

2014

# Hero to zero: Stress perceptions of the public school administrator and his spouse

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HERO TO ZERO: STRESS PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL  
ADMINISTRATOR AND HIS SPOUSE

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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May 2014

## ABSTRACT

Fields (2005) reported stress on school administrators due to “uncontrollable demands on their time, the negative impact of the amount of time that the job required on their personal lives, their prospective staffs, and the amount of conflict encountered.”

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the impact of the lived experience of male public school administrators and their wives, specifically involving the experience of stress. Studies of crossover stress in relation to public school administration and their spouses have not been as plentiful as other service-oriented, high stress work domains, such as police officers, fire fighters, correctional workers, public accountants, etc.

This qualitative study involved four semi-structured interviews with married couples in which the husband’s occupation is that of a public school administrator. Each of the couples were married at least two years prior to the husband’s entry into an administrative role. An autoethnographical account was also provided to normalize the experience and provide context for the research.

All of the administrators interviewed indicated that the job was stressful, and that the stress had increased over the course of their career as the scope of their position grew. Although they typically tried not to involve their wives in the stresses of the job, stress and worry was expressed by each of the wives. Three major interconnected themes emerged from the data: (1) Family Sacrifice, (2) Public Perception, and (3) Social Isolation.

This is an important topic given a 2012 study titled *Principal Concerns: Iowa May Face Statewide Demand* by Michael DeArmond and Monica Oujidani, which suggested that within five years, just under half of principals in Iowa will be eligible for retirement. With the potential for such turnover in school leadership, prospective administrators must recognize the various life forces facing themselves, their spouses, and their families with the decision to make the career and life-altering move to enter the field.

Implications are identified for educational leadership programs. According to Whitaker (1996) “educational administration programs need to fully prepare principals for the realities of the job” (p. 69). Further, a role is identified for professional organizations, such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), in providing support for the spouses of public school administrators.

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May 2014

DEDICATION

To my wife, Jill:

So let's make our steps clear that the other may see

And I'll wait for you

If I should fall behind

Wait for me

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank each of the following. I am indebted to each of you for my continued growth and learning.

Thank you to my dissertation committee, for encouraging my best.

Thank you to my parents, for giving me your best.

Thank you to my children, Ellie and Easton, for inspiring me to be my best.

And thank you to my wife, Jill, you're simply the best.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### A Personal Narrative

“Steve, you have that 1,000 mile stare. Listen, in your position, you’re going to piss off 25% of the population each year. You do the math. Believe it or not, you’ll begin to grow some thicker skin on your back side over time.” Those were the words spoken to me by my mentor and principal during my first year as a school administrator.

I had accepted my first administrative position as Assistant Principal at Clemons Middle School, in Freehold. Freehold was a typical mid-sized Midwest town with a strong industrial base, a blue-collar work ethic, and a prideful sense of school and community. Clemons Junior High School, later to be Clemons Middle School, was a building of approximately 600 students. Although I had taught in a larger district, Clemons was very similar in size to the school where I had taught.

A study by Swent and Gmelch, as cited by Laing (2000), acknowledged that “today’s educational leader is challenged by more conflict and pressure than ever before in the twentieth century” (p. 7). Laing further cites Brimm (1983) in listing the 10 most stressful parts of the jobs as:

1. complying with state, federal, and organizational rules and policies
  2. excessive time devoted to meetings
  3. trying to complete reports/paper work on time
  4. trying to gain public approval and/or financial support
  5. resolving parent-school conflicts
  6. teacher/staff evaluations
  7. making decisions that affect lives of individuals the principal knew
  8. too heavy of a work load impossible to finish in a regular work day
  9. imposing excessively high standards on self
  10. frequent interruptions
- (p. 8)

Laing's study (2000) further cites a myriad of reasons why teachers and counselors, administratively certified, find the position undesirable, and ultimately choose not to pursue it. In 2003, Carr called school leadership "the toughest job in America" (p. 14). In the same article, Carr further stated, "many researchers believe the real issue isn't that educators and board members aren't well prepared to fulfill their leadership roles, but that the demands of the profession are increasing at exponential rates" (p. 18).

None of this strikes me as overly surprising, nor do I think it would have surprised me prior to my entry into administration. Although I may not have known the extent of conflict school administrators dealt with on a daily basis, I certainly knew there were "issues" that were dealt with out of the public eye, and that these individuals were very busy. I don't think it would have changed my pursuit of such a position anyway. I knew from about the time I was in the seventh or eighth grade that I wanted to be an educator. I think it was due to the fact that I looked up to many of my educators growing up.

I also envisioned myself as a school administrator. Whether it was Little League, or high school student government, I had always been told that I was a "leader." I'm not sure why. Was it because I exhibited leadership qualities, which led others to perceive me as a leader? Or did others perceive me as a leader, and therefore I exhibited leadership qualities to meet their expectations? Or perhaps it was as simple as being the oldest child in our family. Regardless, an eventual move into administration seemed like a natural step, whether due to leadership qualities, my goal-oriented nature, a desire to expand my scope of influence in helping others, or something else – and I felt as though I was walking into it with my eyes wide open.

I had often heard educators, particularly administrators, makes statements such as “that one is going in my book someday,” a reference to a unique situation that had occurred that the general public might find amusing, or even unbelievable, if it were ever published into a novel of happenings throughout their career. It was more of a figure of speech than anything, but I quickly understood its meaning during my two years as assistant principal at Clemons Middle School. During those two years, I dealt primarily with student discipline, student attendance, at-risk populations of students, and special education issues.

Welch, Medeiros, and Tate (1982), as cited in Whitaker (1996), examined causes of principal burnout and found, (1) “isolation inherent in the role served to discourage ties with teachers and students;” (2) “amount of time and effort expended;” and (3) “frustrations with the “organizational structure” (p. 61). Aspects of these causes became very apparent during my first two years as an administrator. The degree of conflict management necessary exceeded my expectations and a feeling of loneliness accompanied each mounting situation due to the confidential and confrontational nature of the issues being dealt with.

Still, I thought I could save the world, or at least make something of a difference for every student and parent I dealt with. It was the same approach I had taken as a classroom teacher, but I was quickly learning there was one major difference. In my classroom, I had control of the environment. I could shape the culture of the environment with 25 students per class period. And while 5-10% of my students may have created unique challenges, it was still as a relatively small number. As an administrator, I was a

part of a much larger, more difficult to control, culture, and our most difficult 5-10% of students and parents (and occasionally staff members) made up a much larger constituency.

Perhaps most striking to me during my first years as an administrator was the lack of parental support, or misplaced priorities, when dealing with the most serious discipline issues. In the world that I grew up in, the school (teacher, principal, etc.) was right. They set expectations, and likewise, my parents demanded that those expectations be respected and followed. As an administrator, however, I quickly learned that some parents attributed disruptive classrooms to unclear teacher expectations, or the shortcomings of a teacher's classroom management. "What about the other kid!?" was a surprising, and all too familiar parental response.

David Anderegg, professor of psychology at Bennington College, finds that "anxious parents are hyperattentive to their kids, reactive to every blip of their child's day, eager to solve every problem for their child – and believe that's good parenting" (Marano, 2004). This was perhaps one of the toughest adjustments to administration, and one that I had not fully anticipated.

After two years as Assistant Principal, I interviewed and was hired as Principal at Clemons Junior High School. As my role grew, naturally the scope of responsibilities did too, as well as the accompanying stress. While my role still involved dealings with the aforementioned issues, other concerns as identified by Whitaker (1996) in studies of principal burnout became a part of my everyday life, such as "teacher problems, student problems, and parent concerns....more pressure for accountability from parents and



central office, trying to be instructional leaders, implement change, and complete management tasks simultaneously..... and expectations to be instructional leaders and managers on the one hand, and trying to initiate and implement significant changes on the other” (p. 63).

Moreover, the loneliness increased with this move “up the ladder,” the circle of potential mentors grew smaller, and the critical eye of public perception more focused. Lam (1984), as cited by Fenzel, Litchka, and Procaccini (2009), “provided a typology of sources of stress in such positions that included stressors emanating from the interactions and tasks associated with the administrative role, the external or community demands and conflicts involved with the position, the responsibility of resolving interpersonal conflicts within the organization, as well as one’s own set of skills and dispositions related to the leadership role” (p. 8).

I entered the principalship at a time that saw the unprecedented influence of state and federal agencies in local public school governance, most notably the passage and far-reaching implications of No Child Left Behind. These mandates from beyond the district, as well as changes from within, left staff, who were accustomed to local control and site-based decision making, with a sense of frustration and helplessness. These issues, both external and internal to the district, added to the daily and routine stresses of this very public position, including but not limited to student discipline, concerned parents, staff relations, curriculum decisions, student achievement, scheduling, and community relations.

Researchers have described the principal's job as "demanding, unrelenting, and overwhelming" (Combs, Edmonson, & Jackson, 2009). Finally, Whitaker (1996) reported principal comments such as "it has affected my sleep," "we drink more," "we beat ourselves up emotionally," "I have concerns on how this job affects home life" and concerns such as "we keep adding more responsibilities, but are asked to reduce funding and staff" and "you can't be everything to everybody."

I have found this last quote to ring quite true in my experience- "you can't be everything to everybody." The job as a school administrator is a 24/7 endeavor, beyond the long work hours, to public identification of the person with the position. Further, it is my contention that this identification is extended to the administrator's family, leaving the spouse of male administrators to contend with a "first lady" type of phenomenon, where her identification and actions are linked to his/her spouse's position.

In addition to the stress the spouse may experience via his/her public recognition, the spouse is also left to deal with the "behind the scenes" coping mechanisms of his/her administrator spouse. In the two years immediately following the birth of our first child, I found it increasingly difficult to "be everything to everybody." I was surprised by my naivety in regard to this aspect of the job. My wife and I had been friends since junior high school, were high school sweethearts, and educators who entered into my pursuit of school administration together, delaying our desire for children until such a desired position had been secured. In short, we did not enter into our situation naively.

During the first two years of my daughter's life, I did my best to be home at a reasonable time, for meals, play, bath, and bedtime stories. I was a good father and

husband until everyone went to bed. At that time, I'd crack a beer, turn on *Sportscenter* or Springsteen, and sit up half the night. This pattern of behavior worried my wife, who was concerned for my long-term health and emotional wellbeing. Her worries irritated me, since I saw my late-night endeavors as "my time" after a full day of giving to the needs of everyone else. The next day, the cycle would continue, only more tired, and one step closer to physical and emotional exhaustion.

Until I recognized the flaw in my coping strategies, my wife was left to view my deterioration, offering support and assistance as best she could. The spouse can often be the only "sounding board" for the unique and complicated situations of conflict encountered by a school administrator. The spouse can also be left feeling shut out and helpless. Although I would sometimes confide in my wife and best friend, I often would not offload my worries as I didn't want to burden her, didn't want to relive the events of the day, or couldn't share due to confidentiality issues.

Mina Westman (2001) identifies this phenomenon as "crossover." Westman identifies crossover within current models of work-family interaction as an "inter-individual dyadic process where stress and strain experienced by an individual generate similar reactions in another individual (p. 718). Westman further integrates crossover into a job-stress model, integrating role theory, in which "work and family settings are involved in elaborate interchanges over time with their social environments....allow[ing] us to view family members as intimately connected to others in the workplace and vice versa" (p. 719).

By my eighth year as an administrator in Freehold, and my sixth as Principal at Clemons Middle School, I had completed my Certificate of Advanced Studies (superintendent certification) at a state university and began to take note of superintendent openings. While I knew that another professional advancement would not ease the stress, I was beginning to feel that a new professional challenge was in order. We had accomplished much in my tenure at Clemons for which I was proud, but many of the stressors had become more pronounced. My final 18 months at Clemons would provide heightened insight into the stress of the position and allow for the necessary reflection to move on.

#### Autoethnography – My Final 18 Months At Clemons Middle School

At the same time I began to contemplate a career move, I began what I would later view as a string of significant events every couple months, or events that could certainly someday “go in my book” either for their uniqueness, the stress involved in handling them, or both. Perhaps events similar in stature had occurred every couple months throughout my tenure, without the degree of notice or reflection that was now being given due to my career contemplations. For whatever reason, these issues were more pronounced to me at the time, each one providing insight into what Whitaker (1996) asked principals as “the consequences of emotional exhaustion,” and in which most principals interviewed described as “consequences related to health and personal relationships” (p. 64).

#### ***A day in the life.....***

*I plop into my chair. I can feel my feet pounding, my lower back is burning, and I have a splitting headache. Overall though, it was a pretty good day. It's a little after 5:00 and I can see students starting to mill around outside my office window waiting for*

*rides after their various activities. Like most days, it's time to go over my "to do" list for the day, reflect on the successes and challenges of the day, and organize myself to do it all over again tomorrow.*

*I actually made it into a couple of classrooms today, talked to several teachers during various passing times, and enjoyed three uneventful lunch sections talking and joking with students. All of that AND I accomplished most of my list. – meeting schedules, weekly bulletin, team meetings, etc. Some days this list goes untouched.*

#### April – Student Issue

It never ceases to amaze me how an otherwise seemingly ordinary day in the life a school administrator can change in the blink of eye. With the next call, or the next person through the door, your priorities for the entire day, week, or month can suddenly shift directions. On this day, one of our guidance counselors called me and asked me to come to his office, stating that a situation had occurred in a class and that it would require my immediate attention. As it turned out, students were beginning to talk about an incident in a language arts class in which an eighth grade male, Billy Munson, had exposed his penis for a female classmate to touch. Upon being notified of the situation, the counselor, our assistant principal, and I began investigating the incident through various student interviews, ultimately getting a confession from Billy.

Billy had been involved in a myriad of behavioral issues throughout the course of the school year, from bullying to repeated disruptions in class. Although I did not agree, Billy's ongoing behavior issues were being discussed as a "disability."

I felt that such a label implied that something was wrong with him, something out of his control. I felt as though Billy was beginning to view his own behavior in the same way – as a "disability," or something beyond his control. Billy seemed to be buying into the notion that he was not in any way responsible for his own actions and this helplessness

seemed to be reinforced at home. Billy's parents avoided accountability for Billy, and often enabled his undesirable behaviors.

Given Billy's repeated infractions that spring, culminating in his exposing himself during class, Billy was suspended for a period of up to 10 days until a long-term decision and placement could be made for the remainder of the school year (approximately 6-7 weeks). The decision enraged Billy's father, who confronted me repeatedly over the course of the next week in regard to my unfair treatment of his son. During one such meeting in my office, I vividly remember preparing myself for the possibility of Billy's father becoming physically aggressive. It was the third time in my eight years at Clemons that I could remember having such thoughts during a meeting with an irate parent. Although he did not become physically aggressive, he paced my office, yelling, seemingly more and more agitated at my calm and matter-of-fact demeanor.

This situation occurred to me as an "out of body" type of experience, even as it was occurring. It was as though my own consciousness was hovering over the two of us, viewing the situation from above. It was from this vantage point that I drew cues for my own behavior and what I thought would be most appropriate. A fire was burning inside of me, but by detaching myself from the situation and viewing it from "above" like a movie, I took my cues in playing the role of the authority figure. Acting the part was not something that I had learned in my administrative preparation program. I can remember thinking of some of my strongest, most sure and steady administrative role models, and trying to emulate them in real time.

Billy's father acknowledged that the incident had occurred, and although he didn't try to justify the act, he wanted what he perceived to be fairness. "What about the girl!?" he said. "How is it that she doesn't get the same punishment?!" He made this assumption based on the fact that the girl was back in classes according to Billy's friends. I explained, as I had a hundred times before with other parents, that I could not discuss the consequences of another student with him anymore than I could discuss Billy's situation with another parent. I also tried to explain that Billy's punishment was not solely based on this one incident, but rather a cumulative of his recent actions. As I had done so many times before, I used the analogy of a first offense speeding ticket at 10 mph over the speed limit versus the consequences of a seventh violation at higher speeds.

Still, Billy's father insisted that the girl had caused the incident by taking "it" out of Billy's pants. In disbelief, and keeping my cool as best possible, I said something like, "I don't know about you, but mine only makes an appearance when I want it to." I was incredulous and although I knew that sarcasm was "out of character" for the role I was playing at that moment, I could feel myself reaching a boiling point inside. For a split second I wished that we were just two guys "taking it outside" to settle our differences, yet I knew that my chosen profession prevented me from ever being one of those guys again. I ended the conversation by stating, "Mr. Munson, Billy had his penis out in English class. You can't do that here."

I do not believe that Billy's difficulties at school were the result of any "disability," but rather a sort of what Martin Seligman called "learned helplessness," or an "expectation that nothing one does can control important outcomes" (Nolen-Hoeksema,

Girgus, & Seligman, 1986, p. 435). In a study regarding behavior and learned helplessness, Luper (2008), states:

The purpose of this research project was to examine the hall rules when taught and implemented as an intervention and determine if this was effective in increasing productive behaviors while decreasing inappropriate behaviors and decreasing accident and injury reports.

This intervention process could be used by others who work in this or similar fields to help people with Mild, Moderate, or Borderline Intellectual Functioning become more accountable for their behaviors and, therefore, give them more of a chance to be independent and accepted in the community by lowering the inappropriate behaviors and perhaps help eradicate or lower the sense of self helplessness.

The data strongly support the use of the particular program that was implemented. Holding the women accountable for their actions appears to have helped them better understand their behaviors in relation to particular consequences, hence lowering the evidence of a sense of self helplessness. (p. 15-17)

Billy would not be allowed on school property for the remainder of the school year, and would receive tutoring at the public library via school personnel to complete his current grade level and advance to high school. While repeated confrontation is stressful, it was the decision that weighed on me most heavily. Although I had made the decision to suspend a hundred times before, it never got any easier, weighing the best interests of the students versus the best interests of the school, a comparison that was rarely an either-or proposition.

***A day in the life, continued....***

*Shoot, my only "crisis" situation today didn't even involve students. We had a parent just before lunch who came to pick up his son and insisted to our front secretary that he was going to go retrieve his son from class. She had politely informed him that she would page the classroom and have his son meet him in the office. The next thing I knew my pager was buzzing and I was standing in the office having the same conversation with this parent.*



*I had tried to rationally explain our need for safety procedures, but this parent wasn't interested. I then stood between this man and the door as he approached me and stood with his nose only an inch from mine. I continued to speak calmly to this individual, but inside I could feel the adrenaline beginning to course through my veins. Although my demeanor remained calm, my mind was beginning to visualize taking this man to floor if he would initiate contact. I didn't want to do that. Fortunately, the school resource officer had also been paged and entered at just the right time to escort this individual and his son to the parking lot. I'm thankful that no students were in the office to witness this incident. As I kick back in my chair now and reflect on this situation, it's actually pretty funny. This parent had called me a "silver tongued sleeve slicker" on his way out the door. What is that?*

### July – Central Office Conflict

Clemons Middle School had been labeled a School In Need of Assistance (SINA) by the State and Federal Departments of Education a few years prior, a fact that still infuriated many of the teachers at Clemons. My tenure as Principal at Clemons had nearly coincided with the emergence of No Child Left Behind, federal legislation which many teachers viewed unfavorably as extending the arm of the federal government into an area long sacred to local control. I recall closed-door sessions with a prominent teacher leader, with whom I had great respect, in which he said, "Steve, that's just not how we've done things here in the past. We tend to have more local control. What works other places may not work for us."

I didn't disagree with him, but did my best to explain that I had little control over the flood of mandates. At one point, I expressed my own frustration with our staff. I can remember using the analogy of a damn, with many holes. I felt as though I was stuck on the side of that dam, plugging those holes with my fingers and toes to protect my staff below from the flooding waters of mandates and initiatives. I felt helpless to much of it,

like I was letting my staff down. We had a close-knit staff and I had developed close relationships with most staff members, beyond being just the “boss.”

Perceptions across the district and community were that Clemons was a good school, with a good staff. Later, through a transition of grade level staff, I learned that many teachers at the other buildings admired the camaraderie and culture at Clemons. Yet, I could sense the culture changing to one of frustration as the years went by and mandates and initiatives continued to be pushed onto us. I raised my concerns to central office that we were implementing too many initiatives, or doing things “an inch deep and an mile wide.” I expressed our frustration to the SINA team of state officials that arrived to diagnose our problems and suggest best practices. I suggested that rather than more initiatives and documentation, that perhaps we’d be better served to simply let our teachers teach! My comments were poorly received and I sensed the team saw our building as a lost cause due to poor leadership.

The school was on the SINA list due to our low socioeconomic subgroup (35% of the students) and special education subgroup scores (less than 20% of students) in reading and math, which further frustrated the staff with the SINA label for the entire school. Nonetheless, we had implemented several initiatives to take corrective action, not least of which was a switch to a two-period language arts block for all students, as well an additional period with a newly hired “reading specialist” for non-proficient students. Both changes were significant and undertaken over time with input from many constituencies, in consideration of many philosophical disagreements regarding pedagogy, student schedules, the importance of arts-based electives, and unequal

teaching loads. All of this was undertaken while also studying a transition from a grade 7-9 “junior high school” to a grade 6-8 “middle school,” as well as implementing new software to “map” curriculum, and tend to the daily responsibilities of teaching students.

In her 1996 study, *Exploring Causes of Principal Burnout*, Whitaker notes, “Almost all principals recounted certain difficulties with the central office. There were greater demands placed on principals for accountability by the central office as evidenced by state mandates for new reporting procedures through district and building accountability committees and new mandates” (p. 63). I began experiencing this in July, following my eighth year at Clemons.

Assistant Superintendent, Tonya Allen, and I had always had a good working relationship, however, our views on teaching and learning and staff leadership had become increasingly divergent over the previous year or two. In my opinion, Tonya felt that each year, we could “sprinkle a little of this” and “sprinkle a little of that” into programming, and get results on our standardized scores, as though a mere exposure to a program would save certain students.

Tonya had come to me a month or two earlier with a grant proposal for a new reading program that would be implemented when teachers returned in the fall. While I felt Tonya was well-intentioned, I raised a myriad of concerns with her proposal, not the least of which would be springing an entirely new initiative on teachers with no notice upon their return, and with none of the prescribed training the initiative called for. I also informed Tonya that she hadn’t given current changes enough time to show results, and that some of what we were doing may not be showing up as improvements on

standardized-tests, but were effectively changing our culture – students were reading more, and our at-risk readers were accepting their placement with the reading specialist as a positive!

Tonya had also proposed another aggressive step in implementation with our curriculum mapping software. During an administrative cabinet meeting, I urged Tonya to hold off, providing rationale of a staff that was already struggling to keep up. Tonya indicated that she would hold off and not share her next step with the teacher representatives until we were all comfortable. Soon after, I learned via concerned teachers that Tonya had moved forward anyway. She had lied. I learned that she had not only moved forward with the grant despite my concerns, but had received the grant and planned to proceed when teachers returned in August. Not only was I hanging on the side of a dam plugging holes with my fingers and toes, Tonya was now throwing darts at me, weakening my grip.

As teachers returned in August, our language arts teachers began coming to me with their overwhelming concerns as they learned of the new reading program. It was at that point that I planted my flag. I informed Tonya that our building would not be implementing the reading initiative. My decision and the resulting confrontation with Tonya resulted in a closed-door session for Tonya and me with the Superintendent. While my decision to ignore the initiative stood, the Superintendent informed me that the middle school could not continue to be resistant to necessary changes to improve student achievement. I found those comments to be as offensive as Tonya's actions, but I

remained agreeable. I wasn't looking for a battle, just to do what I felt was right for our students and teachers.

I had been a good lieutenant up to this point and had worked closely with Tonya to try and make improvements in the district. I even valued my personal relationship with her. Now, I felt as though I could no longer trust her and that our relationship had become one of confrontation and avoidance. The need to protect my teachers and the deterioration of my professional relationship with Tonya caused great stress.

***A day in the life, continued....***

*Nothing else rose to the level of "crisis" today, but my "to do" list for tomorrow is filling up quickly. There are number of issues in which I need to be responsive. Those teachers experiencing the most anxiety over some of our proposed curriculum and scheduling changes are going to have to be first on my list. I can tell they are getting restless and their anxiety is not helping our overall culture. I've also heard that a small parent group is beginning to ask questions about our future structure.*

*I glance at the clock – 5:47 p.m. I start to gather my things. Hopefully I can beat my wife home, relieve the baby sitter with our daughter, and get supper started. That's only a 10.5-hour day today, but it's going to have to do. I'm pooped and ever since our first child was born, I've really been making an effort to get home at a reasonable time. Given that I don't have any meetings or activities tonight, this is my chance.*

**August – A Staff Issue**

As teachers were set to return in late August, a rumor that had apparently been circulating throughout the community finally came to my attention. It was said that one of our teachers, Mrs. Smith, had corresponded inappropriately with a graduate of the district, Trent, shortly after his graduation back in May, and perhaps throughout the summer. As the rumor went, Mrs. Smith, who was married, showed up at Trent's graduation party and provided him with a blanket as a gift. It was then rumored that she texted Trent, a local football star, with innuendo as to how they could share/use the

blanket. All of this allegedly happened within a week of Trent's graduation back in May. Ironically, she attended Trent's party with Rick, a former student of hers, and Freehold quarterback who had graduated from high school a couple of years earlier.

I got a call from our Superintendent saying that she needed to meet with me regarding an issue. A sinking feeling took over my stomach. I liked and respected our Superintendent, but knew that good news was not likely the reason for her scheduling this meeting with me. She shared the grapevine gossip regarding Mrs. Smith. I wasn't surprised that I hadn't heard any of this gossip as I typically tried to stay away from the proverbial grapevine. Mrs. Smith's alleged actions were also no shock, and this also wasn't the first time that I had questions about Mrs. Smith's ethics. It quickly became clear that I was going to need to confront this situation with Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith was in her mid-thirties at the time, a couple of years younger than I. She was a good teacher, very enthusiastic, a positive team player as a staff member, and good with the kids. Mrs. Smith was considered "nice," and over the years, I began to suspect that Mrs. Smith was "nice" in an effort to be universally "liked" and/or "accepted." She strove to be liked, popular, and accepted, and while she was good with all of her students, her rapport with the "popular kids" was especially noticeable.

This latest rumor in regard to the inappropriate texting wasn't my first suspicion of questionable ethics from Mrs. Smith. A few years prior, Mrs. Smith had had an affair with a single male teacher in our building. Although I was aware of the rumors at that time, I felt it none of my business. As far as I was concerned, they were two consenting adults and what they did together outside of the workplace was their business.

A couple of years prior to the affair with the teacher, Mrs. Smith was involved in another sticky situation. She came to my office to report that she had been arrested for shoplifting in a retail center about 90 minutes from Freehold. She explained that it was all a big misunderstanding, something to the effect that something had inadvertently gotten placed beneath her cart and she didn't realize it until she was confronted at her car, and that her lawyer would likely get it quickly resolved.

The puzzling part of the story, however, was that she was charged. Obviously the authorities weren't buying her story, and had enough evidence to warrant a charge. Further troubling was the fact that all of this happened on a weekday in which she had called in and taken a "family ill" day due to a sick child. She covered this by explaining that her child had started feeling better by mid-day, and since she had the day off already, she decided to go shopping with her sister.

Way back at the point of the shoplifting incident, our Superintendent was prepared to take action, but would leave it to me as to whether or not we sought termination. While there were portions of Mrs. Smith's story that I simply did not buy, and I (even back then) had growing questions about her character, I was not ready to pull the plug. After all, she was a good teacher, very enthusiastic, a positive team player as a staff member, and good with the kids. Yes, I questioned her character, but her only prior transgression was an affair with a colleague, which I felt held little relevance. I defended Mrs. Smith to our Superintendent with the shoplifting incident and disciplinary action was not taken. I felt at the time that we had a good teacher, and there was no point in disrupting a good professional relationship over the matter.

I was torn over whether or not I had done the right thing – overlooking the affair and letting the shoplifting go without consequence. Now, the rumors of her texting Trent brought my concerns into focus. I started to think back, remembering other questionable behaviors by Mrs. Smith over the years.

I began to investigate the current texting issue with Trent. To complicate matters, Trent’s father was one of our teachers, and a colleague of Mrs. Smith. When I approached him about the matter I could tell from his body language and cautious comments that Trent had indeed received some type of inappropriate overture from Mrs. Smith. I was left to read between the lines, however, as he did not feel comfortable implicating Mrs. Smith.

A colleague once said to me, “Steve, how do you explain to people what it is that we do as principals? They’d never believe the crap we deal with – dealing with educated people who do stupid things!” Mrs. Smith, of course, downplayed the text and blanket when asked about it. Although, when I suggested that we get her text records from the phone company, she acknowledged that perhaps her messages could have been misconstrued. I wrote her up on grounds of “ethics,” although “It is difficult to see how a truly binding code can be formulated and enforced given the more fragmented organizational and professional identities of teachers” (Warnick & Silverman, 2011). The write up for her file was an account of her infractions intended for her and her personnel file and was under the umbrella of “ethics” to include the texting, as well as the shoplifting case a couple of years prior. Mrs. Smith, with representation and rebuttal from the teacher’s union, signed off on the documentation and informed me that, given



that she and her husband were doing very well in farming, this would likely be her last year teaching anyway as she would likely stay home with her kids.

This was all quite a way to begin to kick off a new school year! It was to be a chilly year with Mrs. Smith. Little did I know at the time, I was also entering my last year in Freehold.

***A day in the life, continued....***

*As soon as I open the front door I hear two sounds that fill me with happiness. One is the shriek of my daughter's voice yelling "DADDY!!!, and the other is the sound of her feet hitting the floor and running toward me. She had been sitting on the couch with the babysitter reading books, but she's now made it to the kitchen in record time and I'm getting a hug that immediately washes all of the stresses of the day from my body, if only for the moment. I drop everything, see the babysitter out, and give my daughter my undivided attention. She's more than happy to be plopped on the counter to help me prepare supper.*

*A few minutes later my wife arrives home, getting a similar greeting from our daughter. Within minutes we're all in the kitchen, discussing the events of the day. "How was your day?" I ask her. "Good" she responds, adding a few details from her day. "How was your day?" she asks. "Fine," I answer unconvincingly. She's grown accustomed to this typical response, and delicately asks about a few details to prompt the conversation. As usual, I meet her questions about work with general, one-word answers, as though to steer the conversation another direction. By now, she knows the routine and switches the topic to avoid the inevitable frustration she knows this line of questioning will bring from me.*

**October– Tragedy**

My phone rang shortly after midnight. Our Superintendent was on the other end of line. She informed me that Erik Klem, a teacher at Clemons Middle School, had been in a car accident and did not survive. I got dressed immediately, made the same call to my counselors and assistant principal, and headed to the school to meet with them to begin planning what would be the longest day of my professional career to date. As I drove to the school, the superintendent called me again to inform me that there was more

to the story that I should know and that we would meet to discuss the details first thing in the morning.

Our crisis team of two counselors, an at-risk coordinator, and an assistant principal joined me shortly after I arrived at the middle school. Sadness and shock filled the air. They were close to Erik and a couple of them had known him since he was a student in Freehold. I could tell immediately that although I considered this group to be colleagues, friends, and in the case of a couple of them, mentors, that they were now looking to me for leadership. I could see it in their eyes: "What do we do now?" My focus and organization immediately took over my actions. I knew that I had to remove my own emotional feelings and be the rock for our staff and students.

My team and I spent the next several hours, until the wee hours of the morning, preparing for our school day. Unfortunately, we had some experience in dealing with death in our school. During my nine-year tenure in Freehold, no less than 10 young people had died -The middle school student struck by a car on his skateboard....the seventh grader who had a seizure at football practice only to find it was due to a brain tumor that he would fight until his death his senior year of high school....the soft spoken and kind middle school boy who took his own life without explanation....the middle school student shot by a high school student in a gun accident in their garage, that then caused the high school boy to turn the gun on himself....the recent graduate who stayed in town to play football for the local college, killed due to his own drunk driving...the senior boy who committed suicide.....

Yes, we unfortunately had experience in dealing with death in Freehold, and in preparing our staff and students for the altered routines that would be required. But this was different. This was Mr. Klem – colleague, friend, teacher, father, husband, outdoorsman, Little League coach, and a native of Freehold. He was a hometown boy who had returned home with his wife, to teach and raise his two children. He was a good teacher. He was a good person – universally liked, and always willing to go the extra mile to help out in the school, the church, and in the community. He had been named ‘Teacher of the Year’ by a national retailer for his work at one of the elementary schools a few years prior, and had more recently been chosen ‘Teacher of the Year’ by the students of Clemons Middle School.

Our planning of communications, crisis centers, outside resources, and schedules wrapped up near sunrise. Finally, we began to make the calls to staff to prepare them for the day ahead, and schedule a staff meeting prior to the arrival of students. I went home, showered, grabbed a bite to eat, and headed back, further digesting the additional information from the superintendent’s second call.

As the meeting convened that morning, staff entered, many sobbing. I had seen those sobbing faces before in similar meetings as a result of student deaths. Now, I was looking into those faces again, only this time, the pain seemed deeper. I informed the staff of the details of Erik’s death – that he had dropped his children off at his parent’s house in rural Freehold, proceeded down a gravel road hill in his truck, and struck the concrete barrier of a bridge near the bottom. Apparently a similar death had taken place

on the same bridge several years earlier, as many recalled, only that one was ruled a suicide.

We prepared for the day, the counseling centers, the Red Cross, the local church officials on hand, a time-out center for teachers simply needing coverage for a class so they could take a ‘time-out.’ A well-respected and recently retired teacher agreed to cover Erik’s classes until a more permanent replacement could be found.

It was a tough day, to say the least. Students created banners and hung large cards throughout the halls and commons to help cope with their loss. These were the types of things that we knew helped, but that we did not permit with our experiences with suicide. In those situations, “erecting a memorial...can have negative consequences if these actions are viewed by students as glorifying suicide or imply that suicide is a logical response to the challenges faced by adolescents” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 6). In this case, I was the only one in the building who knew that Erik had actually committed suicide.

The second call from the Superintendent, and subsequent conversations, revealed a sordid tale, which seemed surreal at the time – like something out of a fictional movie. Apparently, following work the day prior, Erik’s children rode the bus from the elementary school to the middle school to meet their dad as usual, and then they headed home together. A short while later, the authorities knocked on Erik’s door. Apparently knowing full well what it was about, Erik asked if he could first drop his children off at his parent’s house, and then meet them at the police station, to which the authorities agreed. He never intended to make it to the police station.

As the next week went on, the authorities continued to drag the river where Erik's truck was recovered, but did not find Erik's body – day after day. People began to wonder, why couldn't they find the body? Rumors also began to swirl, that according to a dispatcher in a nearby town, who lived in Freehold, that there was more to the story. The rumors began to include some of the sordid details.

In the meantime, the news media from the state's largest TV stations began to call me repeatedly – at work and at home – seeking information in regard to Erik, the type of person he was, and how the school was coping. I feared that it was only a matter of time before they started asking questions directly related to rumors of Erik's situation. I went to my office late Sunday evening to compose an e-mail that I sent to all of the media outlets, outlining the magnitude of our loss, and asking that they respect the needs of our mourning school and community, and essentially, back off. They did.

I continued to try and lead our school through the ordeal, bearing the burden and anger of Erik's true actions, but meanwhile assisting our school with their loving memories. One of our counselors, a Freehold native, a close personal friend of my wife, and a close personal friend of the Klem's, asked me if any of the rumors were true. I told her that I couldn't speak to any truth in the rumors. She was angry that anyone could say such things about Erik. I too was angry, but angry at Erik, and trying to cope with that anger at the same time I mourned his loss and supported others in their loss.

After four or five days, the body was eventually recovered, and although information continued to seep through the community, we slowly tried to return to some degree of normalcy. To say we were in shock would be an understatement. I still have

images of Erik, having dropped off his children for the last time, gripping the steering wheel as he sped down that hill, and the thoughts that must have been going through his mind. I'll never forget that Friday.

I remember at the end of the day, after everyone had left the building, our high school principal walked down to see how I was doing. I can remember feeling completely numb, tired, and emotionally exhausted. I had given everything I had from midnight to that moment, I had tried to be the source of stability that our staff and students needed and we had made it through the day. It was time to go home and figure out my own feelings, and prepare for the difficult weeks and months ahead.

***A day in the life, continued....***

*I'm not exactly sure how to explain it, or the reasons behind my behavior, but I rarely want to talk about my workday. I guess by detailing the stresses of the day I feel like I'm reliving them. In a way I think I'm also trying to protect my wife, cautious not to off-load my worries onto her. Sometimes I think it might also make life easier on her when confronted by others. We do see my subordinates in social settings from time to time, so knowing too much can only complicate things for her. I know people assume that she knows the confidential details about my professional world, but she rarely does. I won't say that she NEVER does, but I guess I just don't feel it necessary to share what I consider to be the day-to-day stresses of the job – or the mountain of minutia. The job can make it tough to breath some days. I don't want her to experience that. It's also my job to provide and I don't want her to feel as though I don't enjoy, or am burdened in any way, by doing that.*

*It tends to be the bigger things that I do share with her. It might take some type of psychoanalysis to figure out why I share some things, while others I don't. Perhaps the boulder is just too big too shoulder alone at times and I feel the need to tell someone. Obviously it has to be someone that I trust implicitly. I guess in some respects she acts as my therapist in those situations. Sometimes it just feels better to be able to talk through a situation with someone. Those situations, however, seem to be few and far between, and today is definitely not one of them.*

### December – Another Staff Issue

At the close of the previous school year, our industrial technology teacher had retired. Unfortunately, due to a statewide shortage of individuals with such a certification, our summer search did not yield many qualified applicants. Given my opinion that hiring is the most important task of an administrator, I was worried that I would be forced to “settle” for a marginal candidate, rather than enhance our team. It is imperative to hire good people who share your vision (Teske & Schneider, 1999, p. 24). My prospects for hiring a substitute until a suitable replacement could be found were not good. And due to the state retirement system, it would be nearly a semester into the school year before our recently retired teacher would be available to sub. We needed a teacher for the school year, so with some reservation, I hired Sam Eilers.

Sam was a middle-aged male from a prominent wrestling family in the state. His resume was filled with wrestling-related positions, at the high school, collegiate, and national team levels. His actual teaching experience was minimal, particularly at the middle school level, and his resume was filled with gaps, presumably due to his travels in pursuit of wrestling. I agonized over the decision, but with few options, ultimately gave him a chance.

It was clear from the start that Sam’s pursuit of wrestling may not have been his only reason for job shuffling. He lacked organizational skills although he was willing to put in long hours to prepare, his haphazard nature left him struggling most of the time. At one point in the fall, in my frequent checks on Mr. Eilers, and in an effort to assist him with clear direction, I referred him to correspondence I had distributed at the beginning of

the school year and began to realize the extent of Mr. Eilers's organizational difficulties, as most all of his papers were thrown into a large cardboard box. Mr. Eilers said that he had struggled with dyslexia as a youngster, and sometimes took longer to figure things out. To his credit, he did try.

As the fall progressed, Mr. Eilers kept his head above water, although I was concerned about his classroom management. Nonetheless, we were progressing without any major incidents, and as unsettling as that felt as an expectation, it was the reality at hand. I was holding my breath in terms of his lack of progress as a teacher. I felt sorry for Mr. Eilers, but felt a greater obligation to our students. By November, my visits to Mr. Eilers were becoming increasingly frequent, either due to classroom management concerns, or professional managerial tasks (such as submitting electronic grades timely and correctly, etc.). Three students caused Mr. Eilers a great deal of difficulty, all in the same section.

In December, an incident occurred in class with one of the three troubled students, in which the student claimed that Mr. Eilers shut him in a closet as discipline. Mr. Eilers explained that he had simply asked the student to stand in the tool closet, out of sight of his classmates, due to his continually disruptive behavior. Mr. Eilers further explained that the light was on, and the door was not completely shut. I believed Mr. Eilers, and also believed the student to be exaggerating.

Nonetheless, I used the incident as the culminating occurrence to end Mr. Eilers's employment with the district. My first step was to meet with the chief of the teacher's association, a high school teacher in the district. I had a great deal of respect for him,



dating back to a situation a few years earlier with a veteran teacher that I sought to remove. In that case, the 30-year veteran teacher, Mr. Scott, had made a habit of inappropriate comments, glances, and innuendo throughout his career, only to reach the point of getting his hand slapped by administration. My documentation on the teacher was extensive, as had been my predecessors. The union chief had represented Mr. Scott in previous cases with my predecessors and was more than familiar with the administrative concerns. It was during that case that the union chief showed me that he was not interested in protecting bad teachers, but only interested in making sure that I went about my actions appropriately, and followed the appropriate rules, procedures, and due process. My predecessors had failed to do that and Mr. Scott had continually escaped termination. With the help of our school attorney, Mr. Scott's teaching career and licensure was ended. The union chief and I respected each other and knew that if we each did our jobs effectively, our profession would be the better for it.

In the case with Mr. Eilers, he had only been employed a few months, so there was no long-term relationship with the union. Upon citing the difficulties of this teacher with the union chief, he assisted me in counseling this teacher into a resignation. He didn't necessarily want to leave, but he could see the handwriting on the wall, so to speak, and a possible suspension and/or termination in his future. It simply was not working out for Mr. Eilers, or for the school, and we amicably parted ways. Still, those conversations are never easy and were preceded by many restless nights, particularly given that I had to let Mr. Eilers go immediately preceding the holidays.

***A day in the life, continued....***

*Supper time and clean up then brings a little time with our daughter. I love this time with her – play time....bath time.....story time....and bed time. I can honestly say that I haven't thought much about work for the past hour or two. Now that my wife is heading back to rock our daughter, however, I can steal some time to get a few work items done. I crack a beer and sit down at the computer. A few emails have accumulated that need my attention. It doesn't seem like I can ever really get away from work.*

*My wife sticks her head out to say she's going to bed. Bed? I look at the clock and realize that I've been sitting at the computer for over 90 minutes. A couple empty beer cans are further evidence that more time has passed than I thought. "Are you coming to bed soon?" my wife asks. "Yep," I respond, not knowing if it's the truth. I do, however, use it as my cue to relax. Finally, it's my time. This is the Sportscenter, Springsteen, and suds portion of my day. I shut down the computer, grab another beer, and head to the recliner for some television.*

**January – Another Loss**

The holiday break was much needed. Our staff was reeling from the loss of Erik Klem and the divide from central office in regard to implementation of initiatives seemed greater than ever. For that matter, I felt a greater divide from our staff than ever before. Although I wasn't at liberty to discuss my interaction with, or the infractions of, a staff member, and I think given a high level of established trust most all suspected my actions with Mrs. Smith and with Mr. Eilers to be warranted, it firmly put me in the position of "the administrator," and frankly, "administration" was not at the top our staff's Christmas list that year. Bottom line, staff was not at liberty to have all of the information, as is typical with many confidential administrative decisions, and only relied on their perceptions and/or information filtered through colleagues.

Unfortunately, the holiday break didn't put an end to our bad news. During the week of January 15, I was forced to convene our staff for more unfortunate news. Our custodian, Douglas "Stilt" Sanders had had a stroke and was in critical condition. Stilt was a beloved member of this close-knit staff, a friend, and a colleague, who always

knew that his role was more than just cleaning the school. Stilt loved street-rods and rebuilt custom cars in his spare time. He was happy, helpful, and loved life – and our kids and staff loved him. He knew that some of our hardest to reach students would talk to him about hot-rods, when they wouldn't talk to anyone else in the school about anything. He knew that, as custodian at Clemons Middle School, he could make a difference, and he did.

On Monday, January 21, I called our staff back together to inform them that Stilt had lost his battle, and passed away. At this point, outlining the procedures and resources available for grieving staff and students felt almost routine. We marched onward, but our efforts towards continual school improvement seemed to pale in comparison to the realities we had been faced with throughout the year. According to the American Psychological Association, coping with the loss of a coworker, “may make it hard to focus on work for awhile. While others may find it difficult to get back on track, resulting in mistakes that, in turn, disrupt the organization’s functioning” (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

***A day in the life, continued....***

*After the 10:00 p.m. Sportscenter I start flipping through the channels and realize that ‘Shawshank Redemption’ is on for what seems like the 10,000<sup>th</sup> time. I watch anyway. My mind drifts from the movie, to work, to life in general. I’m starting to feel the buzz of the alcohol and my mind is flipping from topic to topic like a slideshow on speed.*

*Shortly after midnight and my wife sticks her head in the room. “Are you coming to bed anytime soon?!” she says with an annoyed tone. “Yes,” I respond with an equally annoyed tone, knowing it’s not the truth. She heads off to bed. I head to the computer and put on some Springsteen music.*

*I’ve been listening to Bruce Springsteen since my early teens and in many ways his music is the soundtrack to my life. It’s not unusual for different songs to take me back to certain events in my life. Tonight is no different. These songs take me to different places and times, yet I also fade back to now, and wonder how I got from there to here. I*

*hear different things in some of these songs now; and create different meanings. "Poor men wanna be rich, rich men wanna be kings, And a king aint satisfied till he rules everything" (Springsteen, 1978). Is that where I'm at now? I don't remember feeling this kind of stress when I was teaching in the classroom. Is my obsessive goal setting just some power trip? I got into education to help kids. I thought by expanding my scope of influence, I could help even more. Am I doing that? Am I making a difference for kids in our school district?*

#### April – A Staff Issue

In April, our Superintendent and Technology Coordinator requested that I come to central office for a meeting. At that meeting, they shared a number of questionable websites that had been accessed by a staff member at Clemons Middle School. Although the sites were not illegal, they were salacious in nature, and not only inappropriate material for the district accessed server, but especially inappropriate given that they were accessed during the school day, at times when students would have been present. I wondered if students could have accessed this teacher's computer. I asked the technology coordinator to research the issue more thoroughly, with a complete listing of this person's login activity before we moved forward.

My heart sank when I learned this issue involved Mr. Pete Edwards. My wife and I had gotten to know Mr. Edwards and his wife, Beth, socially through playing softball. Both were Freehold natives, and at the time, Pete worked in a manufacturing plant in a nearby town. Pete had taken a couple of stabs at college, but hadn't finished. He'd gotten married too young, had children, gotten divorced, and started over, all of which required his manufacturing job, and interfered with college. During those years, Pete talked about regretting having not finished his degree, and how his dream would be to finish, and his dream job would be to teach and coach in the town where he grew up –

Freehold. He talked about growing up on the “wrong side of the tracks” without the greatest home life. He believed he could relate to the tough kids, and I believed him as well.

Eventually, Pete did return to finish up his teaching degree, and shortly after, we had an opening for a teaching position. I knew in my heart that Pete was a perfect fit for the position, nonetheless, he was required to go through the same rigorous hiring process as all applicants. The staff committee assembled for the hiring process came back with the same feelings that I had – that Pete was perfect for the position. Soon after, Pete was walking on air, teaching at Clemons Middle School and coaching at Freehold High School – his dream job. He and Beth would add a child of their own, and life seemed as perfect as possible to Pete. Not to mention that my gut feeling about Pete as a teacher was spot on – he was a fantastic addition to our staff and perfect in his new position.

That school year, however, proved to be as difficult for Pete personally as it was for Clemons as a school. Even with everything we were dealing with as a school, I had noticed that Pete was not himself throughout the fall. He eventually confided in me that he was dealing with some personal issues and that his coping strategies weren't the best. I was pulling for him as a friend, a colleague, and a boss. He certainly wasn't the same teacher he had been the previous two years.

The technology coordinator came back from her investigation with reams of paper, all with tiny print of website activity, technological footprints from Pete's electronic journeys. I scheduled a meeting with Pete. He walked into my office, saw the reams of electronic paper, the Superintendent sitting at my side, and knew it would not be

one of our typical meetings. I began to read off some of the websites, and the times accessed, and his head dropped to his chest. He tried to explain but I could tell that he knew there was no acceptable explanation.

He realized the seriousness of his actions. Given the time and location of his computer and the results of our investigation, we believed Pete's assertion that no students were aware of his online activity. Given that fact, the fact that his activity was not illegal, and the reality that we were nearing the end of the school year, we informed Pete that we would allow him to finish out the school year with restrictions.

We also informed Pete that we would seek to terminate his contract at the end of the school year. He asked if there was any way that he could get another chance. I told my friend – no. Pete agreed to resign effective at the end of the year. The last thing that he said to conclude the meeting was that he was sorry to let me down after I had taken a chance on him. "I had my dream job" he said, "and I screwed it up."

***A day in the life, continued....***

*The clock on the computer shines 1:22 a.m. Feeling a little numb and with my mind wondering, I force myself to head off to bed knowing that my alarm is only a few hours away.*

*A few hours of sleep pass and my alarm starts to beep. I hit snooze. I haven't even opened my eyes yet and I can feel myself squinting. My shoulder muscles are all crunched up. Even my dreams were filled with the issues awaiting me at work. Even sleeping, I was never truly able to exhale and relax. My mentor used to describe this as feeling like "the back of your eyeballs are tied to your asshole." That's one way of putting it.*

*I drag myself up and get ready for work. It doesn't feel like I've slept at all. A short while later, I kiss my wife and daughter. "Have a good day," she says. "You too," I respond. I pull out of the driveway and begin to put on my game face. "Fake it 'till you make it" my mentor also used to say. I'm ready to do it all over again.*

### May – The Home Stretch

As we moved into the spring of the year, the role as educational leader continued amidst all that I have described – the daily trials and tribulations were ever present. A couple of years prior, our building had transitioned from a 7-9 junior high school, to a 6-8 middle school. This transition was facility driven, given ongoing discussion to close six aging elementary buildings, and construct one multi-dimensional elementary campus. This facility transition would mean a transition of sixth-grade to the Clemons “Middle School,” and a transition of ninth-grade to the Freehold High School – including the necessary staff. We were given the task of implementing best “middle school” practices, with no further staffing or resources. What it would mean for many staff, however, was new building assignments, new teaching assignments, new schedules, and new routines.

We had spent a couple of years researching “middle school” models and best practices, sending staff on school visits, developing committees, and planning for the transition at Clemons. Although it was clear that we would not be able to accomplish implementation of all that we studied due to the restrictions placed upon us, we knew that we had an opportunity to try and retain the best of our traditional model, and improve in some areas as well. Regardless, even the smallest changes underwent great scrutiny, as almost every change was viewed as “second-order” by someone on staff.

Second-order change involves fundamental shifts in the way we perceive ourselves and the world. Unlike first-order change, which consists of minor alterations to the way we do things within a particular paradigm, second-order change transforms that paradigm into something totally different. In organizations, paradigms are constructed around an organization’s mission, its product and placement in the market place, and even its CEO (think about Apple or Microsoft). These paradigms partly inform employees’ personal identities. What makes second-order change so difficult is that most people, as well as

organizations, are unaware of the existence of these paradigms. (Paredes, 2011, p.2)

By the spring, we had been through a couple of years as Clemons Middle School, under what was essentially a “hybrid” model of middle school philosophy and traditional junior high school processes. For some, the changes had gone too far, and for others, we hadn’t changed enough. What became clear this spring, however, was that due to retirements and existing staff certifications, that we would have an opportunity to shift assignments again, alter schedules again, and accomplish some of the key concepts central to middle school philosophy that we had not been able to accomplish during our previous transition. We began to reassemble committees and outline possibilities and priorities, listen to dissenting opinions, and move toward a consensus of action.

By and large, our staff was ready for a change. It had been a tough year and people were ready to take action to improve things in general. Only a few staff members opposed any change, largely the same ones that had opposed any previous change, or any change at any time for that matter. Although not unanimous, we had consensus, and clear momentum for a mandate for change. I began to meet individually with staff members where a change of assignment would be necessary, and all were accomplished without a single involuntary transfer. With our existing pieces to the puzzle shifted, we were set to hire accordingly, and began to lay out schedules, processes, and procedures for our new teaming structure. After a long, tough year, our staff seemed reenergized at the prospect of a new beginning the next fall.



### Personal Reflection

As we neared the end of that school year, I was offered a position as superintendent in another school district. I pulled staff together for yet another of our impromptu meetings, to inform them that I would be leaving. Based on the reaction of some, I could tell they were fearful that it was yet more bad news that they had been pulled into this room to receive. Others worried about the changes being planned for the upcoming year, and whether or not it could be accomplished with a change in leadership. A counselor said, “Steve, I think we need to put a halt on the changes now. The staff was ready to follow *YOU* down that path, not just anyone.” While I took his comments as a compliment, I assured the staff that the processes had already been put into place, their rationale was still sound, and there was no turning back, with or without me. I reassured them as best I could, and let them know that my decision to leave had been, yet another, difficult and stressful decision.

As I looked back on those final 18 months in Freehold, and my entire nine years at Clemons, my mentor during that first year had been right about one thing – I had grown some thicker skin on my backside. I had come to realize that one simply can’t please everyone – it’s impossible to be everything to everybody. That experience and realization helps to make the tough decisions, but it doesn’t make acting on those decisions any less difficult – or the burden of carrying those decisions any easier.

This realization also helped me to see the impact of stress on my life and my health. As alluded to previously, late nights with music, television, and alcohol had a way of stringing the stressful days together, with the stress of each day compounding on

the next. I had watched my own father survive a serious heart attack in his 40's, brought on by poor lifestyle choices and a family history of heart disease. Although I was not a smoker like my dad, I knew that I shared his genetic predispositions. I also began to realize that my high stress and coping strategies of alcohol, little exercise, little sleep, and poor diet were likely lifestyle choices leading me down the road my father had traveled.

Yet what I've often wondered and worried about is the impact of this lifestyle on my wife. I know that she sometimes shared my stress, whether because I was shutting her out, or sharing too much – offloading my issues onto her as though she were my therapist. I know that it was sometimes difficult for her to watch me cope with my stress in unhealthy ways that I could not recognize – the poor eating habits, the lack of sleep, the beer drinking, the lack of exercise, etc.

I know that I was not the only one living in a fishbowl of public perception. I was the Middle School Principal and that was how I was often introduced, no matter the time or place. I know that was also how she was typically introduced, with “her husband is the Middle School Principal” often attached to the back of her name when introduced. I know that people asked her opinion, or more likely, simply brought up school issues hoping to gain some insight by gauging her reaction. I know that these were all a part of my wife's life as well. I suspect that because of my profession, she has a few chapters to someday add to her own book. I wonder if her experiences are typical of other wives of public school administrators?

### Statement of the Problem

Fields (2005) reported stress on school administrators due to “uncontrollable demands on their time, the negative impact of the amount of time that the job required on their personal lives, their prospective staffs, and the amount of conflict encountered.” Studies such as this have normalized my experiences. Although the stress and demands involved with public school administration, as well as the phenomena of “burnout,” have been well documented (Combs & Edmonson, 2009; Combs et al., 2009; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Whitaker, 1996; Whitaker, 2001) relatively little has been written specifically about the impact of such a chosen profession in regard to the family unit of the public school administrator. Such stressors and perceptions are fairly unknown as related to wives of male public school administrators and the husband-wife relationship. Studies of crossover stress in relation to public school administration and their spouses have not been as plentiful as other service-oriented, high stress work domains, such as police officers, fire fighters, correctional workers, public accountants, etc.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the impact of the lived experience of male public school administrators and their wives, through a phenomenological qualitative framework. This understanding will aid administrative preparatory programs in identification of the hidden/personal costs of educational leadership with prospective students. It is my hope that programs in educational

leadership can use this study to add to the body of literature to what Polka and Litchka (2008) have termed “The Dark Side of Educational Leadership.”

#### Justification of the Study

A 2012 study titled *Principal Concerns: Iowa May Face Statewide Demand* by Michael DeArmond and Monica Oujidani suggests that in the next five years, just under half of principals in Iowa will be eligible for retirement. With the potential for such turnover in school leadership, prospective administrators must recognize the various life forces facing themselves, their spouses, and their families with the decision to make the career and life altering decision to enter the field.

#### Research Questions

How does the husband’s position as a public school administrator impact the life of the administrator husband and his wife?

1. Is the job of public school administrator stressful, and if so, what are the indicators?
2. If wives perceive certain stresses associated with their spouse’s job, do wives worry or feel stress as a result, and if so, what are those worries and/or stresses?
3. Is there a responsibility to public perception given the husband’s position, and if so, is this a source of stress?
4. Does stress associated to the husband’s position manifest itself in your personal life/marriage? If so, how?
5. What are some coping mechanisms you use to deal with stress related to the (husband’s) job?

6. Are there personal/family stressors associated with the life of a public school administrator that deserve careful consideration prior to entering the field?

#### Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for the reader of the study: (a) Stress, (b) Burnout, (c) Spillover Stress, (d) Crossover Stress, (e) Qualitative Research, and (f) Phenomenological Study.

- a. Stress: Hans Selye coined the term in “stress” in 1936 (Pomfrey, 2012). Selye defined it as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it” (1973, p. 692).
- b. Burnout: Maslach et al. (2001) define burnout as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (p. 399).
- c. Spillover Stress: Stress spillover occurs when “stresses experienced in either the work or home domain lead to stresses in the other domain” (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989, p. 175).
- d. Crossover Stress: Stress crossover occurs when “stresses experienced by one’s spouse at work lead to stresses for oneself at home” (Bolger et al., 1989, p. 175).
- e. Qualitative Research: Research providing detailed narrative descriptions and explanations of phenomena investigated, with lesser emphasis given to numerical quantifications; methods used to collect qualitative data include ethnographic practices such as observing and interviewing (Qualitative Research, Education.com, n.d.). “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding

how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

f. Phenomenological Study: Creswell (2007) describes a phenomenological study as that which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 57-58).

### Methodology

The underlying framework of this study is built around the theoretical construct of “crossover” and the underlying mechanisms of the crossover process as identified by Mina Westman (2001). Westman identifies crossover within current models of work-family interaction as an “inter-individual dyadic process where stress and strain experienced by an individual generate similar reactions in another individual (p. 718). Westman further integrates crossover into a job-stress model, integrating role theory, in which “work and family settings are involved in elaborate interchanges over time with their social environments....allow[ing] us to view family members as intimately connected to others in the workplace and vice versa” (p. 719).

This study seeks to understand the impact of the lived experience of male public school administrators and their wives, through a phenomenological qualitative framework. Purposeful or criterion-based sampling was used to identify 4 male public school administrators and their wives. Semi-structured interviews were used and data collected was transcribed and analyzed via a constant comparison method, particularly as

pertains to issues of stress and/or crossover stress. The constant comparison method of data analysis involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). Major themes or patterns in the data were coded and reported.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presents an auto-ethnographical account of 18 months in the administrative career of this researcher. The chapter further contains the problem statement, purpose of the study, justification of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and methodology.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature regarding job-related stress and burnout, as well as crossover stress as applies to a spouse, particularly as relates to educational leaders.

Chapter 3 discusses qualitative research, phenomenological methods, the semi-structured interview strategy, selection of participants, and the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 presents a narrative analysis from the research.

Chapter 5 presents a theme analysis of the research findings.

Chapter 6 provides reflections of the study, implications of the findings for professional practice and preparation, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Stress and Burnout

What is stress? Stress is an ambiguous and often-debated term. Despite widespread use of the term, Feitler and Tokar (1986) point out that it is not a clinical term, and is used rather interchangeably with feelings of anxiety, conflict, threat, strain, and ambiguity. Motowidlo, Packard, and Manning (1986) add that the “term stress is enshrouded by a thick veil of conceptual confusion and divergence of opinion” and that “many authors have noted a lack of consensus on even a definition of stress” (p. 618). They provide their own definition of stress as being an “unpleasant emotional experience associated with elements of fear, dread, anxiety, irritation, annoyance, anger, sadness, grief, and depression” (p. 618). Further, Biesta (2004) adds that stress is a “condition of disequilibrium within the intellectual, emotional and physical state of the individual; it is generated by one’s perceptions of a situation, which result in physical and emotional reactions. It can be either positive or negative depending on one’s interpretations” (p. 17).

Animal scientists have defined stress as “the inability of an animal to cope with its environment, a phenomenon that is revealed by failure to achieve genetic potential” (Dobson & Smith, 2000). Koolhaas et al. (2011) further propose that the term ‘stress’ “should be restricted to conditions where an environmental demand exceeds the natural regulatory capacity of an organism, in particular situations that include unpredictability



and uncontrollability,” which physiologically results in an “uncontrollable neuroendocrine reaction” (p.1291).

Perhaps the simplest of all definitions of stress is provided by the man who coined the term in 1936, internationally recognized authority and pioneer stress researcher, Hans Selye. Selye defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it” (1973, p. 692). Through his research, Selye believed stress to be inevitable. He further believed that physical fatigue would result from the gradual impact of stress (Selye, 1977). Karasek and Theorell (1990) assert that negative outcomes are from a complex set of phenomena, and not just a single event.

Through his work, Selye identified three stages of stress, called General Adaptation Syndrome or G.A.S., as (1) Alarm (an event requiring response), (2) Resistance (coping), and (3) Exhaustion (if long term exposure; Selye, 1976, p. 718). Selye’s link of stress to physiological responses mostly associates stress as a negative, or distress (Selye, 1983). This negative occurs because of a lack of fit between individual needs and the demands of the environment (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994).

According to Feitler and Tokar (1986), people perceive stressors idiosyncratically, meaning that stress may be an individual response to circumstances and events, or personal interpretation (p. 267). Similarly, transactional models of stress see the stress process as a continuing individual struggle for balance between external demands/constraints and internal or personal resources/needs/values (Cox & MacKay, 1981).

Daniels and Guppy (1994) looked at this individual struggle in their study on occupational stress and concluded that an internal locus of control buffered the effects of stressors, while an external locus of control (low autonomy and social support) led to poor wellbeing. Likewise, the findings of Karasek and Theorell (1990) were similar in their Jobs Demands-Control Model, where high psychological demands of a job and low control over the job equaled a decrease in overall well being (p. 32).

In another study, Levi (1990) concluded that if a worker feels unable to control work conditions, or copes ineffectively, or lacks social support, then potentially pathogenic reactions may occur, emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, or physiologically. Farkas (1982) defines this type of occupational stress as “an experience arising from a perceived imbalance between work-related demands and an individual’s capability, power, and motivation to meet these demands, when failure to respond to them is seen as having important consequences” (p. 1).

When this happens, a coping mechanism kicks in and an individual constantly changes their cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the internal or external demands of transactions that tax or exceed their own resources (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). For example, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) list sources of stress for school superintendents as demands on time, a continuous pace, constant meetings, and keeping track of a large number of things at one time (p. 151-152). Given the external locus of control involved with these demands, an individual school superintendent may experience the effects of negative stress.

Negative stress is often associated with “anxiety, frustration, strain, conflict, and tension” as well as “feelings of insecurity, helplessness, and desperation” (Brimm, 1983, p. 64). Over time, the gradual impact of stress can display itself through lost productivity or deterioration of physical or mental health. Stress can have physiological, psychological, and social manifestations (Feitler & Tokar, 1986). Cooper and Cartwright (1994) indicate links between stress and incidence of coronary heart disease, mental breakdown, poor health behaviors, job dissatisfaction, accidents, family problems, and certain forms of cancer (p. 455). Figler (1980) indicates that stress affects individuals at four physical levels:

Level 1: Heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and other physiological metabolic rates.

Level 2: Irritability, anxiety, tension, inability to concentrate, restlessness, and prolonged “level one” symptoms.

Level 3: Headaches, upset stomach, chest pains, and other pronounced physical disorders.

Level 4: Ulcers, strokes, alcoholism, drug addiction, heart attack, and psychosis are indicators of the final stage of debilitating stress. (p. 23).

In addition to these physical/medical symptoms, other consequences may be behavioral or psychological. According to Cooper and Cartwright (1994), behavioral changes, such as an increase in drug or alcohol use, an increase in smoking, accident proneness, or violence may occur (p. 23). They also note psychological consequences such as family problems, sleep disturbances, sexual dysfunction, and depression (p. 24).

Many of these consequences are due to stress that is occupational in nature. About 75% of those who consult a psychiatrist are experiencing problems related to job satisfaction or an inability to unwind (Levi, 1990, p. 1142). People who suffer from

stress are more likely to suffer from debilitating illness due to tension on the job (Savery & Detiuk, 1986).

This type of debilitating stress that originates via the workplace is sometimes referred to as burnout. Ganster and Schaubroeck (1991) seem to treat burnout as a type of chronic stress (p. 279). Cordes and Dougherty (1993) acknowledge a growing consensus around the concept of burnout, but offer no clear distinction between burnout and stress (p. 625). According to Christine Maslach (1982b), however, it is emotional exhaustion that is at the “heart of the burnout syndrome” (p. 3). Maslach is “perhaps the most widely accepted authority on burnout” (Edmonson, 2006, p. 200). Among varying definitions of burnout, Maslach (1982b) offers, “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among people who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (p. 3). Similarly, Cordes and Dougherty (1993) add that “burnout appears to be a unique type of stress syndrome, which includes perceptions of emotional exhaustion, a dehumanization of clients in one’s work, and perceptions of diminished personal accomplishment” (p. 651).

Maslach, with Susan E. Jackson, developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a standardized scale measure to assess burnout (Maslach, 1982b). The Maslach Burnout Inventory was developed as a tool to measure burnout as a result of occupational stress in human service professionals, and is widely recognized in the field (Bakker, Demerouti, & Shaufeli, 2002).

Maslach recognized the susceptibility of service oriented professionals, or professional helpers, to stress and burnout. According to Maslach (1982b), service

oriented professionals are always focused on the problems of others, lack positive feedback (and thus feel unappreciated), often carry a sense of helplessness, and face a high frequency of conflict (1982b). This type of setting can cause “overload,” where one’s burdens exceed the person’s ability to handle them, which is the epitome of stress. Maslach further identified her dimensions of burnout as her three aspects of the Maslach Burnout Inventory:

1. Exhaustion: wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue; physical, psychological, or emotional; loss of concern, loss of trust, loss of interest, and loss of spirit.
2. Cynicism: negative response to others; depersonalization, negative attitude toward others, loss of idealism, and irritability.
3. Inefficiency: negative views of personal accomplishment and negative response towards oneself; low morale, depression, and a sense of failure. (Maslach, 1982a, p. 32)

Service professionals experiencing overload and role conflict and ambiguity often feel alone and without the support or feedback of supervisors (Maslach et al., 2001). Further, they can feel helpless and without the authority or resource to fix the problems they face. The nature of their work “often takes place within a larger organization that includes hierarchies, operating rules, resources, and space distribution. All of these factors can have a far-reaching and persistent influence, particularly when they violate basic expectations of fairness and equity” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 409).

#### Stress, Burnout, and School Leadership

“The toughest job in America today is school leadership and school board members and administrators are feeling the heat” (Carr, 2003, p. 14). The job is not only tough, but according to Whitaker (1996) the role of school administrator is prone to burnout due to the isolation inherent to the role, the time and effort expended, and the

organizational structure (p. 61). In fact, the organizational structure of schools in general may put everyone within that structure at risk. Jury, Willower, and DeLacy (1975) characterize schools as having, “vague and diverse goals, ambiguous criteria of success, lack of a widely accepted technology of teaching, a mandated relationship with clients who may or may not be willing participants, high population density, stimulus overload especially for teachers, a host of logistical problems, and political vulnerability” (p. 299).

While everyone within the service-oriented profession of education may be inherently at-risk for factors of occupational stress and burnout, both Thomas (1986) and Borg and Riding (1993) acknowledge that most stress research in education has been focused on teachers, with school administrators receiving less attention.

This seems odd given that school administration appears to fit what Hewlett and Luce (2006) have deemed an “extreme job.” They define an “extreme job” as one frequently working 60 or more hours per week, considered a high wage earner, and with at least five of the following characteristics: unpredictable flow of work, fast paced and with tight deadlines, inordinate scope of responsibility that amounts to more than one job, work-related events outside of regular work hours, availability to clients twenty-four-seven, responsible for profit and loss, frequent travel, a large number of direct reports, and physical presence at the workplace at least ten hours per day (p. 51).

In addition to fitting many of these “extreme job” characteristics, school administrators “deal with constant pressures from multiple direction: school boards, community groups, teachers, parents, and students” (Bruckner, 1998, p. 24). Ackerman

and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) recognize this “leadership life” as a “complex balance of conflicting forces and tensions that manage to function most of the time” (p. 26).

The balancing act of the school administrator doesn't appear to be getting any easier. According to Carr (2003), “the demands of the profession are increasing at exponential rates” (p. 18). Whitaker (2003) cites international evidence of tension between leadership and management, principal shortages, school choice pressures, and a tightening of accountability in regard to student achievement, budgets, etc. This in addition to what Whitaker (1996) had previously identified as frustrations with “sheer overload,” high stress due to a variety of tasks and diverse roles, and simultaneous pressure for “back to basics” and government reform (p. 60-61).

A more recent 2011 study by Singh and Al-Fadhi revealed the increased frustration and pressure of government reform/legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which imposed sweeping federal requirements upon schools resulting in challenges regarding funding, narrowing curriculum (and thus frustrated teachers), altered expectations, retaining staff, and demands for increased achievement despite influencing variables outside of one's control. As a result, Singh and Al-Fadhi conclude that “the responsibilities of administrators have increased significantly in the NCLB era and greater demands are being made of them” (p. 753).

Governmental pressure may be increasing, but it is not new. Thirty years ago, Brimm (1983) wrote that,

whatever the sources of stress or the value assigned to them, educational leaders across the nation confront daily the routine administrative tasks that consume an inordinate amount of time, the conflicts which occur between the schools and their various ‘publics,’ the increased emphasis on teacher evaluation and

employment recommendations, and the sense of helplessness in managing problem situations such as governmental mandates and uncertain job expectations. (p. 69)

Brimm's commentary on the pressures of governmental mandates was prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales, and similar acts which gave regulatory authority over schools to the national government in the United States, No Child Left Behind in 2001 and Race To The Top in 2009.

According to Biesta (2004), this rise of accountability is part of a much wider social transformation affecting many spheres of modern life. Biesta further contends that schools are caught in an era where relationships between government and citizens is becoming more economic, where the state is seen as the provider and the taxpayer as the consumer of public services and thus quality becomes about "processes and procedures rather than content and aims" (p. 248). As a result of this phenomenon, Biesta indicates that we see a change in the identities and self perceptions of everyone involved, and a "deprofessionalization," where individuals (school administrators included) are forced to react and meet the needs of customers instead of using their professional judgment (p. 249).

Such a deprofessionalization can leave school administrators feeling less effective. Borg and Riding (1993) note that their study results "also attest to the multidimensional nature of administrative stress. In view of the ever increasing demands that parents, teachers, schoolchildren, and the educational department make on administrators, it would appear that administrators are bound to become more pressured with the likely outcome that their effectiveness is reduced" (p. 20).



In their 2002 book, *The Wounded Leader*, Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski recognize the multidimensional nature of administrative stress and write, “school leadership can take a person from an inspired moment to a crisis in an instant” and thus ask the question, “How can I be all these things to all these people?” (p. xii). Ackerman, Donaldson, and van der Bogert (1996) add that “the more you care and the more helpful you are, the longer stretches the line of problems to solve and people to help (p. 165). Thus we see a constant cycle of what Evans (1996) identifies in school leadership as the “prevailing bias toward avoiding any potentially serious conflict,” which in itself can be stressful (p. 274).

Conflict with people rose to the top of the stressors in a 1980 national study of school administrators by Koff, Laffey, Olson, and Cichon. As a result of 1,291 responses to their study, the four themes that emerged relevant to administrative stress were teacher conflict (most stressful overall), student conflict (most stressful among high school principals), helplessness/security, and management tasks/problem solving. One of the 1,291 respondents nearly summarized the results of the study with comments regarding the “constant demands of the job, lack of sufficient time, threat of the unexpected” and “management of conflicts among school and non-school personnel” (p. 3). Similarly, Borg and Riding (1993) found four broad sources of administrative stress to be inadequate resources, workload, lack of support and resolving conflicts, and work conditions and responsibilities (p. 13).

### The Principal

According to a study titled *Principal Concerns: Iowa May Face Statewide Demand* by Michael DeArmond and Monica Oujidani from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, nearly half of Iowa's school principals will be eligible for retirement over the next five years (2012). Given that reports of principal shortages have been well documented (Whitaker, 2001), such a conclusion may be cause for concern. But why aren't more educators looking towards this career path? According to one superintendent quoted by Whitaker, the "principalship is a very difficult job; in many cases, I think it's more difficult than mine. I think the demands are very, very high for time, for expectations that are unreasonable of people – expectations from parents and from staff" (p. 88).

In his 2011 book, Pace writes, "expectations for school principals are increasing. Today's principals find themselves in an increasingly complex, pressure-filled environment that requires much more than was expected even a few years ago" (p. xi). Results from a study by Shumate (2000) would seem to support such a statement, finding that 73% of principals surveyed reported experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, and 59% moderate to high levels of burnout and depersonalization (p. 102).

This phenomenon does not seem to be unique to American principals. Borg and Riding (1993) cite various studies in support of their conclusion that "a considerable portion of head teachers and deputy heads find their role as administrators particularly stressful" (p. 5). Further, Harris (2007) notes, "recent statistics on teacher stress and head teacher stress, and the inability to fill head teacher vacancies in England and Wales

suggests that the issue of teacher and leader stress and burnout needs to be acknowledged and faced by teachers and leaders themselves as well as government and local authorities” (p. 137). And finally, Savery and Detiuk (1986) found increasing demands on Australian principals by a number of diverse demands (p. 272).

There are a number of factors inherent to the position of principal, or lead teacher as it is referred to in the United Kingdom, that leads to stress and burnout. Role overload and role conflict appear to be major stressors for principals (Savery & Detiuk, 1986). Principals seem to be caught in an ongoing dilemma to manage on the one hand, and try to initiate and implement significant change on the other (Whitaker, 1996). Whitaker (1996) quoted one principal as saying, “In this district, administrators are suppose to be in charge. If something goes wrong, I’m responsible. My job is on the line if I can’t solve the problem. Being on the line all the time causes a feeling of powerlessness because I can’t possibly control all the variables” (p. 163).

A survey of high school principals by Combs and Edmonson (2009) found the most challenging responsibilities reported to be accountability, human resources or personnel issues, and morale/motivation of staff (p. 452). These results were similar to the findings of Combs et al. (2009), where the greatest challenges reported for principals were accountability for student achievement, relationships with parents, motivating teachers, and balancing a variety of responsibilities (p. 12). Finally, Shumate (2000) used the Maslach Burnout Inventory to identify the top five stress factors for principals as:

1. Activities outside of normal work hours at the expense of the family.
2. Workload and the inability to finish in a normal working day.
3. Number of meetings occupying too much time.
4. Compliance with state and federal policy.

5. Imposing excessively high expectations on ones self.  
(p. 104)

According to Combs and Edmonson (2009), one third of all Texas principals surveyed (n=190) reported high levels of burnout and they further conclude that the presence of burnout may be under-reported given that principals experiencing burnout may be less likely to participate in such a study (p. 453-546). With such levels of stress and burnout associated to the position of the principal, it may be reasonable to assume some degree of consequence or personal cost to assuming such a position.

The personal costs of working this way become painfully plain to most principals as well. The open-endedness of the job makes it extraordinarily easy to put in sixty or more hours at school in a typical week. Being responsive and helpful often leads to making phone calls from home at night or on weekends. Being at the center of things is physically taxing and, over long periods, is very stressful. Being important in the school and in the community can make the principal a target of resentment and a repository for public sentiments about schooling and other educational issues. These realities of principals' work threaten the boundaries of principals' lives: between public and private, between career and family, between professional and personal. Many of us need these boundaries to maintain a sense of balance and meaning to our lives. The leadership role and its work can readily consume us and our families. (Ackerman et al., 1996, p. 164)

The personal costs of the principalship can be both health and family related. In their study, Savery and Detiuk (1986) concluded that due to the positive relationship between high blood pressure and high-perceived stress, there is a need to reduce perceived excessive stress levels of principals (p. 279). Whitaker (1996) found that when asking principals about the consequences of stress and emotional exhaustion, most described consequences related to health and personal relationships. One principal indicated that "I spent two days in the hospital with a heart arrhythmia" and the "doctor said it was stress related" (p. 64). Another principal commented that, "it has affected my

sleep. We drink more on certain nights...we beat ourselves up emotionally” (p. 64). And finally, a third principal stated, “Sometimes you have to come in, close the door, and blow off steam. You can’t always take stuff home. I have a concern on how this job affects home life. There are many times when I go home frustrated and it carries over to the family” (p. 64).

These comments are consistent with the findings of Hewlett and Luce (2006) when they asked professionals about the effects of “extreme jobs” on health and relationships. Hewlett and Luce found that 69% of those surveyed indicated that they would be healthier if they worked less, 58% indicated that work got in the way of their relationship with their children, and 46% of respondents indicated that their job got in the way of a good relationship with their spouse (p. 58).

### The Superintendent

The extreme job ethos among school administrators isn’t reserved for principals. Lafee (2012) cites a 2003 survey of the Colorado Association of School Executives in which many superintendents reported routinely working in excess of 80 hours per week (p. 20). These long hours, combined with very visible and political aspects of the job, don’t seem to be anything new for school superintendents. In 1966, Betty Wetzel, then a wife of a 30-year superintendent spoke about the increasingly difficult job of the superintendent.

Within a decade, it seemed, the schools were charged with teaching everything from contraception to nuclear physics, while the ultra-right simultaneously muddied the already churning waters with charges of Communist plots and called for a return to chastity, the flag, and the three Rs. All things were possible, in the minds of the American public, if the schools would just shape up.

Meanwhile, the superintendent juggled hot potatoes and made the daily decisions on matters about which most citizens were hotly partisan and few if any neutral. (Wetzel, 1973, p. 157)

Wetzel went on to note that in 1971-1972, 21 of 261 superintendents in Massachusetts were asked to resign, or quit under fire, and further cited 14 deaths from heart failure, 15 cases of heart attacks, eight cases of severe ulcers requiring hospitalization, and five nervous breakdowns (p. 158).

Fast-forward 43 years from Wetzel's account of the superintendency and Fenzel et al. (2009) cite their own study of 131 superintendents, concluding that superintendents encounter considerable stress similar to corporate executives due to time pressures and conflicting demands of constituencies (p. 1-2). They further concluded that superintendents are vulnerable to occupational stressors such as role overload and high levels of fiscal and public responsibility (p. 7).

Add to this the pressure brought on by heightened accountability, and Sternberg (2001) quoted one superintendent as saying, "you're so consumed, it becomes your whole life" (p. 1). According to Glass and Frenaceschini (2007), superintendent stress can be "a disabling condition affecting behavior, judgment, and performance" (p. 47). Goldstein (1992) told the story of superintendent Ramon Cortines and his account of his 1991 emergency room visit for bleeding ulcers. According to Cortines, "I just lost it emotionally. I broke into tears. It was my lifestyle. I didn't sleep. I didn't eat right. I'm impatient as hell, and I internalize a lot" (p. 9). Another superintendent, Peter McWalters reflected on his 1987 superintendency by saying, "everybody said I got older. I lost my hair and got wrinkles. People were surprised my family didn't break up." (p. 15).

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) identified budget, time and restrictions in dealing with incompetent teachers, expelling students, and news media among the sources of stress according to superintendents (p. 125). They further note “how political the job is” and that “superintendents seem rarely to be free of either the internal or external political consequences of any decision they make” (p. 135). According to Superintendent Dan Blacketter, “It just seems like you’re on exhibit a lot of the time. They want to see the superintendent at the ballgame, but no one really wants to sit by you” (p. 16).

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) note the loneliness “endemic to the position of every top executive of an organization” (p.141). They note the isolation of the position with superintendent comments such as “finding someone I can really talk to,” “you have to watch yourself all the time,” and “when it comes down to it, if something blows, it’s yours” (p. 141-142).

This isolation may be exasperated by the public nature of the superintendent’s decision making, and due to organizational restraints, s/he may not be able to express rationale to those decisions publicly. According to Lazarus (1966), “stress reactions appear to be the result of conditions that disrupt or endanger well-established personal and social values of the people exposed to them” (p. 4). Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) quote one superintendent as saying, “You know, the system is all set so that somehow the wheels turn. It’s when a human body gets caught between two wheels that I have a problem..... What do I do? How can I get the kid out with the least damage” (p 153)?

Conflicting demands and compromise, according to Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), may create demands which force the superintendent “to act at variance with some

of his own values” (p. 147). They further note that “shades of grey” can “serve as a personal protection device to help him rationalize those times when he ignores an ethical value he holds” (p. 148). “Even if the superintendent wins, the victory may be a Pyrrhic one, since he violated informal organizational norms in favor of his own ethics” (p. 149). The loneliness of the position can be enhanced by “having to live with the knowledge that he had taken a position in which he didn’t believe” (p. 150).

Whether in a large urban district facing diversity needs, or in a rural system where resources and life in a fishbowl can be a challenge, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) note challenging stressors for superintendents nationally. According to Berryhill (2011) a high rate of turnover in the superintendency has become a national problem. Similarly, Bluhm (1998) attributes the 30% annual turnover of Vermont superintendents to burnout and job demands (p. 49).

According to a 1990 survey of 1,800 superintendents, 8% reported experiencing very great stress, while 42% reported experiencing considerable or some stress (Goldstein, 1992, p. 12). These numbers could be higher in reality. According to one superintendent, “I don’t think anyone really talks about it much. Sometimes people hide it. It is macho or strong to act as if it didn’t occur. If you let people know you are bleeding too much, that is not seen as good” (p. 17).

According to Jim O’Connell, Executive Director of the New York State Council of Superintendents, “Stress is becoming a greater liability of the job than ever before. I’ve never seen it tougher” (Goldstein, 1992, p. 9-10). One superintendent seems to echo these sentiments, saying, “My wife is a low-keyed person and very supportive. She



thinks I'm nuts to be in this, that I'm burning myself out. I'm going every minute. I'm never home at night. I think she sees me going through things like school closings and wondering why the hell I'm killing myself" (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, p. 163).

Former Superintendent Jake Eberwein, may have summed up the all-consuming nature of the superintendency when he said, "I don't think you fully understand this until you've had the job awhile" (Lafee, 2012, p. 19).

### Stress, Burnout, and the Family

Lawson (1999) quoted one school administrator as saying, "We bankrupt ourselves when we don't have time to recharge with those we love. It shouldn't feel like you're a bad employee when you seek to limit your time commitment to 50 hours" (p. 98). The demands and stresses of the school administrator may be compounded by such guilt, and may add to the family unit as well. According to Kisch (2012), "the subject of how to lead a productive work life alongside the care of one's family has drawn scant attention in the research literature in regards to superintendents or anyone else who holds the top executive reins of a public agency at the local level" (p. 42). In fact, empirical data exploring the status of family and personal relationships among school administrators are sparse and limited in scope (Lafee, 2012).

Helen Sharp, whose husband is a superintendent, suggests that such evidence of the impact of school administration positions on ones domestic relationships may be scarce, but anecdotal reports suggest the existence of such tension as an occupational hazard (Sharp, 1998). During the same year, Bruckner (1998) concluded, "the heavy demands on time, the conflicting nature of responsibilities and the high visibility of the

job take a heavy toll on the personal lives of superintendents and their relationships with spouses and family members” (p. 24).

Such comments are consistent with the findings of Maslach (1982b) in regard to the family impact of high stress and burnout careers. Maslach (1982b) cites a tendency to bring work problems/emotions home, thus causing fighting and bickering, as one demand placed on the family due to a stressful job environment. Secondly, Maslach (1982b) indicates a propensity for the working spouse to be emotionally withdrawn at home, less willing to give to others outside of the workplace, and more apt to create “barriers” by their refusal to “talk shop” (p. 83). Other demands include a propensity of the caregiver to treat family like a client, negative coping strategies such as excessive drinking, and long hours away from the family unit.

Sharp (1998) echoes the concerns regarding time, both in terms of long hours and public availability, as a harsh expectation of the job of the school administrator. She cites meetings, school events, forums, coffees, service group projects, and committee work as time demands, which pulled at her superintendent husband. Sharp further described “routine intrusions” which “usually require an immediate response to what can range from potentially serious problems to frivolous matters of concern only to the caller” (p. 29).

Combs et al. (2009) quoted the wife of another school administrator as saying, “It’s hard to make plans because things always come up and he needs to go back to school or take care of something right then” (p. 44). Such occurrences not only limit ones time with family, but according to Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), many school

administrators then feel pressure to ensure that their limited time with family is “quality” or “special” time (p. 164).

According to a study by Lambert, Kass, Piotrowski, and Vodanovich (2006), employees experiencing work-family conflict were less satisfied with their lives in general and thus, as the demands of the work and family increase, role conflict increases and life satisfaction decreases (p. 71). To survive such conflict, Lafee (2012) cites reliance on a strong spouse who understands the demands of the job and who can fill all of the necessary gaps and shortcomings that occur as a result (p. 21). Lafee notes that many administrators have spouses who also work in education, and due to similar values, understand the job. As a superintendent’s wife, Sharp (1998) agrees: “Not unlike most domestic relationships, school leaders tend to choose mates with similar character traits and value systems” (p. 28).

### The Fishbowl

Regardless of family support and congruent values with ones spouse, it is clear that the demands of the role of school administrator can be substantial and ever-present to the family unit. According to Carr (2012),

Superintendents know they work and live in a giant fishbowl. School board members, teachers, community members and the news media have been known to scrutinize what kind of vehicle they drive, who they socialize with outside of work, whether they drink alcohol, where they live and when they leave the house each morning (p. 26).

Family privacy always has been an issue for superintendents, but experts and school officials say the challenges have intensified in recent years owing to the exponential growth in social media and states’ fiscal woes. (p. 27)

Living in the public eye can shape the personal lives of superintendents and their families in a myriad of ways – influencing the restaurants they patronize, the friends they hang out with and the hobbies they choose. (p. 29)

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) quoted one superintendent's wife as saying, "...five days a week, 18 hours a day, and being constantly in the public's eye, no matter what we do. Perhaps that has been the most difficult thing for me to adjust to" (p. 175). Blumberg and Blumberg note this problem of "not being able to hide from the public eye" (p. 158). They further recognize the sense of being alone, even with a lot of people around – a phenomenon that they claim to be a part of the superintendency.

According to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), there are a host of issues, which are "threatening the barriers between public and private, career and family, and professional and personal" (p. 29). Even private moments or ordinary matters of living, according to Blumberg and Blumberg, such as shopping, or dining in a restaurant can be moments a accessibility for superintendents and their off-the-job life becomes perceived as "public property" (p. 156). They quoted one superintendent as saying,

It's my perception that being a superintendent means living your life in a fishbowl. Even if I think I've left the affairs of the day in the office, when I take my kids out shopping that evening I am very sensitive to the fact that I am still the superintendent of schools and everybody knows it. I know I feel that pressure. I can't walk away from it. I can't be just another guy on the street.  
(Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, p. 157)

### The First Lady

Based on their interviews with five wives of superintendents, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) note that the wives are also "keenly aware of the pressures and stresses under which their husbands work" (p. 180). They further note that the wife of a superintendent "typically lives more closely and intimately with the effects that her husband's job has on their family than he does" (p. 174). One of the wives interviewed said, "There's always a guardedness. In public, a superintendent doesn't have the option

of voicing his own opinions or his own feelings. There's always the problem of living up to the image, and I guess along with that is the image of the superintendent's wife" (p. 176).

The wives of public figures have long felt the pressures and importance of image in American culture. According to Gillespie (1990), the wives of public figures have been viewed historically as a morality symbol and it has been "largely taken for granted that a public official will appear with a wife at his side for certain ceremonial events" (p. 379). Gillespie further notes a certain "nonverbal assurance" that the presence of a wife seems to communicate to an audience about her husband (p. 384). Further, according to Gillespie, the wife or family as a "symbol of stability and validity taps a very deep vein in American civil life" (p. 380). The presence of the wife "assures the mass audience that a public person has nothing to hide" and offers reassurance that her "husband will be a safe investment" (p. 386-387).

While typically associated with politicians, the role or phenomenon of "first lady" seems applicable to the wife of the school administrator, particularly in a small town where the school can serve as a hub of social activity in the community, and the school administrator is perhaps the highest paid public employee in town. According to Sharp (1998), herself married to a superintendent, the "superintendent and wife must be model citizens," and "act like objective yet gracious diplomats," while "the spouse is the pleasant, smiling, background person" (p. 28). She further notes that the public persona can seem "unrealistic" (p. 28).

It would seem that this “first lady” role of the wife of the school administrator is not a new one. In 1958, Mrs. O.H. Farrar, wife of a school principal, provided the following for the 42nd Annual Convention of the National Association of Secondary Principals:

- The principal’s wife must have a thorough understanding of her husband’s position, and what his responsibilities are, before she can assume her role as the principal’s wife in the community. I am sure we are all in agreement that the successfulness of a principal depends to a great degree on his wife.
  - In order for the principal to achieve success, his wife must adjust her life to a new community, which is now her community.
  - The principal’s wife must accept the fact that many times personal plans must be cancelled at the “eleventh hour,” and it is her responsibility to make adjustments accordingly.
  - A principal’s wife should take an active part in community affairs.
  - She must know when to speak, and when not to comment on school policies or school news when discussed at some social gathering.
  - The principal’s wife should acquaint herself with the “right people” in the community and belong to the “right groups.”
  - She must know the correct things to do as the occasion presents itself, and be well-groomed, and dressed in good taste.
  - She must share her husband, her time, and her home with the community.
- (Farrar et al., 1958, p. 189)

Mrs. Farrar’s comments and advice continue along this same vein, and although may seem antiquated, or stereotypical in nature, they do echo the long standing perspective in regard to the pressures placed on administrative wives due to public perception.

Carr (2012) quotes another more contemporary administrator’s wife as saying, “I needed a folder telling me what to do. I didn’t know how to handle the stress loads that went with the job. I didn’t know I had a job, honestly” (p. 29). According to Carr, this wife tried to distance herself from her husband as people “bent her ear about their school-related concerns” (p. 29). Similarly, Wolcott (1973) quoted another wife as saying, “In a

way it's a rather lonesome life. You're involved to a certain extent, and yet you're never in on it. You're very definitely involved in all the problems and aspects of the school, but you're sort of on the sidelines" (p. 53).

In addition to community social pressures, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) also list frequent moves to new communities, a desire for one's own identity, and the need to protect one's family as other conflicts for the wife of the school administrator. Jeanie Baker, wife of a superintendent notes that, "it would be nice to have a superintendents' spouses support group" (Carr, 2012, p. 33). According to Gooden (2012), "the glass house in which the school leader's family lives may be novel, but it is not something that most relish" (p. 55).

#### Crossover Stress and the Spouse

According to Westman (2001), "studies of crossover of job stress and strain between partners have shown that job demands are transmitted from job incumbents to their partners" (p. 717) and in studies on the topic, "people rarely succeeded in barricading distress generated at work from the family domain" (p. 734). Similarly, Bolger et al. (1989) report "statistically reliable links between the work stress of one spouse and independent reports of home stress on the part of the other spouse" (p. 181).

Westman (2001) identifies three mechanisms for crossover stress as:

1. Direct Empathetic Crossover: Spouse can imagine how they would feel and experience and share their feelings.
2. Spuriousness – Common Stressors: Stressors common to both partners in their environment.
3. Crossover as Indirect Process: Direct effect of partner's coping and other partner's well being (i.e. withdrawn communication of one partner can increase the stress of the other partner). (p. 729-732)

Lawson (1999) further identifies the diminished quality of family time simply by its diminished quantity due to the job demands of a working spouse (p. 99). According to the wife of one superintendent, “School is something he can’t leave there. It’s something that you more or less live with all the time. He has these problems he just can’t turn off at the end of the day” (Wolcott, 1973, p. 54). Another administrative spouse echoed this all-encompassing aspect of the job when she said, “It seemed like his job had priority over everything that I might want to do or wanted him to do” (Bruckner, 1998, p. 26).

This stress contagion in married couples is supported by quantitative evidence that “overloads in one role domain lead to overloads in another domain” (Bolger et al., 1989, p. 181). Few studies, however, have directly focused on the job of the school administrator and their spouses. One of few such studies was a survey of 575 spouses of school administrators, distributed by the Nebraska Council of School Administrators, in which Bruckner (1998) calls the spouses’ comments “emotional and troubling” (p. 24). In this survey, the following were most cited by spouses as sources of their worries for their administrative spouse:

- Job demands
  - Controversial board decisions
  - Increasingly serious behavioral problems with students
  - Expectations to volunteer time to multiple community projects and organizations
  - Lack of sleep/physical strain and well-being
  - Time away from own kids
  - Family takes a back seat to the job
- (Bruckner, 1998, p. 25)

Studies in other service-oriented, high stress work domains, have been more plentiful, yet have yielded similar results. In a study of 142 couples in which one spouse



held the role of police officer, Jackson and Maslach (1982) concluded that when burnout was present, the spouse reported that the officer was unable to shake their professional role when off the job, that they often handled their own children as they would someone on the job, and that they increased the frequency of negative coping mechanisms such as smoking, drinking and isolation. Jackson and Maslach further concluded that the wives in this study were typically unsatisfied with their husband's job. Similarly, Westman and Etzion (1995) studied 101 male military officers and their wives and found that the husbands' sense of control and burnout positively related to the corresponding variables measured for their wives.

Studies involving personnel at correctional facilities have produced similar results. Long and Voges (1987) studied 301 male prison officers and perceptions of job-related stress and found shared perceptions of stress with their wives. Burke (1982) studied 41 male senior correctional administrators and the well being of their spouses and that the work demands of the husbands had an influence beyond the workplace and into the lives of the spouses.

Similarly, Burke, Weir, and DuWors (1980) studied 85 male senior administrators of correctional facilities and also found a relationship between the husbands' work demands and the wives' well being. They concluded that as work demands increased, the results were less marital and life satisfaction, less social participation, and increased psychosomatic symptoms and negative feelings. There were no cases in which the wife's wellbeing enhanced as a function of increased occupational demands on the husband.

Studies of crossover stress in other professions have yielded similar results. In a study of 149 spouses of certified public accountants, Pavett (1986) concluded that, “stress in the workplace can influence not only the worker but also the family of the worker” (p. 1152). Rook, Dooley, and Catalano (1991) did a longitudinal study of 1,383 married women and found that their “husbands’ job stressors were associated with elevated psychological distress among their wives” (p. 171) and that the adverse effects of the husbands’ job stressors were “substantial in magnitude” (p. 173). And more recently, Montgomery, Peeters, Schaufeli, and Panagopolou (2008) found evidence of crossover stress among 78 information-technology professional and their spouses.

Another relevant study outside of the field of school administration may be that of Bakker, Demerouti, and Dollard (2008), in which potential crossover stress was studied among 168 dual-earner couples. Findings of this study were that high job demands positively related to conflicts with the partner, increased overload and emotionally demanding interaction with clients resulted in increased anger and unpleasantness towards the partner, and that increased job demands may lead to negative interactions with the partner due to an inability to relax and recover for family responsibilities (p. 908). These findings are consistent with Cordes and Dougherty (1993) who drew from several studies to conclude that, “not only does the individual suffer, but the employees family and friends, the organization, and the people with whom the employee interacts during the work day all bear the costs of this.... problem” (639).

So what does all of this mean for the spouse of the school administrator? In Bruckner’s aforementioned 1998 survey of 575 Nebraska school administrator spouses,

spouses indicated a perception of dual personalities, noting that their spouse was less pleasant at home and sometimes seemed less in touch with their own children than the accomplishments of kids at school. One administrator's wife commented on the survey, "He's short with us. His mind is occupied with other things...the public gets his best side" (p. 25). Another indicated that her husband was "talked out by the time he gets home" (p. 25).

These comments are interesting given that "data suggests that talking to ones spouse may help to reduce some of the negative stress reactions" (Rook et al., 1991, p. 1153). Sternberg (2001) quoted Lane Plugge, a superintendent citing the stress of being let go by a district after 12 years, as saying, "I find great refuge in my spouse. It's important to have someone you can share everything with" (p. 13). Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) quoted another superintendent as saying,

It's a crucial thing for me. My wife happens to be most supportive of the superintendency and of my professional career. She's a real therapist. She knows the ups and downs, and we really don't even have to talk about them. I don't go for a day without unloading a problem. We both find it great therapy for ourselves. (p. 169)

Blumberg and Blumberg further quoted administrators' wives on this topic as saying, "It depends on what the issue is," "He uses me as a sounding board and also vents his frustrations now and then. Particularly this happens in situations where he can't speak with anyone else, because in the role of superintendent, there's nobody to talk to. It's a lonely spot," "I'm probably his best listener," and "I can listen to him for hours. But I can never repeat anything to anybody. I mean, in a sense it's like a confidential relationship between a client and analyst" (p. 181).

Still, according to Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), other administrators take an entirely different approach to handling their job related stress and the degree to which they involve or offload with their spouse. According to some superintendents, “There are things she’s better off not knowing or speaking about,” “I don’t share those problems,” “I really don’t want to talk about my job at home,” and “I don’t want those kind of tensions to carry over into the home. I want to try and keep that all separate” (p. 169-170). Such comments support the study of Bolger et al. (1989), whose data documented the existence of a “stress compensation process” in the home, where “men and women reduce involvements in stressful home situations following a stressful day at work” (p. 181).

Regardless of the approach at home, the literature clearly suggests that the job of public school administrator, like other service leaders, is not only stressful, but carries implications for the spouse/family. Be it time, public perception, withdrawal, or an off-loading of worries from one spouse to another, the wives of male public school administrators may recognize consequences perceived as negative from their husband’s job.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of male public school administrators and their wives, through a phenomenological qualitative framework. Although the stress and demands involved with public school administration, as well as the phenomena of “burnout,” have been well documented (Combs et al., 2009; Combs & Edmonson, 2009; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 1996; Whitaker, 1996; Whitaker, 2001) relatively little has been written specifically about the impact of such a chosen profession in regard to the family unit of the public school administrator. Such stressors and perceptions are fairly unknown as related to wives of male public school administrators and the husband-wife relationship. Studies of crossover stress in relation to public school administration and their spouses have not been as plentiful other service-oriented, high stress work domains, such as police officers, fire fighters, correctional workers, public accountants, etc.

This study seeks to understand the real life stressors of the male school public administrator and their spouse. Further, the study seeks to understand the impact on family life per perceptions within the community.

The underlying framework of this study is built around the theoretical construct of “crossover” and the underlying mechanisms of the crossover process as identified by Mina Westman (2001). Westman identifies crossover within current models of work-family interaction as an “inter-individual dyadic process where stress and strain

experienced by an individual generate similar reactions in another individual (p. 718). Westman further integrates crossover into a job-stress model, integrating role theory, in which “work and family settings are involved in elaborate interchanges over time with their social environments...allow[ing] us to view family members as intimately connected to others in the workplace and vice versa” (p. 719).

### The Research Problem

“Educational administration programs need to fully prepare principals for the realities of the job” (Whitaker, 1996, p. 69). Just under half of principals in Iowa will be eligible for retirement in the next five years (DeArmond & Oujidani, 2012). “There is widespread agreement that in the United States schools are facing a dearth of leadership capable of providing good leadership” and “constant reports on the shortage of school leaders, as well as concerns with the job itself, find more wounded leaders leaving or languishing in the world of schools than ever before” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 5).

Pace described his own experience as a school principal, stating that, “beyond the unexpected complexity of the issues themselves, I was almost wholly unprepared for the way many of them would make me feel – full of anticipation, fear, anger, and often incredulity” (Pace, 2011, p. xii). Data provided by Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) supports Pace’s comments, noting that 80% of superintendents and 69% of principals felt university educational leadership programs are out of touch with what happens in today’s schools.

Given the potential shortage of school administrators, and the ever-increasing complexities of the job, it is imperative that educational leadership programs better anticipate the needs of future students. This study seeks to add a personal level to such preparedness by exposing the unintended consequences of the profession. According to Terre Davis, a veteran administrative search consultant, “They need to go into the job... and know what it’s going to do to the family...” (Kisch, 2012, p. 48).

### The Research Design

Phenomenological qualitative research was used to collect data for this study. “The qualitative paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 5). Similarly, Merriam (2009) describes qualitative research as seeking to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research in which individuals (those who have experienced a certain phenomenon) are asked to describe their everyday lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). According to Grbich (2007), “phenomenology is an approach which attempts to understand the hidden meanings and the essence of an experience together with how participants make sense of these” (p. 84). Dieser (2006) adds that phenomenological research identifies the “essence” of human experience. This

study captured the essence or core meaning of what it means to be, or be married to, a male school public school administrator.

The process of collecting information involved primarily in-depth interviews with male public administrators and their wives, at a location of their choice. The resulting data was then be used to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). According to Atkinson (1998), “Most people are eager to tell of their experience, to tell the stories they have lived, because they are what they know best and are also what are of most interest to them. As we listen to someone else’s life story, we are struck by how the story hits us, by how it moves us, by how it connects with something that we are directly familiar with, too” (p. 22).

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used and data collected taped and analyzed via a constant comparison method, particularly as pertains to issues of stress and/or crossover. The semi-structured interview process, according to Barriball and While (1994), is “well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (p. 330). Due to the potentially diverse experiences of the participants, it may be necessary to vary from a strict interview script, and rather use a mix of grand tour questions and probing questions (Merriam, 2009).

Each interview was transcribed in its entirety. The constant comparison method of data analysis was used, comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). Major themes or patterns in the data were coded and reported. According to Thomas (2006), “The primary purpose of the inductive



approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238).

Following the transcription of each interview, member checking was used to ensure validity of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a study (p. 314). Member checking consists of “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Protection of the participants remained a priority at all times. According to the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues,

Regardless of whether research offers the prospect of direct benefit to human subjects, long-standing ethical principles constrain the unfettered pursuit of knowledge. For research with human subjects to be ethical, volunteers must be treated fairly and with respect, subjected only to reasonable risks from which proportionate humanitarian benefit can be obtained, and not treated as mere means to the ends of others. (2011)

Full disclosure of the study and signed consent was included for all participants.

Confidentiality was maintained, as only the researcher knows the identity of the subjects.

Upon transcription, all audio was erased. Following the completion of the study, all transcription was shredded. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Further, anonymity was protected by excluding responses which contained specific identifying information or situations.

### Interview Questions

Each interview began with the same general starter questions, allowing the conversation to drive the questions during the interview. When applicable, probing questions were used to follow the general starter questions. “Probes are questions or comments that follow up something already asked. It is virtually impossible to specify these ahead of time because they are dependent on how the participant answers the lead questions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 100). Field notes were also used to aid in interpretation of “the content of what is being said, the meaning which the interviewee attaches to it, what is communicated via body posture, the voice quality, movements, and so on” (Schamberger, 1997, p. 25). The following are the general starter questions that were used.

1. Is the job of public school administrator stressful, and if so, what are the indicators?
2. If wives perceive certain stresses associated with their spouse’s job, do wives worry or feel stress as a result, and if so, what are those worries and/or stresses?
3. Is there a responsibility to public perception given the husband’s position, and if so, is this a source of stress?
4. Does stress associated to the husband’s position manifest itself in your personal life/marriage? If so, how?
5. What are some coping mechanisms you use to deal with stress related to the (husband’s) job?

6. Are there personal/family stressors associated with the life of a public school administrator that deserve careful consideration prior to entering the field?

#### Description of Participants

Purposeful or criterion-based sampling was used to identify four male public school administrators and their wives. Merriam (2009) states, “To begin purposive sampling, you must first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied” (p. 77). For the purpose of this study, all participants reside together in the State of Iowa and have been married at least two years before and two years after the husband’s entry into school administration.

#### Couple #1: John and Brenda Abraham

John Abraham currently serves as an elementary principal in an Iowa community of approximately 12,000 people (2,400 students). His wife, Brenda, works in the offices at the local college. John, a native of his current town, has lived on the same street his entire life, while Brenda grew up in a small community nearby. The couple have two college-age children, both of whom attend school nearby. John and Brenda have been married for 25 years.

John’s career in education has also spanned 25 years, all in the same district. His first 19 years were spent as a teacher, followed by five years as an assistant middle school principal. John is currently in his first year as an elementary principal, serving a building of approximately 1,200 students, 90 licensed staff, and 50 paraprofessionals.

Couple #2: Jon and Angie Peterson

Jon and Angie Peterson have been married for 23 years. They have two college-age children in addition to a daughter who is a junior in high school; her third high school in as many years due to her father's change in superintendent positions. Angie has always considered her primary job to be a caretaker for the children, but holds a teaching license and has served in various roles as a paraprofessional in the districts Jon has served.

Jon is currently in his 15<sup>th</sup> year as a public school administrator, following seven years as a teacher. Jon became a principal in a very small district (150 students) in a neighboring state before moving to Iowa to accept a principal position in a small Iowa district (approximately 550 students). Jon spent nine years in that district, three as principal and six as superintendent, before moving to an Iowa community of approximately 5,000 people (1,700 students) as superintendent for the next three years. Jon then spent one year as superintendent of a large Iowa school district (nearly 5,000 students), before accepting his current superintendent position in a community of 8,500 people (2,000 students).

Couple #3: David and Tina Johnson

David and Tina Johnson have been married for 21 years. They have two high school-age children, one of whom is a senior this year. Tina works from the home, taking care of administrative duties such as purchasing and payroll for a family business located in the community where she grew up.

David's career has spanned 28 years, the first 12 as a teacher and coach. For the past 16 years, David has served as high school principal in three different Iowa school districts (500 students, 1,400 students, and currently 900 students). David is in his fifth year at his current position.

Couple #4: Jeff and Deb Smith

Jeff and Deb Smith manage dual professional careers, Jeff as a school superintendent and Deb in the marketing field. They have been married for 20 years and have two children, one in fifth grade and other in first grade.

Like most superintendents, Jeff started his career as a teacher (10 years), before serving as a secondary principal for four years and an education consultant for three years. Jeff has served in his current superintendent position for the past seven years in a consolidated school district of approximately 700 students. Jeff's entire career has been spent in small rural Iowa school districts.

## CHAPTER 4

### NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research data gathered during interviews with four different male public school administrators and their spouses. These data were collected to capture the authentic lived experience of these couples, particularly as related to stresses related to the husband's job as a public school administrator.

#### John and Brenda Abraham

I drove nearly two hours on a cold Iowa Friday night in December to meet with John and Brenda Abraham. As I approached the address, I couldn't help but to notice the picturesque street lined with older, but well-kept homes, front porches lining the street. The Abraham's house also fit this description and I would soon learn that they had lived there for all 25 years of their marriage. Finally arriving, I entered through the back door as instructed by the sign in the front.

The Abraham's had insisted that we meet in their home and that I come for supper. As I entered the house from the cold dark of night and stepped into the kitchen, I was welcomed by the wonderful aroma that filled the room; the warmth of the oven exceeded only by John and Brenda's welcome. I removed my coat and placed it in the next room as Brenda had instructed. The small rooms were cozy and well cared for, and the homey feeling seemed to fit the Abraham's personality.

We sat down to a delicious meal and the conversation flowed comfortably between various topics, eventually moving toward the topic of my visit. John knew the

community well having lived there his entire life, and having worked his entire 25 year career in local school district. He was only in his sixth year as an administrator in the district, so his thoughts and reflections easily moved back and forth between his 19 years as a teacher and his more recent tenure as an administrator; the transition between the two roles still fresh in his mind.

As John reflected on his move into administration, it was clear that the conversion had changed many of his longstanding relationships with colleagues and that some of those changes had left scars. He had found that he was privy to a whole new world of information and because of the confidentiality of his new administrative role, his longtime work friends no longer trusted him. “You know so much more,” John said. He continued,

The office is a filter; it’s a cataract. I feel like a big part of our job is to protect faculty from those things they think they need to know, but they really don’t. And then you hear, “you’re not communicating with us” and “we don’t have good lines of communication” or “you’re not accessible.”

That first year, I thought, my God, doesn’t anyone trust me to take care of things? A lot of people make uninformed conversation and you can’t walk up to them and say “you’re crazy” even though they’re not even close.

John continued to reflect on the topic of trust and how so many long-standing relationships seemed to change overnight when he became an administrator. In addition to the confidentiality of situations, he discussed the inability to be visible and accessible to everyone, all the time. John joked that the hard part was that “people don’t think you do anything” and he described a phenomenon he, only half jokingly, likes to call “Hero To Zero”:

At this end of the hallway they watch you handle something and you're a hero, and at this end of the hallway you're a zero because they don't know what you're doing. You know, first floor loves you because you took care of an issue down there; second floor says, well, he didn't do anything up here. No matter how many hours, no matter how much you do, a lot of it what you do is unseen and because teachers work in isolation and they don't see what you do, their perception is that you didn't do a damn thing to help.

As John spoke about this topic, it was easy to see from Brenda's body language that she had also lived this situation through her husband. She finally interjected, "they didn't trust him anymore." She added,

It was tough for me to watch too. I think his biggest thing that I saw was that he was hurt a lot by his fellow teachers. Even though he'd been friends with several of them, some would go behind his back and file a grievance. Those emotional things were hard for him to struggle through. It was tough for me to watch too.

The concern in Brenda's eyes and voice were unmistakable as she spoke about John's experiences and her comments shifted the focus of my questioning to her worries as a result of John's job. "Yes, I worry. It bothers me when he's hurt," she said. "He internalizes everything so much...and that's not good for his health to do that so he's got to find a way to let that out without having a heart attack." She continued by stating that John refused to bring his work home and wouldn't talk about it with her. "I choose not to," John added. "She's right, I internalize it."

Both John and Brenda admitted that John finds his own ways of coping with his stresses, such as exercising, mowing grass, scooping snow, or going for a walk at night. "I could tell he needed it because he'd have a short fuse with me and the girls," Brenda said. "It was like he gave his best self to the school...and he could come home and let down, but when he let down, he let the demon out that he had to hide all day long."



Although Brenda understood John's needs for coping to stay healthy, she acknowledged that those times often further complicated things at home and added stress to the family when her children were still at home. She added

He needs that time to exercise and he needs time for himself, but that left me to do the dishes. I'd get home from work too and get supper ready, help the girls with their homework, and make sure things are getting done.

His "me time" was mowing or tinkering in the yard...and sometimes that made us feel like he was putting himself ahead of the family. We'd be lucky some days if we got to bed at the same times. There hasn't been a lot of "us" time over the years.

John agreed. "We're not a very good couple because we've never put our relationship above the job," he said. "I'm a crappy dad and I'm a worse husband, but I'm a good provider. I gave up seven years of weekends for advanced degrees. Being an administrator - it's a sacrifice for the family."

"You have to have a whole lot of patience," Brenda nodded. "There were times when I did take it personally and said 'enough, stop giving them all of you and us none.' I think everyone has that 'D' word [divorce] in their vocabulary at some point, but you just have to learn to get through that."

Brenda's comment left no doubt that the stresses of John's job and his ability, or inability, to cope with the stresses of the job had left a mark on the family. I appreciated the honesty and depth of the reflections by both John and Brenda. I couldn't help but to wonder about their two children and what they may or may not have to add to the conversation, so I took the conversation in that direction. Both of their now college-age daughters had gone through high school during John's administrative tenure.

“He could never just be a parent,” Brenda said. “Even when we would go to away games for our own kids, he was the ‘administrator’ there. They would all look to him.”

“Hey, go over there and tell those kids...” John interjected. “And if I walk over and tell those kids to cool it, they can say ‘stick it’ and I’ve got no authority, or if I don’t walk over, people will say that I’m just standing there letting them do it. It’s that perception of the responsibilities and the role of the administrator; they are not as clear as your job description.”

As an example, Brenda brought up a band trip that she had wanted she and John to chaperone as parents a few years prior. She was disappointed when John informed her that he wouldn’t go due to the perception of others. “He said if he went, he wouldn’t be the parent...but the administrator that is there,” Brenda explained. “And thank goodness he didn’t go because we had a HUGE issue on that trip.”

Clearly public perception was an issue that John kept in the back of his mind to help guide his actions and decisions. “Do you find the responsibility to public perception to be a source of stress?” I asked. John answered:

I would say that I’m way less social now than I was prior to becoming an administrator. You know that old saying, ‘it’s lonely at the top.’ Experiences have made me more guarded, because when you’re talking to someone, there are automatic assumptions – ‘well, look, they must be buddies.’ So I’m just not going to put myself in that situation, so what do you do? I stay home or I go mow or something. I just remove myself from it because it’s a constant – it’s always there.

“It might just be nice once in awhile to go somewhere and not have to talk to everybody,” Brenda added. “And yes, sometimes not have to walk around with a smile plastered on your face – stuff like that. And there are days when he’ll just say, ‘you know, I’ve been around people too much,’ so we’ll just stay home. We’ve done that a lot.”

I could certainly relate to much of what John and Brenda were explaining. The solitude of the long drive to their house wasn’t something that I had minded at all, and although it was getting late, I wasn’t dreading the drive home either. Before I left, however, I asked them both for any advice they might offer to an aspiring administrator.

Brenda laughed as the dog jumped on John’s lap and suggested that every administrator needs a pet. “The dog was actually for the kids, but he’s been good for him too,” she said. “He didn’t want one, but he’s the one that’s most attached to it.” On a more serious note, she added that the spouses of future school administrators need to be prepared to be a single parent. “Don’t plan on them being here...at night, going on the field trip, or being at the kids’ events because it’s not going to happen.”

For John, it was a tougher question to answer. “I don’t know how you describe it to anyone,” he said. “If they said, ‘hey, I want to be a principal,’ I don’t know how you could tell somebody what that is going to be like.” He thought about it for a moment and added that, “having someone, a colleague, or fellow administrator that you can talk to is pretty critical.”

I thought that was some very sound advice to end on, so with that, I thanked the Abraham's for their gracious hospitality and headed back out into the cold dark night. I had my first interview in the books and the drive home left me feeling like I had the start to something that could aid aspiring administrators and their wives in practical preparation for their journey.

#### Jon and Angie Peterson

I approached the steps of the house with hesitation, unsure if I was in the correct location. Even though Jon had mentioned that it was a rental home when he provided me the address, I wasn't totally convinced that I was in the right spot as I rang the doorbell. Within seconds, my doubt washed away as Jon opened the door and greeted me with a smile. He quickly apologized for the accommodations, again noting that it was a temporary arrangement, and welcomed me into the tiny house where his wife, Angie, also welcomed me warmly.

Jon was in his third district as superintendent in as many years, the first move being his choice, and the last as a result of differing expectations with a new board of education. As we made small talk about the house, Jon shared that they had just gotten good news in that their houses in their two previous communities had just sold that week. Although they had taken a loss on the homes, they were thankful to be out from under those two mortgages and able to look forward to a planning a new home in their new community.

As we settled in at the kitchen table and began to talk about the stresses of school administration, it was clear that the wounds from the experience in their previous district were still fresh. Jon spoke about the growing scope of responsibilities and accompanying stresses from teaching (“dealing with stress from two angles – parents and students”), to the principalship (“dealing with more teachers, and the conflict with that, and more public”), to the superintendency (“dealing with all of those, plus you have the community piece”). Public perceptions and politics were clearly on Jon’s mind. “It’s so political,” Jon said. He continued:

You have to understand all the political aspects of a community before making decisions, yet the school board expects you to make decisions and get moving before you really have a full understanding of that. So that political piece has probably been the hardest for me. There are people who are natural politicians in this job and they play it beautifully, but that’s not a part of the job that I like or want to do. I just want to be honest with people and make decisions that are good for kids and not have to take into consideration who someone is when you’re talking to them. That, for me, has been very stressful.

“I think a lot of times in a public role – administrator, pastor, politician, celebrity – it’s easy for people to not see you as a person,” Angie added. “You’re an easy scapegoat. They may not be out to get you, but they just need someone to blame their frustration on.”

Jon continued, “In one of our previous communities, it was interesting because even the pastor felt the same way – I can’t just be a normal person.” Jon indicated that these pressures associated with public perception and politics seemed to grow stronger with each move to a larger community. “In my last district, they [school board] were not happy that I was driving a pickup truck. What difference does it make?”

Jon reflected on his various moves as a superintendent and talked nostalgically about his initial superintendent position in a small community. “We felt like normal people,” he said, “it was more like family.” He continued:

When you went to church it wasn't like you were the superintendent. It was more normal. But in the larger communities since then, you just feel uneasy. You are the superintendent of schools. You want to say, just leave me alone, I don't want to volunteer for anything, I just want to be a normal person. And we haven't found that church since where we're just family. And if you change churches how does that impact the political aspect of you as superintendent in the community? You have to take all that into consideration.

Angie's body language seemed to indicate agreement, although it didn't seem like something she would say. Angie was quiet and reserved and I sensed that she would not want Jon to feel anything but support for any of the career decisions he had made for their family. She did, however, confide that things can sometimes be lonely and isolated. “Usually if you can find one good friend, it makes things bearable. And wherever we've lived I've been able to find at least one good friend – someone to talk to if I needed to or to do things with occasionally. Pastors wives make pretty good friend...because they're kind of in the same situation,” she added.

“If I had it to do all over again, I would have never left that first small district,” Jon concluded. “I would have stayed there my whole career. Professionally you know you have to move. If you want to continue on, moving up, it's a great professional move. For your family, I'm not so sure.”

Jon's words hung in the air as I thought about my own situation, a recent professional move from superintendent of a very small school district to one larger, and

the consideration of family needs that I agonized over in making that decision. Jon's comments seemed a perfect transition to discuss family so I shifted my line of questioning to Angie.

Angie's worries were "mostly just everything with the kids" (now 21, 19, and 16). "I think the big thing is probably his time away from the family and trying to find that balance," she said. "And sometimes I wondered if teachers gave or didn't give our kids opportunities because of him," she added. Jon jumped in regarding the second of Angie's two worries for their kids:

There is definitely that aspect. My son didn't make National Honor Society. He's a straight 'A' student, he's never had any problems. I just remember how he felt about that. That wasn't about the kid. That was about a teacher that didn't like *me* and by God that kid wasn't going to get on. And I think that's so true. I see it now too. I don't allow staff to wear jeans – you're going to be professionals. There are people who hold that against my kids. How do you tell your kid that you know what is happening? Do you address that as superintendent? You tell your kid, you know what, deal with it. And she's tough, but that's not right.

It was clear that hearing Angie's family worries as a result of his job had sparked emotion in Jon. He mentioned that he regretted the fact that his youngest daughter was now experiencing her third high school in three years. This focus on his kids was a tough topic for Jon. He explained that he had missed a good deal of his children's childhoods due to his job. "You feel really guilty," he said.

This is the earliest I've been home in weeks. My kids grew up and I didn't get to spend the time I should of. It seems like [administration] can put the stress of time and guilt on you. You start to think of the time you lost with your kids that you were spending with other people's kids. I think you almost disengage yourself from your own children's education, which seems really odd. My wife was always – she's the reason our kids turned out well. She raised our kids. I

was always at work. I think that stress is a guilt. You know, even when you're home, you're not home because you're still dealing with issues. Your mind is somewhere else. I feel guilty about it and I wish I had it back.

It seemed that we had reached the focal point of Jon and Angie's stress, although Angie admitted that she simply put more energy towards the kids as a way to cope with the stress. Both also admitted that Jon didn't bring a lot of it home. "I try hard not to tell her school business," he said. It seemed like Jon carried most of the professional stress, and he wanted it that way. So I asked him to describe his stress and to discuss some of his methods of coping with it.

Jon indicated that running was his biggest method of coping with stress, although he admitted that the time away from family to train was also troublesome. He also mentioned church, men's bible group, and drinking as methods of coping. "I could see how some people could become alcoholics so easy," he said. Jon added that being able to talk about things with other superintendents was also important for his coping, although he admitted that when moving jobs, he hasn't always had someone to bounce things off of. "Stress is weird. You can tell. I've lost a ton of weight due to stressful situations. You don't even know. You have a back and neck ache all of the time and you just know it's stress."

Despite the regrets, guilt, and stress, Jon concluded that he would still encourage people to go into administration. "It's easy to say that you should budget your time and balance your family, but the bottom line is, the people who become administrators are all the same type of personality – achievers...I don't think you can change most of them."



Angie concurred with Jon's statement as we began to rise from the table to conclude our interview. "I think that personality thing is really true because I don't think it would matter what job he would do," she said. "I think the hours would be the same because of his personality type."

#### David and Tina Johnson

As I approached the Johnson's home, I couldn't help but notice the size of the structure. It was an old Victorian-style home; the type you might imagine someone buying as a restoration project over the course of a number of years. David greeted me at the door and as we entered, the hardwood floors, framing, and high ceilings were striking. We made our way towards a large dining room table in sizable dining room with a large opening into the living room.

Tina soon joined us and we discussed the unique nature of the home. She explained that it was once a bed and breakfast and that there were many projects left to do. Tina viewed such projects as a potential stress reliever for David. He didn't see it that way and it was easy to see that this was a source of good-humored bickering. Instead, "he sits in front of the TV," Tina said. "Oh yes, mindless TV," she continued. "We're watching *Duck Dynasty*, we're watching *Gold Rush*, we're watching *Toddlers and Tierras....*"

"Sometimes I couldn't probably even tell you what is on [the TV]," David admitted. "I just need to be able to just decompress." David admitted that the job was stressful and that "you just get so emotionally invested in some of the things that happen

at work...I think if she was honest, she would say that a lot of days she'd wish I wasn't here because of my attitude when I got home." David admitted to needing decompression time because "there are times when I come home that it doesn't take much to light me up. When I hear of administrators that drink to excess or marriages fall apart, it doesn't surprise me at all." David continued:

There are situations where it certainly impacts your physical health -physical health and mental health. Who knows if I was doing another job if I'd be 35-40 pounds overweight. My body deals with stress in different ways. I've had stomach issues, I've had headache issues – those types of things. I've been through some pretty tough situations, where, you know, your mental health – never to the extent that I thought I was a threat to anybody or myself, but certainly to the degree that I can appreciate what people go through with depression and that type of thing.

"Most people just have two factors – your boss and your co-workers," Tina interjected. "He's got the board, superintendent, other administrative staff, teachers, parents, students...I mean, how many other professions out there have six factors that can impact your job? I wouldn't want his job," she concluded. David agreed that it was stressful because he had to "answer to so many people."

We had hit the ground running with this interview and the conversation flowed very naturally. David and Tina had been married for 21 years, 16 of which David had served as a high school principal, so they had plenty of experience with our topic. David admitted that his experience did help some in dealing with the demands of the job. "I'd like to think that I'm older and wiser," he said. He noted that he'd been through so many situations over the years that "I don't get bent out of sorts about the same things I used to.

I think it's because I've been there and done that ...just different faces and different last names," he added.

Although David thought that he may be handling the stress a little better than he did earlier in his career, he did admit that "it's a hard job...the job can be all consuming, it really can...and I think it's gotten harder." David noted the increased demands of the public, tight financial situations facing schools, and the negativity about public education in the media as things that make his job tougher.

I decided to narrow in on his comments regarding public demands and I asked the two of them to expand on that topic. Tina noted that she worked out of their home so she was a bit more insulated than David, but she was used to going places "where they know who I am but I don't know who they are." And although she said she doesn't usually worry too much about what other people think, she does catch herself biting her lip from time to time because of David's job. "If you weren't in a public job, you could just say screw it," she said. She added,

If you're some everyday person – Joe Schmo – you can say, 'I really don't care what you think about me because you're not my best friend anyway,' or whatever. And I have that attitude sometimes until I sit and think that I can't always do that because we still need his job. You can't let everybody get a bad opinion of you or they can run you out the door.

For David, this notion of being a public figure was always present in his mind. There is "no way to separate personal life from professional life," he said. "I think when you're dealing with people who are in the public eye, you have to put on your public

face,” David added. “And even when things aren’t going well. And that’s hard and that creates stress – especially if you’re conflicted.”

David noted that he had lived in five different communities during his career in education (three as an administrator) and “every one of them have been a little bit different” in regard to public perception and expectations. For some communities, you had to “look the part,” he said, while Tina added that you’d have to go to a secluded place like a country club to have a beer. Other communities, like their current community, were more laid back and casual. David explained:

It’s more of a comfort zone for me. If we were in one of those towns where the fellas hung out down at the elevator and drank coffee, I’m comfortable doing that. I’m comfortable at the more formal community affairs too. I can do that. I’ve been involved with a couple of pretty important social situations through the [local college] with their president. I can do that. But I enjoy being able to, for instance, we had a conference meeting on a Wednesday night and it got over about 8:30 and 4 or 5 of us went down to the tavern downtown and we drank a beer. You know, I’m a lot more comfortable with that.

Regardless of community expectations, however, David acknowledged that, “you’ve got to get rid of the idea that you’re going to make everyone happy.” He added, “not everyone is going to like you.”

As we discussed this topic of public perception further, David and Tina explained that it impacted their children as well and caused them concerns regarding issues of fairness. “Even though your kid may deserve it, you’re not nominating them because of perception,” Tina said. Or, she noted, it happens the other way. “Our daughter got into National Honor Society and one other girl didn’t and the parent sent a letter to the advisor blaming my husband!” David chimed in:

I think the worst thing about it for your kid is when people don't give the kid credit. She gets what she gets, in some people's eyes, because she's my daughter. Not because she puts in the time – not because she's got some talent or knowledge. To be honest with you, those things hurt. Some of those things do keep you awake at night. They really do.

It seemed the topic of their children had struck a nerve. Even though they were in their fifth school year in their current district, it seemed their kids had never really settled in following their move. Tina explained:

Moving...we didn't do the kids a service. We should have moved earlier. It was one of those things you thought they would be okay. Our daughter was 8<sup>th</sup> grade at the time and she was pretty sociable so we thought she'd be okay. And our son was having struggles anyway, so we thought a move might be better. But it hasn't, because he's not as sociable. And she walked in during 8<sup>th</sup> grade, which is a tough age. And she had three strikes against her – she's athletic, she's smart, and she's the principal's kid. She was in the mix in everything before and had a great group of girls she was with. We come here and there were a couple of queen bees and stuff. So it wasn't a good move for them.

Tina acknowledged that, even after five years, she wasn't sure if her son had really adjusted. I gathered a sense that this was a difficult topic so I didn't linger on the topic any longer than necessary. As I began to wrap things up, I asked them both for any advice they might provide to an aspiring administrator. Ironically, they noted that a couple had come to them just a week prior actually seeking this advice. The husband was considering an administrative degree, so they sat down to talk about the experience with David and Tina.

David shared that, "I think the thing they have got to understand is that it is a hard job. You're going to have to make some decisions that are really going to upset some

people. And there are going to be some times where there are going to be some decisions that really upset you.”

Tina provided a list of things:

1. He’s going to be gone more and if he is home, he’s going to be sending emails and stuff like that.
2. You will wonder if you’re doing a disservice to your kids, and if you’re going to move, do it early enough that you’re not catching those junior high years.
3. Dealing with the public a little bit - people are usually nice, but you’re not necessarily included.

As I left the Johnson’s home and started my drive home, I began to reflect on the three interviews and the common themes that were beginning to emerge. It was clear that I wasn’t the only administrator concerned with the demands that the job was placing on my family.

#### Jeff and Deb Smith

Jeff and Deb Smith manage dual careers and a family so finding a time to meet was not an easy task. The Smith’s agreed to meet with me early one morning, delaying the start to their respective workdays. As luck would have it, a winter drizzle left all three of us monitoring weather for professional reasons that morning.

The drive was slow, but I arrived at the Smith’s on time. My GPS had guided me to their beautiful new home on a golf course in a small rural Iowa community. Upon arrival, Jeff welcomed me into their home where we sat down at the kitchen table with Deb. Deb was professionally dressed due at a meeting following our interview. They explained that Jeff would be working from home that day due to their youngest child

staying home from school sick. They acknowledged that they were balancing two careers, and although Deb typically took the more traditional role of staying home with sick children, that would be Jeff's role on this day.

Like my previous interviews, it didn't take us long to get to the topic of public perceptions and expectations – Jeff's staying home with his daughter being an example. "Even for him to stay home with one of the kids if they're sick," Deb explained, "there is still a very traditional paradigm, especially in rural communities, that when a child is sick it should be mom, and not the principal or superintendent because they have a big job."

It also didn't take long to realize that both Jeff and Deb were keenly aware of public perception, and adept at juggling the expectations that such perceptions sometimes present. Jeff noted that things get very stressful as a superintendent because "there are just so many factions that you have to give attention to."

This seemed to be particularly true in Jeff's situation given that he was in charge of a consolidated school district made up of several small communities. Deb indicated that it was difficult to live in one community within the district, yet satisfy the need to be visible and involved in the other communities as well. Jeff provided the following example of his work with a local civic organization:

A prime example of this is that I'm a member of [a certain civic group in his community]. We did some work on a park shelter house in town here one Saturday morning. A gentleman from the newspaper came to take a picture of all of us. I refused to be in the picture. Some of my fellow [members] didn't understand and I explained that I can't be a part of [this organization in several different communities] and publicly I don't want to be on display that way. In some people's eyes, if they were to see that picture in the paper and see the school superintendent helping with a project like that, they'd appreciate that. But I have

to think of the people in a couple of our other communities that would look at that and say, “huh, he’s taking care of their shelter houses, but what’s he doing for us?” That’s just a good example of what it’s like.

Deb wondered if all of the life commitments expected of superintendents were realistic, fair, or sustainable. While she noted that stresses and tradeoffs were to be expected in professional roles as compensation increases, she questioned whether executives in other fields faced the same unique pressures as superintendents:

I think in other professions, some people can work at home sometimes, or sort of flex if they’ve been away on a business trip; where if they’ve put in 80 hours that week, they can have a little flexibility. With his profession, in the public eye, he would never be allowed that.

Deb continued to discuss public expectations that seem to be unique to the profession of the public school administrator, making it a “life” rather than a “profession.” She noted that most professions do not have a residence requirement, yet public school administrators and their families are often left to abide by such an unwritten rule.

The expectation is that you live in the district. I think this can be an interesting thing to wrestle with when you are a two-career family. I read somewhere that had interviewed kids of superintendents, both living in the dad’s district and not living in the dad’s district and they contrasted the experiences of the kids and the superintendents and there can be some real advantages to releasing superintendents from that expectation to live here; because I think then it would be more like a profession or job, whereas now it’s a life. I know it’s sacreligious to say, but at times I wish my kids didn’t go to school here. And I wish we were able to live where I work. But I do wonder if we’ll look back in 20 years at the expectations and say that it was ridiculous to expect of people. You look at the impact, even financially, we built a house here and maybe that was a little naïve. But then the reality sets in that if we need to go, or something were to happen with a board election and we had to go on the fly, how long would we be sitting on this house? And then another community is expecting you to move and invest



there. Those are life commitments that I'm not sure are fair to expect of people. You could find yourself in a really financially difficult situation. I've heard of superintendents sitting on two houses they're trying to sell from previous steps in their career. And when you have a family, what choice do you have? You can't go rent an apartment and expect your kids to grow up in a temporary housing situation. You're trying to give your kids an environment. Sometimes that whole expectation can be a major stressor on a family.

According to Deb, these types of expectations underlie a "volatility" of being a public school administrator, particularly a superintendent. "You can have trouble putting down roots as a family knowing that you can potentially be one board election away from major upheaval that has little to do with your performance," she said. She noted that sometimes doing the right things for kids can leave adults angry and this uncertainty causes stress on a family. "Are we going to be here forever? Is this where we're going to raise our kids? How long?" she questioned. "You're always kind of looking behind you wondering if you need to be thinking about what the next step is because doing the right thing is sometimes politically unpopular," Deb added. "Keeping the peace can sometimes be good personally and for your family, but it's not necessarily what's best for kids professionally."

Jeff acknowledged having had to make decisions that "do not make you real popular." Issues like budget/teacher reductions, closing a school building, and district sharing/reorganization take a toll on the entire family when living in small town Iowa. Deb added that many of the people affected by these decisions are related to one another or connected to kids in her daughter's class:

We've even had some experiences where a parent has said something to the classmate of our daughter like, "I don't want you to play with her because of who

her dad is,” and then our daughter would come home and say, “Dad, what did you do?” And then you have to try to developmentally and appropriately explain that dad has to sometimes make decisions that are unpopular. And that’s about all that we can say.

Even after seven years, the interconnectedness of their small community had left the Smith’s feeling like outsiders. “We’ve found that so many people in this community are connected by roots,” Jeff said. “Everybody’s a cousin.” Because of this, Deb added that people have less of a need for a social life because it is already built into their extended family structure. She noted that she is always the one reaching out to others for a play date for the children because every weekend is “Johnny’s birthday party with the whole family” for other kids.

This difficulty to connect socially has not been reserved for the kids. Both Jeff and Deb had been provided advice to keep ahold of previous friendships back when Jeff made the decision to enter the superintendency. They’ve come to realize this to be good advice. Deb acknowledged feelings of isolation:

I don’t know in this role that people really want to cozy up to the superintendent and his family socially. I don’t know that they want to let their hair down and have a few beers. And we’re even uncomfortable doing that a little bit. Yet, when you have school-age kids you know how important those connections are with other families for your own mental health, and for the kids. We’d love to have a family that could come over on a Friday night and the mom’s could have a couple glasses of wine and the dad’s could have a couple of beers and kids could play. We have that, but not here. We have that with our previous friends. Part of me thinks that wives need a support group that could normalize the experience, because it’s like, “are we losers, because we used to be fun.” I’ve said things to him over the years about inviting couples over or doing a card club and at first he was like, “I don’t think you should do that. What if we exclude someone?” But I need that. I’m a social person and I feel like I need that. I have mom friends here but I would classify them as mostly acquaintances because I need to be protective of confidences related to his position. It can be very isolating.

Jeff did acknowledge that their church was very open to them and welcomed their involvement, noting that Deb serves on the church council, which provides some connection. Still, the 24/7 perception of Jeff's position has left him less than fulfilled with their church connections. "They have a coffee social after church and we used to go more often than we do now...for me it was too much business [school] talk on a Sunday morning," Jeff said.

Without such connections, I asked Jeff how he coped with the stress of the job. He answered that with an equally stressful dilemma: weighing needed individual time versus family time when away from work. "I think you need a little bit of individual time...some engagement in a hobby or something," Jeff explained, "but there is not enough available time for that because if I'm not engaged in my work then ultimately I should be engaged with my family and my kids." Balancing his family versus his personal need to distress caused Jeff further stress and guilt. Jeff shared that he was preparing for an annual getaway with some longtime male friends as "de-stress for me," but it was clear that his upcoming trip also caused him to be conflicted. Jeff added that he thought that in the back of Deb's mind she was "probably a little resentful that I'm using my time away from work for that."

Deb indicated that she supports the trip because she understands that "he needs to get away because that is the only place that he can get back to the core of who he is." Her bigger concern was that he saves his stress relief up for one trip a year and it would be better for his mental health to incorporate daily exercise. "I think if he built in 30 minutes each day of that self care it would be better," she said. Deb added that she has

observed many of Jeff's superintendent colleagues and that she worries for Jeff because "you can see how the job changes them physically...you can see that the job is just killing them." Jeff acknowledged that he needed to exercise, but noted again, "there are a lot of demands on that little dime of time that you have."

I could certainly relate to Jeff's comment, and nearly everything the Smith's had shared with me. It all sounded very familiar – married 20 years, check – two kids, one in fifth grade and the other in first grade, check – seventh year as a superintendent, check, my sixth – pressures of public perception, check – struggle for life balance, check.... As with the other interviews, I closed by asking Jeff and Deb to provide advice to aspiring school administrators and their spouses. For both it centered around the age of children and "right time for your family" versus career aspirations. "I think with young children it's probably a task that you really can't do both justice to," Jeff said regarding the superintendency. "We work hard in our careers to get to that position where we get the first superintendent's position, and now in my seventh year, I think 'big deal.' But it was such a climb to get there and now I wonder if I was too aggressive on that goal."

"Once you're the bank president, you can't go back to being the teller," Deb interjected, echoing Jeff's comments. Deb continued:

I think people need to know that it can be such a career goal that you aspire to, but make sure that when you get there the timing will be right for your family and be mindful that there is really no going back on your career trajectory. Make sure you're going into it for all the right reasons, and not just a financial benefit because we've said thousands of times, if you look at it on an hour by hour basis, principals are doing better than superintendents, and teachers might even be doing better than superintendents. There are huge tradeoffs.

Not surprisingly, I could relate. I thanked the Smith's for their candid and thoughtful conversation and headed out the door to scrape the ice from my vehicle windows. My hour removed from the superintendency was clearly over.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEME ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

All four of the couples involved in this study invited me to sit at their kitchen tables to discuss very personal struggles deriving from the husband's position as public school administrator. A few commonalities emerged from each of these kitchen tables.

All of the administrators indicated that the job was stressful, and that the stress had increased over the course of their career as the scope of their position grew. Each spoke to the 24/7 demands of the job. Principal David Johnson stated, "It is a hard job. It is a difficult job," and that "the job can be all consuming, it really can," while his wife Tina added, "you can't get away from it."

Each also spoke to the increased stress that came with the growing scope of each position. Superintendent Jeff Smith echoed the sentiments of all four couples when he spoke of the responsibilities to "a student body...and administrative team, a teaching staff, a non-certified staff, a school board, and a community." He added that "you have to keep everything moving forward and ultimately all of the fingers come pointing back to you."

Tina Johnson shared similar thoughts when she said, "Most people just have two factors – your boss and your co-workers. He's got the board, superintendent, other administrative staff, teachers, parents, students.... I mean how many other professions out there have 6 factors that can impact your job? I wouldn't want his job."

Another second commonality was that, although each husband admitted that they tried to not talk about work at home, each of the wives acknowledged feeling stress due to their husband's job. These findings are consistent with the findings of Rook, Dooley, and Catalano (1991), whose longitudinal survey of 1,383 married women found that "husbands' job stressors were associated with elevated psychological distress among their wives" (p. 171).

Superintendent Jon Peterson said, "I try hard not to tell her school business...you hide things from her and if something is going on, you just don't share it." He further added that he thought the job was sometimes "more stressful on your family than it is you – the time you're away from them – the long hours – it's hard on them." This comment supported the claim of Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) when they noted that the wife of a superintendent "typically lives more closely and intimately with the effects that her husband's job has on their family than he does" (p. 174).

The wives comments supported these claims, with each acknowledging worries for their husband's mental/physical health and/or their family in general, particularly their children. The worries of the spouses in this study were consistent with many of the spousal worries expressed on page 26 of Bruckner's 1998 Nebraska study of administrative spouses:

- Job demands
- Controversial board decisions
- Increasingly serious behavioral problems with students
- Expectations to volunteer time to multiple community projects and organizations
- Lack of sleep, physical strain, and well-being

- Time away from kids
- Family takes a back seat to the job

Bruckner quoted one spouse as saying, “It seemed like his job had priority over everything that I might want to do or wanted him to do.”

A final commonality was that all four interviews revealed an awareness of potential health-related consequences of the job and/or the need for physical exercise.

Whitaker (1996) found that when asking principals about the consequences of stress and emotional exhaustion, most described some consequences related to health.

Superintendent Jon Peterson said, “you need to be healthy, you need to exercise with this job” and also noted “I’m not an alcoholic, but I could see how some people could become alcoholics so easy.”

Principal David Johnson said, “it certainly impacts your physical health – physical and mental health...I’ve had stomach issues...headache issues...I can appreciate what people go through with depression and that type of thing.” He also acknowledged that “regular exercise would probably make a difference.” “Who knows if I was doing another job if I’d be 35-40 pounds overweight,” he added. Similarly, Superintendent Jeff Smith said, “Exercise has become a big thing with me, or lack thereof. I’m not exercising to a level that is healthy for me.”

The wives also contributed to this topic of health concerns. Brenda Abraham spoke about her concerns for John’s health:

Yes, I worry. It bothers me when he’s hurt. And he tries to hide it. He’s very good about going out and exercising, mowing grass, or scooping snow – he has a



good way of trying to deal with things that way. But he just internalizes everything so much and I can tell when he's about to blow and that's not good for his health to do that so he's got to find a way to let that out without having a heart attack. He gets to the point that he's not sleeping, and losing his keys, or locking his keys in his truck, and he never does that. His brain will not shut down.

Likewise, Deb Smith indicated that she worried about her husband's mental and physical health and professed, "I think that if he built in 30 minutes each day for that self care, it would be better." Similarly, Tina Johnson worried about her husband's sedentary coping strategy of watching "mindless TV."

In addition to these commonalities, three major interconnected themes emerged via a constant comparison analysis of the data. First, like the findings of Bruckner (1998), which indicated that "the heavy demands...of the job take a heavy toll on the personal lives...and their relationships with spouses and family members" (p. 24), the stories included in this study revealed family sacrifice on many levels.

The second emergent theme echoes the sentiment of Helen Sharp, who indicated that the public persona [of the superintendent] "seemed unrealistic" (Sharp, 1998, p. 28). Likewise, each of the couples in this study expressed some level of uneasiness due to public perceptions and/or expectations and the resulting lack of normalcy.

Finally, the topic of isolation and/or loneliness arose in each of the four interviews. According to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), "stress from a curious kind of 'public isolation' is a constantly recurring theme in leadership work. Comments during each of the four interviews alluded to what Evans (1996) described as a paradox of isolation in a fish bowl for school leaders.

### Theme #1: Family Sacrifice

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) wrote, “the leadership life, we recognize, is a complex balance of conflicting forces and tensions that manage to function most of the time” (p. 26). For the administrators and wives in this study, balancing the conflicting forces of the husband’s professional role versus the needs and responsibilities of the family is a continual struggle and source of ever-present stress. Lawson (1999) quoted one administrator as saying, “We bankrupt ourselves when we don’t have time to recharge with those we love. It shouldn’t feel like you’re a bad employee when you seek to limit your time commitment to 50 hours” (p. 98). Sternberg (2001) quoted a superintendent as saying, “You’re so consumed, it becomes your whole life” (p. 1).

For the individuals in this study, there is “no way to separate personal life from professional life,” as stated by Principal David Johnson. This connection of personal life to professional life was summed up by Principal John Abraham when he said, “Being an administrator – it’s a sacrifice for the family.”

#### Time Away

For the couples involved in this study, the sacrifice started with the amount of time that the administrator is away from his family. The amount of time that “he always feels he has to be there,” as stated by Brenda Abraham was accepted by each of the couples interviewed as a “given.” As Brenda thought of advice for future administrative spouses, she said, “don’t plan on them being here...because it’s not going to happen.” “There hasn’t been a lot of ‘us’ time over the years,” she added. Her husband John

concurrent. “We’re not a very good couple because we’ve never put our relationship above the job,” he said.

Angie Peterson talked about her husband’s time away from the family for work and said, “but then it becomes normal. Because then if you do have a week where he’s home and doesn’t have as much going on it’s so weird and I don’t know what to say to him. That’s just not normal.” A spouse from Bruckner’s study (1998) similarly indicated that she had adjusted over time by saying, “I have adjusted to being a single parent” (p. 26). Likewise, Deb Smith acknowledged, “The thing that always gets lost is your own personal self-care and your own personal interests. You know that you’re always putting yourself on the back burner most of the time.”

### Engagement and Attitude

Perhaps more striking than the time away from family was the concern for the time when the administrator husband’s are home but disengaged or irritable due to work. The inability to leave work at the office isn’t new. Wolcott (1973) quoted one principal’s wife as saying, “School is something he can’t leave there. It’s something that you more or less live with all the time. He has these problems he just can’t turn off at the end of the day” (p. 54).

Jon Peterson’s comments support these sentiments:

You know, even when you’re home, you’re not home because you’re still dealing with issues. Your mind is somewhere else. They go to bed and you stay up and work on school stuff. Even just sleeping with your wife – it would be nice to go to bed at the same time. But you come in late and wake up your wife and that’s not fair to them. I feel preoccupied a lot of the time.

Similarly, Tina Johnson noted that David was “sending emails and stuff like that” when at home, instead of engaging with family. David took Tina’s comments a step further and added, “I think if she’s honest, she would say that a lot of days she’d wish I wasn’t here because of my attitude when I got home. There are times when I come home that it doesn’t take much to light me up.”

This was a sentiment that Brenda Abraham also voiced. “You know, he’d get home and one little thing would set him off and it was like, ‘what the heck did we do,’” she said. “There were times when I did take it personally and said ‘enough, stop giving them all of you and us none’...he’d have a short fuse with me and the girls. It was like he gave his best to school to put his best face on there,” she concluded. These statements were nearly identical to those of a spouse in the Bruckner (1998) study who said, “He’s short with us. His mind is occupied with other things...the public gets his best side” (p. 25).

### Children and Guilt

The time, disengagement, and temperament issues weren’t lost on the husbands in this study, particularly where it involved their children. They were acutely aware of the sentiment expressed by Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) on page 179: The time and demands of her husband’s job simply didn’t permit him to become involved.

Superintendent Jon Peterson said, “I think you almost disengage yourself from your own children’s education, which seems really odd.” Jon spoke of never chaperoning his own children’s events. He spoke of never attending parent-teacher conferences for his own

children due to his fear of putting undo pressure on his child's teacher due to his role as administrator. Jon continued:

But it's the time element for the family. You know, my kids grew up and I didn't get to spend the time I should of. It seems like [administration] can put the stress of time and guilt on you. When you reflect now, my kids have all turned out fairly normal, but you start to think of the time you lost with your kids that you were spending with other people's kids. Somehow that doesn't seem right. And with your wife. My wife was always – she's the reason our kids turned out well. She raised our kids. I was always at work. I think that stress is a guilt. I feel guilty about it and I wish I had it back.

Jon concluded his thoughts on this topic by stating, "My biggest regrets are with my children." He wasn't the only one. Brenda Abraham also spoke of chaperoning trips for their children and the fact that her husband could "never just be a parent." Tina Johnson said of her husband's administrative moves, "we didn't do the kids a service." And Jeff Smith admitted, "with young children, it [superintendency] is probably a task that you really can't do both justice to."

### Theme #2: The Microscope

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) quoted one superintendent's wife as saying, "...being constantly in the public's eye, no matter what we do. Perhaps that has been the most difficult thing for me to adjust to" (p. 175). According to Carr (2012), "family privacy always has been an issue for superintendents, but experts and school officials say the challenges have intensified in recent years owing to the exponential growth in social media and states' fiscal woes" (p. 27).

The Abrahams, Petersons, Johnsons, and Smiths are all keenly aware of the pressures of public perception and the accompanying expectations. They recognize the boundaries established for their actions, as well as the constant judgment. They recognize the 24/7-nature of these expectations. They recognize that the judgment is both personal and professional. According to Deb Smith, the public perceptions and expectations involved with Jeff's job create "life commitments that I'm not sure are fair to expect of people."

### Professional Life

Each of the administrators interviewed for this study described a certain sensitivity to the constant perceptions of others. Given their public roles, the pressure of the perceptions and expectations of others seemed to blur between their professional and personal lives. Still, perception seemed to begin with their professional actions and decisions.

For the principals in this study, it seemed to be a juggling act with their daily time, trying to be everywhere and everything to everyone at once. John Abraham referred to his efforts, and his physical presence, as "Hero to Zero." "At this end of the hallway they watch you handle something and you're a hero," he explained, "and at this end of the hallway you're a zero because they don't know what you're doing." John further expressed his frustration with this phenomenon:

You know what people will think, "that son of a bitch is not here." It's hard. You can't have both. Everybody is a damn critic. People don't have any idea. They just don't. People wouldn't even believe half the stuff we deal with. I equate it to

my school law classes. I never thought most of that stuff could have happened. But it's a day in the life of a principal.

Principal David Johnson expressed similar concerns, but instead of physical presence, he discussed his decision making process. He noted that things got pretty stressful simply because he was trying to answer to so many people at once. He added, "You've got to get rid of the idea that you're going to make everyone happy. Not everyone is going to like you. You're going to have to make some decisions that are really going to upset some people."

For the superintendents, the concerns were similar but were described as broader in scope, and more political. Jeff Smith spoke about "so many factions that you have to give attention to," and his wife, Deb, acknowledged that Jeff's professional decisions weren't always popular. "Often times doing the right things for kids makes adults angry," she said. "Keeping the peace can sometimes be good personally...but it's not necessarily what's best for kids professionally."

Superintendent Jon Peterson also acknowledged his decision-making as very "political":

You have to understand all the political aspects of a community before making decisions, yet the school board expects you to make decisions and get moving before you really have a full understanding of that. So that political piece has probably been the hardest part for me. There are people who are natural politicians in this job and they play it beautifully, but that's not a part of the job that I like or want to do. I just want to be honest with people and make decisions that are good for kids and not have to take into consideration who someone is when you're talking to them. That, for me, has been very stressful.

Peterson's comments are similar to conclusions by Blumberg and Blumberg (1985):

The notion that the school superintendency is, at its roots, a political venture and that effective exercise of the role requires keen political sensitivity combined with shrewd political skills is one that many people find distasteful, some superintendents included. Education is for children, the thinking goes. It is too important and sacred a societal function to be mixed up in politics, whether that politics is public and partisan or involves the covert, astute manipulation of competing pressure groups in a community or on a school board (p. 45-46).

### Personal Life

For the couples in this study, it was difficult to speak about the stress of public perception and expectations without crossing over into the personal realm. According to Carr (2012),

Superintendents know they work and live in a giant fishbowl. School board members, teachers, community members, and the news media have been known to scrutinize what kind of vehicle they drive, who they socialize with outside of work, whether they drink alcohol, where they live and when they leave the house each morning. (p. 26)

The scrutiny described by Carr for superintendents was true for all four couples involved in this study, both superintendents and principals. Jon Peterson yearned for some degree of normalcy. “In my last district, they [board] were not happy I was driving a pickup truck,” he said. “What difference does it make? At one of my previous districts, they told you that the country club was the only place that you should drink a beer.” He added, “...you just feel uneasy. You are the superintendent of schools.” Jon’s wife, Angie, added that “it’s easy for people to not see you as a person” given the public persona.

Although people may not view the couples in this study as “normal people,” it is clear that people are watching. “When I take my kids out shopping ...I am very sensitive



to the fact that I am still the superintendent of schools and everybody knows it. I know I feel that pressure,” noted one superintendent (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, p. 157).

Tina Johnson stated that people, “know who you are and you have no idea who they are.” And she added that, although you may not know who people are, you still have to care about what they think. “If you weren’t in a public job, you could just say screw it,” she said, “...but I can’t always do that because we still need his job.”

For Jeff and Deb Smith, where they spend their time, and with whom they spend it, is a frequent topic of conversation. “Where do you spend your time?” Jeff asked. “I think in some people’s eyes, we’re always coming up short.” Deb added, “I’ve said things to him over the years about inviting couples over or doing a card club and at first he was like, ‘I don’t think you should do that. What if we exclude someone?’”

Similarly, John Abraham admitted to being “more guarded” due to public perception and his desire to avoid the “automatic assumptions” of “well, look, they must be buddies.” John’s wife, Brenda, also spoke to this idea of guardedness or avoidance. “It might just be nice once in awhile to go somewhere and not have to talk to everybody,” she said. “And yes, sometimes not have to walk around with a smile plastered on your face.”

According to Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), many administrators are viewed by their community as “public property” and face assumptions that as administrators they should “be accessible, regardless of time, place, or occasion” (p. 156). Because of this, John Abraham admitted, “I just remove myself from it...I stay home.” Brenda concurred, “We’ve done that a lot.”

The Johnson's also admitted to removing themselves from the situation, but for them it is by leaving town. "We take off a lot on the weekends," Tina said. Jeff added, "I find that those weekends away...the best way to end a week." These comments are consistent with the wife of a superintendent as quoted by Blumberg and Blumberg (1985):

We have to plan very definite times when he will get away and we can do particular things as a family. Otherwise, the time just slips by, and you lost it. There has to be some point in the year when he just leaves...when we can all go and get away so that nobody can get in touch with us. (p. 179)

### Children's Life

On a deeper personal level, each of the couples in this study extended the issue of public perception to concerns for their own children. Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) spoke to the dilemma facing the children of superintendents, noting "If they shine in school, it's because of their fathers. If they don't shine, do get in trouble, or get picked on, it's also because of their fathers" (p. 177). Angie Peterson admitted to worrying about "mostly just everything with the kids." "I've wondered if teachers gave or didn't give our kids opportunities because of him," she said. For her husband, Jon, there was no wondering about it:

There is definitely that aspect. My son didn't make National Honor Society. He's a straight 'A' student, he's never been any problems. I just remember how he felt about that. That wasn't about the kid. That was about a teacher that didn't like me and by God that kid wasn't going to get on. And I think that's so true. I see it now too. I don't allow staff to wear jeans – you're going to be professionals. There are people who hold that against my kids. How do you tell your kid that you know what is happening? Do you address that as superintendent? You tell your kid, you know what, deal with it. And she's tough, but that's not right.

David and Tina Johnson shared similar stories. Speaking of their daughter, Tina said, "...she had three strikes against her – she's athletic, she's smart, and she's the principal's kid...And even though she may deserve it [NHS], you're not nominating them because of perception." She added, "Our daughter got into National Honor Society and one other girl didn't and the parent sent a letter to the advisor blaming my husband." David chimed in about the unfairness he sees his children face due to his role as high school principal:

That's a problem- that's a concern...I think the worst thing about it for your kid is when people don't give the kid credit. She gets what she gets, in some people's eyes, because she's my daughter. Not because she puts in the time – not because she's got some talent or knowledge. To be honest with you, those things hurt. Some of those things do keep you awake at night. They really do.

Although their children are much younger, the Smith's also addressed the issues facing their children due to Jeff's job. Deb shared this experience:

So we've even had some experiences where the parent has said something to the classmate of our daughter like, "I don't want you to play with her because of who her dad is," and then our daughter would come home and say, "Dad, what did you do?" And then you have to try to developmentally and appropriately explain that dad has to sometimes make decisions that are unpopular. And that's about all that we can say.

Each of these situations regarding unfairness were noted in addition to the guilt these individuals expressed in the first theme of family sacrifice. It was clear that the issue of normalcy for their children weighed heavily on each of the couples interviewed.

### Theme #3: Crowded Loneliness

“I would say that I’m way less social now than I was prior to becoming an administrator,” Principal John Abraham said during our interview. “You know that old saying, ‘it’s lonely at the top.’ Experiences have made me more guarded.” Although it has been suggested by some (Bell, Roloff, Van Camp, & Karol, 1990) that there is no evidence to suggest that ascension through the job ranks equates to loneliness, Principal Abraham and many others have experienced the correlation to be undeniable.

#### Professional Isolation as Principal

According to Jackson (1977), “one of the chief residues of my own administrative experience is the memory of having felt alone, not in the simple physical sense of being by myself, without companions, but in the deeper psychological sense of being apart from others” (p. 427). For Jackson, the mere title of principal created a visibility and sense of apartness, “a self-conscious feeling of being onstage,” and as “being perceived as someone special, a shade apart from the others” (p. 428).

For John Abraham, the change from teacher to administrator (all in the same district) seemed to erase 19 years of collegiality, trust, and friendship. John’s wife, Brenda explained:

I think his biggest thing that I saw was that he was hurt a lot by his fellow teachers. Once he moved into administration he couldn’t tell them things or, you know, he had to be careful so it wasn’t seen that he was favoring one over another. And even though he’d been friends with several of them, some would go behind his back and file a grievance. And they wouldn’t talk to him about it, they would just be mad about something. And I just remember that some of those emotional things were hard for him to struggle through. You know, he’d be like, “man, I thought we were friends and they’re going behind my back.”

Welch, Medeiros, and Tate (1982), as cited in Whitaker (1996), examined causes of principal burnout and found number one to be “isolation inherent in the role served to discourage ties with teachers and students” (p. 61). Principal Abraham found this to be true as his long-time relationships immediately changed with his administrative role. “You can’t sit and tell everybody what is going on,” he said. “It adds to a level of distrust.” He continued:

You’d think that being here everyday and watching me everyday, that those people would think, “you know, there must be something to this because that’s not the way he usually is; he wouldn’t be that way; that’s not who he is.” But that was not the case.

Similarly, Jackson (1977) described an “unexpected source of my overall feeling of separation derived from my possession of confidential information” and the “isolation that comes from criticism...I was unprepared for the psychological consequences of that” (p. 429-430).

For Principal John Abraham, having an administrative colleague was crucial to his own survival. “You get close because you are working through tough circumstances together,” he said. “You go through things together that you can’t tell anyone else. Having someone, a colleague, or fellow administrator that you can talk to is pretty critical.” His wife, Brenda, called this his “work spouse” because he spent more time with his administrative colleague than he did with her.

Abraham, like the other administrators in this study, simply did not choose to share his work with his spouse. “I chose not to,” Abraham of sharing work worries with

his wife. “I try hard not to tell her school business,” echoed Jon Peterson. This, according to Jackson (1977), could add to the loneliness. Jackson described a scenario similar to one described in the autoethnographical portion of this study:

I would often return home at the end of a day preoccupied with a school problem that caused me to be worried or angry. Signs of my upset were evident on my face, leading my wife, quite naturally, to ask what was wrong. But to explain the source of my discomfort only intensified it. It meant reliving events that I wanted, at least for the time being, to push out of my mind. As a result, I would often brush the query aside by simply saying that it was too unpleasant to talk about. But, though I chose not to talk, there were times when I was still unable to disengage my thoughts from the problem that was bothering me, causing gaps of silence in our predinner conversation. At such moments, even in the company of my wife, I felt oddly companionless. (p. 430)

#### Professional Isolation as Superintendent

Although the administrators in this study did not choose to involve their wives in their professional worries, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) note the loneliness “endemic to the position of every top executive of an organization” (p.141) and quoted one superintendent’s wife as saying:

It depends on what the issue is. He uses me as a sounding board and also vents his frustrations now and then. Particularly this happens in situations where he can’t speak with anyone else, because in the role of superintendent, there’s nobody to talk to. It’s a lonely spot. (p. 181)

Blumberg and Blumberg further recognize the sense of being along, even with a lot of people around – a phenomenon that they claim to be a part of the superintendency.

“I just kept it in,” said Superintendent Jon Peterson. Peterson acknowledged the increased loneliness as he ascended to superintendent positions:

As a principal I think I was always able to talk to my superintendent. We didn't always agree but I knew I could speak with him about things and he was a good mentor for me. But when I got to be a superintendent, especially when I moved to a new larger district, I just didn't know anybody. I didn't have anyone to bounce things off of.

According to Jazzar and Kimball (2004), the further one goes up the career ladder, the more one is exposed to criticism. "Many superintendents today say they feel more pressure than even their closest assistant could imagine" and add that young rising administrators "don't have a clue how isolated the superintendency can be for someone who is accustomed to collaboration. They do not see until they are a superintendent how lonely it is" (p. 11).

Superintendent Jeff Smith cited loneliness in another way. "Ultimately, all the fingers come pointing back to you," he said. "You are ultimately responsible for the decisions that people make or the lack of decisions that people make." For Smith, like many superintendents, the reality that "the buck stops here" leaves them feeling isolated and vulnerable. According to Jazzar and Kimball, "Superintendents sometimes see themselves as scapegoats for their staff, parents, and communities. They take the heat for what people don't like about their schools, their community, or even themselves" (p. 10). They further add that many small-town superintendents "are often set apart from community members by their salaries and their educational backgrounds" (p. 12).

#### Personal Isolation as Wife

Feelings of isolation and loneliness weren't reserved for the administrators in this study. The wives in the study all noted isolating experiences in the home or community

due to their husband's job. At home, Brenda Abraham described her experience as "single parenting" due to John's long hours at work, while Angie Peterson said, "Usually if you can find one good friend, it makes things bearable. And wherever we've lived I've been able to find at least one good friend – someone to talk to if I needed to or to do things with occasionally." She added, "Pastors wives make pretty good friends...because they're kind of in the same situation."

Deb Smith indicated that she had forewarning of the experience she and Jeff were entering when he decided to become a superintendent. She explained the advice they received from a former superintendent:

He asked, "do you guys have good friends?" And we have a close circle of longtime friends. And he sort of said it tongue-in-cheek that they're going to be your only friends, pretty much. And that is something we've noticed here. I don't know in this role that people really want to cozy up to the superintendent and his family socially. I don't know that they want to let their hair down and have a few beers.

Deb added that she is typically the one initiating contact with others socially as they are still a little like "outsiders" having "moved her not knowing anyone seven years ago." "I have to do PR for the family as the spouse and I try to always initiate conversation and be friendly because nobody really wants to sit by me at the basketball games- I try to find someone to sit with."

Tina Johnson indicated that, "people are usually nice, but you're not necessarily included." She cited a nursing home administrator, who moved for professional reasons, and "they said they thought it takes three to four years before feel like you have any real friends." The Johnson's were in their fifth year at their current location and Tina added



that they still “take off a lot on the weekends.” These comments are similar to a wife cited by Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) who said, “it’s necessary for us to go outside our community for close friendships” (p. 180).

## CHAPTER 6

### REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Reflections

During the course of the third interview for this study, Principal David Johnson said, “I think when you are dealing with people who are in the public eye, you have to put on your public face.” I believed this statement to be true nearly a decade ago as the principal in the autoethnography of Chapter 1 of this study, and I believe it to be true now as a practicing superintendent in my sixth year. The difference now is in the way that I approach it.

While this study has served to normalize my own experiences, both professional and personal as a public school administrator, it has helped me to recognize an entirely different perspective in which I approach those experiences. While I may still “put on my game face,” that statement seems to have taken on a different connotation over the years. Likewise, I rarely feel the need to “fake it until I make it,” as my mentor once advised.

Perhaps it’s the accumulation of experiences that have changed my perspective, simply the wisdom of age, the lessons of parenting, or all of the above. The experiences of today are likely as stressful as the ones described nearly a decade ago, or the ones described by the administrators in this study. In many ways, my current role is more stressful and complex than ever. My approach, however, has changed.

I've learned that the first step to coping, and more importantly – leading, is to make your “game face” your true identity. If you don't like that “face,” you have the power change it. Being all things to all people all of the time is impossible. Being your best self is not. We cannot take care of others until we first take care of ourselves. Coping is more than Springsteen, *Sportscenter*, and suds – or a reaction to the events of the day. True coping and leading begins by becoming intentional with our own lives on a daily basis. Rather than reacting to the problems of the day, we must invest in ourselves to provide ourselves the proper tools to overcome the obstacles of the day.

The investment in ones self must be more than professional. According to psychologist Flip Flippen (2007), we are our true selves when we are at home: “The constraints that we fail to address in life will play themselves out at home regardless of how well we are able to hide them in public” (p. 204). To best serve others, and our families first, school administrators must focus on their whole selves. Coping and leading as a school administrator is a process of mind, body, and soul.

### The Mind

All of the emergent themes from this study involve coping and sacrifice due to the perceptions, expectations, and conflicts of a very public existence. Whether it was John Abraham's “Hero to Zero,” Angie Peterson's statement that “it's easy for people to not see you as a person,” or the Smith's perception that “in some people's eyes, we're always coming up short,” all focus on a reaction to the actions or thoughts of others.

In order to better cope and thrive under such public conditions school administrators must shift their mindset from those things beyond their control, to those things in which they do control. According to psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl (1959), we all have the power to shift that mindset:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked throughout the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (p. 86)

Through a conscience effort to shape our own perceptions and attitudes, I believe that school administrators can become proactive towards their own stress, wellbeing, and improvement.

By shifting my own mindset from a results-oriented focus which perpetuates an endless cycle of chasing externalized expectations, to what Carol Dweck (2006) calls a “growth mindset,” I have become empowered toward my own self improvement and the improvement of those around me. According to Dweck, “research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life” (p. 6). She adds that a “growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” and the “passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset” (p. 7).

### The Body

All of the couples interviewed for this study mentioned exercise, or lack thereof, in regard to coping with stress. Of those interviewed, both Jon Peterson (running) and John Abraham (weight lifting, walking, mowing, etc.) acknowledged regular exercise as a method of coping. David Johnson and Jeff Smith acknowledged that they do not regularly exercise, but should. All four men noted “time” as a barrier for exercise. Brenda Abraham and Deb Smith voiced concern for their husband’s physical health, with Abraham mentioning “heart attack” and Smith noted the deteriorating health of many of her husband’s colleagues.

Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham, and Dudgeon (1998), concluded that physical exercise can positively influence conditions related to depression, anxiety, and mood state. In regard to depression, they conclude, “...on the basis of existing literature, it seems safe to accept that physical exercise regimens will have a positive influence on depression...” (p. 113). As for anxiety, they add, “...the literature unequivocally supports the positive effects of exercise on anxiety, with short bursts of exercise appearing to be sufficient, and, in addition, the nature of the exercise does not appear to be crucial” (p. 113). Finally, they also noted that, “results do indicate that various forms of exercise, both aerobic and anaerobic, can be associated with an elevation of mood state” (p. 114).

My own experiences provide support for the aforementioned study, and for the integration of physical exercise and proper diet as effective coping mechanisms for school administrators. The late night coping methods noted in Chapter 1 are simply not

sustainable long-term solutions for dealing with stress. I flipped my own downward spiral of coping several years ago from late night sedentary eating and drinking, to early morning exercise, followed by a nutritious breakfast. As a result, I have experienced improved energy, stamina, and focus. I believe the physiological and psychological benefits of this lifestyle change can provide school administrators another proactive avenue towards their own stress, wellbeing, and improvement.

### The Soul

According to Wilbur (2000), “The word psychology means the study of the psyche, and the word psyche means mind or soul...One is reminded, yet again, that the roots of psychology lie deep within the human soul and spirit” (p. vii). Wilbur (as cited by Brown & Ryan, 2003) notes, “many philosophical, spiritual, and psychological traditions emphasize the importance of the quality of consciousness for the maintenance and enhancement of well-being” (p. 822).

A sense of consciousness, purpose, support, or inner peace can come from many areas. For the Peterson’s and Smith’s both mentioned church and/or religion as a source of support and comfort. Whether or not it is a spiritual act, a psychological state of meditation or mindfulness, or a simple recognition of one’s core values or purpose, administrators may be well served to explore their inner feelings and perspectives.

According to author and speaker Jon Gordon (2013), research indicates that it is impossible to be grateful and stressed at the same time. Gordon suggests reframing our actions from a perspective of “have to” to “get to.” Gordon recommends taking a daily

gratitude walk or to simply spend time being conscious of those things for which we are grateful. Being mindful of these tips during my own morning exercise has proved to be helpful.

For William George (2007), it is a matter of finding one's "True North."

According to George, "When you are aligned with who you are, you sense coherence between your life story and your leadership" (p. 13). George continues:

Your True North represents who you are as a human being at your deepest level. It is your orientation point – your fixed point in a spinning world – that helps you stay on track as a leader. Your True North is based on your most cherished values, your passions and motivations, and the sources of satisfaction in your life. When you follow your True North, your leadership will be authentic, and people will naturally want to associate with you.

Discovering your True North takes a lifetime of commitment and learning. Each day, as you are tested in the real world, you yearn to look at yourself in the mirror and respect the person you see and the life you have chosen to lead. As long as you are true to who you are, you can cope with the most difficult circumstances that life presents.

In reality, other people will have very different expectations for your leadership than you have for yourself. You will be pressured by external forces to respond to their needs and seduced by rewards for fulfilling them. These pressures and seductions may cause you to detour from your True North. When you get too far off course, your internal compass tells you something is wrong and you need to reorient yourself. It requires strength of character, courage and resolve to resist these constant pressures and take corrective action when necessary. (p. 13)

Finally, George adds, "the key is maintaining your integrity by being the same person in all of these environments, and not letting your leadership commitments at work pull you away from the fullness of life" (p. 16).

Whether described in the philosophical, spiritual, or psychological realm, I believe the benefits of attention to purpose and inner peace to be of great importance.

The focus on one's "soul" can provide school administrators another proactive avenue towards their own stress, wellbeing, and improvement.

### Implications and Recommendations

Sharp (1998) recognizes harsh expectations of the job such as availability around the clock, meetings, school events, forums and coffees, committee work, service group projects, and "routine intrusions usually requiring immediate response to what can range from potentially serious problems to frivolous matter" (p. 29-30). Sharp continues to note, "anecdotal reports suggest that divorce is an occupational hazard for public school leaders" (p. 30).

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) cite "widespread agreement that in the United States schools are facing a dearth of leaders capable of providing good leadership" (p. 5). Long hours, stress, potential geographic move, and a lack of overall support have been noted as reasons for teachers forgoing entry into school administration (Laing, 2000).

The above mentioned perceptions are particularly concerning given a 2012 study titled *Principal Concerns: Iowa May Face Statewide Demand* by Michael DeArmond and Monica Oujidani, which suggested that within five years, just under half of principals in Iowa will be eligible for retirement. With the potential for such turnover in school leadership, prospective administrators must recognize the various life forces facing themselves, their spouses, and their families with the decision to make the career and life-altering move to enter the field.



The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the impact of the lived experience of male public administrators and their wives through a phenomenological qualitative framework. Despite the limitation of a small sample size, this study supports concern for a myriad of stressful life forces for public school administrators and their families. These findings have at least two implications: (1) the training of future public school administrators and, (2) support for their spouses and families.

Pace (2011) cites data provided by Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen noting that 80% of superintendents and 69% of principals felt university educational leadership programs are out of touch with what happens in today's schools. This data supports Pace's own administrative experience when he claims, "I was almost wholly unprepared for the way many of them [issues] would make me feel – full of anticipation, fear, anger, and often incredulity" (p. xii). Additionally, Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), in regard to superintendents, note that "early training and work as teachers had little to do with the life they must lead in their position" (p. 155).

Further complicating this issue is the belief that "the toughest job in America today is school leadership, and school board members and administrators are feeling the heat" (Carr, 2003, p. 14). Carr adds that, "the demands of the profession are increasing at exponential rates" (p. 18).

This call for better preparation is not new. Bottoms and O'Neil (2001) called for action on this front in April of 2001, although their concerns were related largely to the area of high-stakes accountability and rising expectations regarding student achievement.

Their suggestions were centered largely around changes in instructional leadership, a necessary, but hardly comprehensive component of the position.

Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) took a more comprehensive look at the demands of the position and educational leadership preparation programs that were largely viewed as disconnected from real-world complexities. Their research review cited a number of features of effective programs, but also noted that there is “little empirical evidence on how specific program components influence leadership behaviors, performance on the job, or student outcomes...” (p. 12).

Finally, Hess and Kelly (2007), regarding their study of 31 preparation programs, conclude, “Our research raises questions about whether preparation is well matched to the contemporary world of schooling...” (p. 22).

Each of these studies focus on the professional end of administrative preparation. Although the components of effective educational leadership programs may be unclear, this current study of male school administrators and their wives reveals a need for a very personal component to the training for both aspiring administrators, and their spouses. It has been suggested that people move into school administration “know what it’s going to do to the family” (Kisch, 2012, p. 48).

Educational leadership programs must add components rooted in the real-world personal costs of the profession. Personal components need to include potential stress and family sacrifice due to the demands of time, multiple constituencies, and the pressures (political and otherwise) associated with public perceptions and expectations.

The potential stress-related health risks and appropriate coping strategies must also be explored with administrative candidates. Finally, spouses must be included in regard to potential crossover stress related to the above-mentioned factors, as well as the potential for social isolation.

Educational leadership programs cannot bear this responsibility alone, particularly where spouses are concerned. According to Wetzel (1973), “the AASA [American Association of School Administrators] should at least recognize wives as partners in the team effort required to field a successful superintendent, and it should make an effort to help them become more knowledgeable, secure, and effective” (p. 159).

Deb Smith raised similar concerns when she stated, “part of me thinks that wives need a support group that could normalize the experience.” Like Wetzel, Smith pointed to professional organizations for help when she added, “I think IASB [Iowa Association of School Boards] could be playing a role here to better educate board members and provide political cover for school administrators so that they can make good decisions and buffer the community impact of that.”

Provided that Wetzel’s comments were made in 1973 and little formal action has been taken on this front by professional organizations is discouraging. The voice of the wives involved in this study should serve as a call to action for various professional organizations such as AASA, IASB, NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals), NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals), NASS (National Association of School Superintendents), and various state associations for school administrators. These professional organizations have the ability to bring

spouses together, break the isolation, provide professional development and coping strategies, and normalize the overall experiences created by their spouses' professional role.

Additional study is also necessary to further explore the personal themes identified in this study. The experience of female school administrators and their spouses also deserves attention in comparison to this project. Finally, particular attention should be given to the experiences of children of public school administrators.

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