of students

qualify for free/reduced price lunch. Comparatively, 26 percent of respondents reported that less than 50 percent of their students qualify for free/reduced price lunch, and 15 percent work in districts where more than 75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch.

The demographic data also reasonably reflected the variable classifications of North Carolina superintendents. Almost 80 percent of the respondents in this study had a Doctoral degree (compared to 73 percent across the state), and more than 80 percent of the respondents were male (78 percent across the state). Nineteen percent of the respondents were female (22 percent across the state). In short, the sample closely reflected the population of North Carolina district level school superintendents.

Nine research questions shaped the findings regarding Common Core stress and overall stress levels among district level school superintendents in North Carolina.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 examined whether the job of school superintendent in North Carolina is stressful. The data gathered via the Administrative Stress Index indicate that North Carolina superintendents are experiencing some job related stress. The mean stress level per question for the respondents in this study, on a scale of 1-4, was 2.476. The mean overall score for the respondents, on a scale from 33-132, was 81.696. The lowest reported stress score was 49, and the highest reported stress score was 108.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 examined the major perceived job stressors of North Carolina superintendents as measured by the Administrative Stress Index. North Carolina superintendents' top five identified sources of stress had mean scores ranging from 2.93 to 3.16.

The top stressor items were: (1) Attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests; (2) Imposing excessively high expectations on myself; (3) Preparing and allocating budget resources; (4) A lack of time to thoroughly respond to all forms of electronic communication; (5) Issues related to school safety and security.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 examined the mean overall stress index for North Carolina superintendents. The participants completed a stress survey, and responded by selecting 1, 2, 3, or 4 on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 being "never" bothers me and 4 being "almost always" bothers me. For the purposes of this study, the lowest possible overall stress index was 33 and the highest possible overall stress index was 132. Each of the 56 respondents' overall stress indexes were scored by finding the sum of their individual answers on the 4-point Likert scale. Each respondent's sum was divided by 33 to find an individual mean score. The 56 respondents' mean scores were then used to determine an overall mean of 81.69 and standard deviations of 12.68.

Research Question 4

Research question 4 dealt with whether the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards has impacted superintendent stress. The mean score on the Common Core question, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4, was 2.30. This was slightly below the overall mean stress index for superintendents (2.47). More specifically, 48 percent of respondents indicated that the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) "rarely" bothers them. Also, 31 percent of the respondents reported that the controversy surrounding the CCSS "usually" bothers them. Fourteen percent indicated that the controversy

surrounding the CCSS “never” bothers them. Seven percent indicated that the controversy surrounding the CCSS “almost always” bothers them.

Research Question 5

Research question 5 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch. The poverty levels for the district were divided into three categories: less than 50 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch; 50-75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch; more than 75 percent of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups in terms of the percentage of students, in the superintendent’s district, that qualify for free/reduced price lunch. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .1045, which is greater than .05. The ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between superintendents who worked in high, medium, or low poverty districts, in terms of their reported stress concerning Common Core.

Research Question 6

Research question 6 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the gender of the superintendent. The male respondents totaled 43, and 10 identified as female. A test for equality of variance assumption for gender was run and the results indicated that equal variance could be assumed for a t-test. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the male and female groups. The t value was .6025, which is greater than .05. The t-test revealed that there were no significant differences between male and female superintendents, in terms of their reported stress concerning Common Core.

Research Question 7

Research question 7 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the education level of the superintendent. A total of 43 respondents reported that they have a Doctoral degree, and 11 reported that they have a Master's degree. A t-test was used to test for differences in Common Core stress levels by education level. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the two groups. The t value was 0.9157, which is greater than .05. The t-test revealed that there were no significant differences between superintendents who have a Master's degree and those who have a Doctoral degree, in terms of their reported stress concerning Common Core.

Research Question 8

Research question 8 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the size of the superintendent's school district. The sizes of the school districts were divided into three categories: 1,000 students or less; 1,001-7,000 students; more than 7,000 students. An ANOVA was used to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .3503, which is greater than .05. The ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between superintendents who worked in large, medium, or small district, in terms of their reported stress concerning Common Core.

Research Question 9

Research question 9 asked if a relationship existed between reported Common Core stress levels and the years of experience as a superintendent. The tenures of the superintendents were divided into three categories: 0-3 years; 4-10 years; more than 10 years. An ANOVA was used

to test the differences among the three groups. At the .05 level, no significant differences were found between the groups. The p value was .3390, which is greater than .05. The ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between superintendents who had 0-3 years of experience, 4-10 years of experience, and more than 10 years of experience, in terms of their reported stress concerning Common Core.

However, a significant difference was found in the overall stress score concerning years of experience as a superintendent. For the overall stress score, the ANOVA revealed that the group “4-10 years” of experience has significantly more stress than the group “more than 10 years” of experience as a superintendent.

Discussion

Of the five research hypotheses in this study, three were confirmed, and two were not confirmed. The three hypotheses that were confirmed were: Superintendents will report their jobs are stressful; the greatest stress levels will be concerned with resources to support a quality educational program; and recent legislative and policy initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top and Common Core State Standards will add to the stress level superintendents’ report. The data supports these three hypotheses in that stress levels appear moderate for superintendents, the top reported stressor items included standardized testing and funding issues, and new information concerning Common Core has added to the body of literature concerning perceived stress levels.

These data are consistent with past literature (AASA, 2007; Sogunro, 2012) in that superintendents reported that their primary sources of stress stem from unfunded mandates, new policies, and that stress is a relevant aspect of their leadership. The high stakes pressures from

standardized testing continues to play a huge role in terms of stress, which indicated that No Child Left Behind era accountability pressures are not a thing from the past. Race to the Top emerged in the open ended responses as part of the ongoing struggle of superintendents to cope with several new policies and mandates. This was to be expected.

The Common Core question added new information to the superintendents' stress level report, in that for this group, Common Core was not as stressful as standardized testing pressures and funding constraints. The data indicate that Common Core, for these participants, was slightly below average in terms of ranking the stressors. The fact that Common Core was not statistically significant can be attributed to a number of factors.

The literature suggested that the top reported stressors from the superintendents would be increased accountability pressures and new policies. The controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards in North Carolina could be a secondary issue for many superintendents, after more immediate worries such as student performance on standardized tests and obtaining adequate funding to meet the needs of the district. Perhaps if these traditional job stressors and fundamental concerns were addressed more adequately in their view, Common Core would rank higher on their list of stressors.

Another possibility is that Common Core has been pushed temporarily to the back burner in light of the ongoing work of the Academic Standards Review Commission (ASRC). The ASRC has until December 2015 to recommend future action on Common Core in North Carolina. Common Core will remain in place until the ASRC releases their plan for Common Core in North Carolina, and it is possible that some superintendents feel that the issue is simply out of their control. More research on this topic would be helpful in gaining more insight into the Common Core controversy.

Another possible explanation as to why more superintendents did not report Common Core as more stressful is that, even though North Carolina was one of the first states to adopt and implement the standards, perhaps the lasting impacts of the standards have not yet been fully felt. There remains a bit of uncertainty about Common Core, even among educators. Not all states in the U.S. have even adopted the standards. Some teachers, principals, and superintendents are urging lawmakers to keep Common Core in North Carolina. During a press conference in 2014, New Hanover County Superintendent Tim Markley, Cumberland County Superintendent Frank Till, Johnston County Superintendent Ed Croom, and Wake County Superintendent Jim Merrill voiced support for Common Core. Critics of Common Core offered that the standards are not age appropriate and also criticized the implementation of the new standards and the related tests. The superintendents responded by saying they could “work with lawmakers and with officials at the state Department of Public Instruction to address issues related to the Common Core implementation and standardized tests” (Brown, 2014).

Two hypotheses were not confirmed. First, the researcher hypothesized that student body composition (i.e. free/reduced price lunch) would be positively correlated to stress. The data returned no significant results in terms of Common Core stress or overall stress when compared to the percentage of students who qualified for free/reduced price lunch. There was a very slight positive correlation between district poverty and overall stress, but not enough to be significant. Although the data in this study were not significant, it is plausible that a higher return rate might have yielded statistically significant data. High poverty districts were slightly under-represented (15% in this study versus 20% state-wide), and low poverty districts were slightly over-represented (26% in this study versus 17% state-wide). Had all 115 superintendents

returned the survey, the data may have shown that district poverty was positively correlated with overall stress.

The other hypothesis that was not confirmed was: there will be no significant differences that North Carolina superintendents report by gender, size of the district, tenure, or education level. The data indicated that a significant relationship exists between overall stress and tenure of the superintendent. Superintendents with 4-10 years of experience reported significantly higher levels of stress than superintendents with more than 10 years of experience as a superintendent. This finding was consistent with the work of Buzelli-White (1988). Buzelli-White conducted a study of Colorado administrators using the Administrative Stress Index. She found that, according to the 30 administrators that participated in the study, administrators were feeling moderately stressed, and that the amount of experience indicated higher stress levels. Less experienced administrators had higher levels of stress.

Boyland (2011) offered similar results, as she reported in her study of educational leaders in Indiana that “the principals who had been on the job the longest, 25 years or more, reported the lowest levels of job stress of any demographic group.” The data in this study are consistent with her findings in terms of stress levels and tenure.

There are multiple competing hypotheses for why superintendents with more than ten years of experience tend to report less stress. One explanation is that ten years of experience yield wisdom and a more balanced point of view. Perhaps superintendents that have been through difficult times before and have made it out with relative stability have learned to cope more effectively with stress over time. Another explanation could be that superintendents that find the job extremely stressful quit before they gain ten years of experience or more. This might account for superintendents with more experience reporting less stress. Wheeler’s (2012) study

of superintendent turnover in North Carolina found that board relations were a high source of turnover. His study also revealed that the relationship between the superintendent and the school board is statistically significant in superintendent turnover. Funding issues were also challenges (Wheeler, 2012). Perhaps a poor relationship with the school board entices some superintendents to leave the job early, which would impact the reported effect of tenure on job stress. If other superintendents have positive relationships with the board, it is likely they would continue in the superintendency, gaining more experience, and reporting less stress.

Several scholars have noted the rising pervasiveness of the stressful atmosphere in public school leadership (Brock & Grady, 2002; Gmelch, 1982; Gmelch & Chan, 1994; Lane, 2000; Sanchez, 1997). Results from numerous stress studies show that the topic is likely not going away soon. Stress stems from various aspects of the superintendency, and the open ended responses given by 22 superintendents in this study likely echo some of the concerns of other school leaders. The data indicated that standardized testing, funding issues, multiple new policies, and federal intrusion into public education are on the minds of at least some district level school superintendents in North Carolina. Given the survey responses in this study and the review of the related literature, it leads one to conclude that the open ended response here are indicative of a larger trend of stress, rather than an isolated set of responses.

It seems that stress will remain relevant as long as public schools continue to face high pressure accountability measures with limited budgets. Unfunded mandates is not a new source of stress for educational leaders, and the job of superintendent is not getting any easier. Given the results of this study, it seems as though superintendents with 10 or more years of experience may have something to offer less experienced superintendents in terms of stress. Also, the top three stressor items among superintendents in this study were ones that represent mainstream

issues in American society: (1) Attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests; (2) Imposing excessively high expectations on myself; (3) Preparing and allocating budget resources. The first and third items are debated by scholars, teachers, parents, and politicians at the local and federal level. The second is more of a personal stressor, spanning beyond educators, which is an interesting finding among this group of superintendents.

In order to provide support for superintendents in terms of stress, the following considerations might be entertained:

1. Superintendents with less than 10 years of experience as a superintendent might consider finding a mentor to share experiences and to attain some perspective as a possible stress reducer.
2. Appropriate time should be allocated for retreat, rest, and reflection.
3. Continuing the debate over the role of standardized testing. High stakes tests impact the stress of students, parents, teachers, and educational leaders.
4. To the extent that they can control their professional and personal agendas, superintendents should create reasonable goals for themselves. This may not be possible with external mandates or board related goals.
5. Continue to conduct and closely monitor studies about stress and stress coping strategies.

The stress atmosphere for North Carolina superintendents appears to be a relevant and ongoing issue. Superintendents need to be mindful of the pressures of educational leadership that can lead to poorer job performance and poorer physical health. By developing a web of veteran colleagues, they might learn to lower their stress levels, leading to a more prosperous tenure.

Recommendations for Further Study

Data analysis for this research has led to the following recommendations for future study:

1. Similar studies using the Administrative Stress Index could be conducted with school superintendents in other states.
2. Future studies could examine race, which could be a significant variable in determining the reported stress levels among superintendents.
3. Future studies could specifically focus on superintendents with 10 years of experience or more. This could shed light on how they manage their stress levels.
4. Research could be conducted to add to the report that the newest policy changes, accountability pressures, and unfunded mandates are impacting the stress levels of school superintendents.
5. Conduct interviews with superintendents in North Carolina to investigate his or her perceptions on the Common Core State Standards.
6. Conduct interviews with superintendents with 4-10 years of experience to investigate his or her perceived level of stress, the major sources of that stress, and how they choose to cope with that stress.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between reported stress levels and certain variables among North Carolina district level school superintendents. More specifically, this study explored the impact of the controversy of the Common Core State Standards on superintendent stress levels, and whether certain variables (years as a superintendent, district size, district poverty level, gender, education level of the superintendent) played a role in Common Core

stress and overall stress. In analyzing the scores of the participants, some superintendents were experiencing different levels of stress than others.

It seems, generally speaking, that North Carolina superintendents are experiencing moderate stress from their job, and moderate stress stemming from the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards. Common Core was not one of the top stressor items for most of the superintendents in this study. While no significant differences were found in this study concerning Common Core, it should not be flatly asserted that Common Core is not stressful for any superintendents. Perhaps a broader study of superintendents across state lines would show different results in terms of Common Core stress levels.

Another meaningful takeaway from this study is that the stressors with the three highest mean scores were concerned with resources to support a quality educational program. Standardized testing pressures and allocating budget resources flow into the other highest stressor: superintendents' imposing excessively high expectations on themselves. Queen and Queen (2004) noted that as superintendents continue to meet the challenges of the position, they put unrealistic demands on themselves to have all the right answers thus adding to their already high level of stress and anxiety. The findings in this study are consistent with the stress literature in that increased accountability standards continue to be the cornerstones of stress in educational leadership.

The statistically significant finding in this study, that superintendents with 4-10 years of experience reported more stress than superintendents with more than 10 years of experience, adds to the stress literature. First, we now have additional evidence that more years of experience may impact perceived stress levels in a positive way. Second, we can explore, based

on the data, new ways to connect veteran and non-veteran superintendents to help manage stress levels.

The data also suggest that superintendents must be influential in the conversation about standardized testing and accountability measures. The quantitative data, as well as the open ended responses, indicate that superintendents are stressed about meeting student performance standards. The literature, and this study, suggests this issue will persist. Being unaware of the negative impacts of excessive stress could lead a superintendent to the road of burnout, physical illness, and a substandard job performance. Professional development on the topic of stress and stress management is necessary to help superintendents achieve longevity in the position, and a balanced viewpoint from which to lead. Where relevant, superintendents should pursue professional development on stress reduction through their professional associations, the university, or private health services.

The stress levels of superintendents will likely yield more interest from students and scholars, as the perceived successes and failures of school districts often stop at the superintendent. Superintendents tend to be motivated, hard-working, and ambitious individuals. Keeping stress levels under control may continue to be a relevant and vital aspect to maintaining a competent leadership (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003; Queen & Queen, 2005; Robbins & Alvy, 2009).

The researcher is hopeful that others will find this data useful for continuing to consciously create an educational experience that all North Carolinians can benefit from. It is important that communities of learning recognize the taxing and difficult tasks undertaken by the superintendent, and the toll those tasks can take on their physical health and stress levels. In order to maintain a competent grasp on this issue, continued research and awareness is necessary.

The data obtained from this study, and from future ones like it, may assist in keeping superintendents and other educational leaders healthy and performing in their jobs at a high level.

Appendix A

A Comparison of the Challenge of the Common Core State Standards to Traditional Job Stressors of North Carolina Superintendents

Survey Instrument: Administrative Stress Index (Gmelch & Swent, 1977)

1. The controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

2. A lack of time to thoroughly respond to all forms of electronic communication.

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

3. Supervising and coordinating the tasks of many people

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

4. Feeling staff members don't understand my goals and expectations

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

5. Knowing that I can't get information needed to carry out my job properly i.e. Red Tape

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

6. Thinking that I will not be able to satisfy the conflicting demands of school board members

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

7. Being able to balance professional and personal responsibilities

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

8. Having my work interrupted frequently by staff members who want to talk

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

9. Imposing excessively high expectations on myself

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

10. Feeling pressure for better job performance above what I think is reasonable

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

11. Working to resolve conflicts between school board members and board of supervisors

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

12. Trying to resolve differences with the school board

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

13. Speaking in front of groups

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

14. Not knowing what the school board thinks of me, or how they evaluate my performance.

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

15. Having to make decisions that affect the lives of individual people that I know (colleague, staff, friends, students, etc.)

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

16. Issues related to school safety and security

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

17. Feeling that I have too much responsibility delegated to me by the school board

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

18. Trying to resolve parent/school conflict

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

19. Preparing and allocating budget resources

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

20. Feeling that I have too little authority to carry out responsibilities assigned to me

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

21. Handling student discipline problems

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

22. Attempting to meet student performance standards as measured by standardized tests

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

23. Evaluating staff performance

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

24. Feeling that I have too heavy workload, one that I could not possibly finish during the normal work day

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Almost Never

25. Complying with federal, state, district and organizational rules and policies

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

26. Feeling that the progress on my job is not what it should or could be

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

27. Responding to grievances and complaints

Almost Always

Usually

Rarely

Never

28. Removing professional staff members who do not meet evaluative expectations

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

29. Feeling that meetings take up too much time

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

30. Trying to complete reports and other paperwork on time

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

31. Trying to resolve differences between/among staff members

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

32. Trying to influence the school board's decisions and actions that affect me

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

33. Trying to gain public approval and financial support for school programs

- Almost Always
- Usually
- Rarely
- Never

Additional Survey Question

34. Have any federal or state mandates or polices impacted your job stress in any way that you would like to share?

Demographic Information

What percentage of students qualify for free/reduced price lunch in your district?

How many years have you been a superintendent?

- 0-3 years
- 4-10 years
- 10+ years

Gender

Male

Female

Please indicate your highest education level

Master's Degree

Doctoral Degree

Please indicate the size of your district

1,000 students or less

1,001-7,000 students

More than 7,000 students

Appendix B
Email Recruitment and Consent Letter

Dear _____,

As a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an aspiring public school leader, I am inviting you to participate in an important study on North Carolina Superintendent Stress. I am conducting this study for my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Fenwick English, Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All public school superintendents in North Carolina are being invited to participate in this **anonymous** survey.

As a fellow educator, I understand that your time is extremely valuable. I only ask for you to spend **approximately 15 minutes** to complete an online survey about your experiences as a superintendent with stress. The results will be used to analyze the stress levels of superintendents as well as the impact of the Common Core State Standards on stress levels.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and the information you provide will be completely anonymous. The results will be reported only in aggregate form; survey responses are anonymous, so your name could never be associated with your responses. You can choose not to respond to questions you do not wish to answer and you can stop at any time.

I hope to include the responses from as many of the NC public school superintendents as possible and your input is important. I hope you are willing to spend a few minutes to complete the online survey.

If you have any questions about the research project or the survey itself, please feel free to contact me at morrison544@gmail.com or (607)425-9112. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board at (919) 966-3113 or at IRB subjects@unc.edu and refer to IRB Study #_____.

Please use the link below to begin the survey. Responding to the survey will be considered your consent to participate.

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