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## The Political Ecology of a School Board Decision to Hire a Nontraditional Superintendent

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The Political Ecology of a School Board Decision  
to Hire a Nontraditional Superintendent

by

Linda S. Sparks

A dissertation submitted  
to the Doctoral Studies Faculty in Educational Leadership  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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in Educational Leadership

University of North Florida

Spring, 2005

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The participants of this study provided the meaningful content as they generously contributed their time and sincerity for interviews. I can only hope that the manner in which I ultimately framed their collective retrospections, along with my own, is worthy of their enduring roles played in Duval County's 1998 superintendent selection drama. I extend special gratitude to Mayor John Delaney, now President of the University of North Florida, for allowing me to use his real name in this final product and for his notable concern for the education of our children.

To General John C. Fryer, Jr., who transferred from one warzone to another, thank you for being the nucleus around which the study revolved. John, this study did not seek to study you; but as a by-product, we learned what people think of your distinctive passion, energy, and ability to formulate a plan for educational success. Thank you for offering yourself to the Duval County Public Schools.

I must also acknowledge my family who believed in me as I endeavored to complete this project. I could never ask for a more supportive husband. David, your love and support made this so much easier. My sons, Jeremy and Bobby, thank you for your faith that your mother can justifiably strive for continuous education. Your own intellectual pursuits have been an inspiration to me.

To future Duval County School Boards, best wishes as you carry the torch in the race where there is no finish line: excellence in public education.

Linda S. Sparks  
April, 2005

## Abstract

This retrospective study used the language of political ecology to describe the dynamics of a school board decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent. Those dynamics were described as contextual variables that existed within the community as well as mediating variables that were negotiated among the key players who were part of the selection process. This study confirmed that the school board did not make the decision in isolation from the community power structure.

The methodology of this descriptive case study was qualitative, using a basic interpretive design informed by symbolic interactionism. Data were collected primarily through interviews with key players of the superintendent selection event, as well as from local news articles and artifacts.

This research identified variables that were part and parcel of the superintendent selection process. It also helped to explain why most of Jacksonville, Florida, favored a candidate with a military background over three other candidates who had served as superintendents of other large, urban school districts. The environmental and mediating variables were presented as key constructs that affected the superintendent selection process and influenced the final decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of school leadership is incomplete without an understanding of influences that affect school district governance. Public schools are grounded and rooted in the politics and power structure of the local community. Local school boards represent the community stakeholders of schools as a public good and do not operate in isolation from the “policy community,” which has been defined as “a constellation of intellectual ideas and social understandings that influence the policy choices of decision makers within its domain” (Wirt & Kirst, 1997, p. 331). School boards make policy, on behalf of the communities they serve, for open and organic school systems that must function within, serve, and respond to an ever-changing environment and policy community (Burns & Stalker, 1961).

It is widely accepted that, for school districts whose superintendent is appointed, the most important policy decision that school boards make is hiring their superintendent. This decision has a lasting impact on respective communities for generations to come in areas such as school personnel, curricula, school construction, fiscal priorities, and student achievement. Superintendent selection has become an increasingly significant issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is an enormous responsibility (Rushton, 2001).

The 1998 superintendent hiring process of Jacksonville, Florida, offers a case study where the outcome of a school board decision resulted in hiring a non-educator. With no previous coursework nor experience in K-12 public education, Air Force Major General John C. Fryer, Jr., accepted the position of Superintendent of the Duval

County Public School District (DCSD) in July 1998. He was charged with rescuing an urban school system from what a study, commissioned by Jacksonville's only daily newspaper, the *Florida Times-Union* (FTU), deemed a mediocre to poor school board and district administration (School Match, 1997).

This study is not about Fryer's leadership as superintendent. Rather, it is about why the Duval County School Board (DCSB) reached outside the educational establishment for leadership, and the community influences that led to hiring a non-educator to lead the 15<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the nation. The period of focus is February 1998 to July 1998, which was the time of Jacksonville's superintendent search process.

Though school boards are the legally constituted bodies for selection of the superintendent, board members are influenced by the community they serve. This study should enable the educational profession to better understand how community interests can crystallize around a superintendent selection process and outcome. Educational leaders, community leaders, and school board members should understand that superintendent selection is a political decision, as well as an educational decision. The way in which board members and community leaders perceive the impact of this decision on schools and the larger community will make a difference in the final choice (Small, 1998). McCarty and Ramsay (1971) postulated that an understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of school board members, as well as community influentials, can result in deeper insight into the relationship between a school board and the community. The way in which key players viewed the experience of

Jacksonville's superintendent selection process can serve as a contribution to other school boards and communities that will ultimately face hiring a new superintendent.

The evolving concept of *political ecology* provides a language with which to describe the dynamics of mediating influences according to Presthus's (1964) view that school systems are subsystems of larger community ecosystems. This case study of a particular school board decision searches for a deeper understanding of influences that affect school district policy making. The particular decision that was the focus of this study became a national phenomenon in the decade of the 1990's: the selection of a nontraditional superintendent.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to (a) describe the key players' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions surrounding the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent, and (b) explore the confluence of influences on the superintendent hiring decision. This inquiry sought to identify *mediating influences* that may explain why the DCSB reached outside the educational establishment for leadership.

The study captured, in retrospect, a snapshot in time of the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of some of Jacksonville's most influential players in the DCSB superintendent search process of 1998. The researcher interviewed both decision makers and community members who influenced the hiring decision to descriptively chronicle the nature of their involvement, their expectations of a superintendent, and their perceptions of the type of leader they felt the DCSD needed. This retrospective, descriptive study aimed to increase understanding of the complex dynamics

surrounding the superintendent selection process by examining the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the key participants, school board members, and community influentials alike (Creswell, 2003).

### Research Questions

The two overarching research questions were:

1. What were key players thinking, feeling, and perceiving during the period of the superintendent search process that led them to favor, or not favor, hiring a nontraditional superintendent?
2. What was the nature of external influences on the school board, affecting their decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent?

### Assumptions

The study was premised on two underlying assumptions:

1. The Duval County School Board, as an elected authority, does not make decisions in isolation from the larger community.
2. The informal community power structure directly influences the form and substance of school board decisions.

## Background

During the 1990's, public education nationwide was under siege from negative reporting. Just previous to the 1998 superintendent selection process, Duval's only daily newspaper published a three month-long series on the state of public education in Duval County. This was the report of "School Match," a study that gave Duval schools a grade of "C" and rated the school board as mediocre to poor, overall (Mitchell, 1997). The newspaper paid \$100,000 for this study. This study, along with everyday television and radio talk shows that clamored against public education, left little doubt that the intensity of negative reporting, whether true or untrue, either exposed or manufactured a crisis in public education (Berliner & Biddle, 1997). This crisis may have shaken public confidence in the traditional leadership of public education in Duval County to the point where it seemed time to look outside the educational establishment for a "hero leader" (Senge, 1999, p. 1) or "savior" (Hill, 2001). This phenomenon was occurring in other school districts around the nation as described fully in chapter two of this study. Three notable examples were Army General John Stanford, who became Seattle's superintendent in 1996; Navy Commander Thomas Seigel, who became the Boulder Valley, Colorado superintendent in 1997; and Citibank lawyer Harold Levy who became superintendent of the nation's largest school district, New York City, in May of 2000.

Previous to the School Match study, Duval's superintendent had resigned under fire, after eight years of service. Dr. Larry Zenke received his doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Florida, Florida's flagship university,

and came to Duval as an experienced school superintendent. His legacy included positioning the DCSD to be recognized as a desegregated school system by the federal courts after more than 30 years of court-ordered busing. Certain influential community leaders, however, made known their belief that the district needed new leadership. The apex of this group became known as the “Nongroup,” which was the term used by some of this study’s participants when they referred to this small but powerful segment of Jacksonville’s community power structure. Raymond (1999), in his Harvard University study, described the Nongroup’s involvement in Zenke’s departure, as discussed in chapters 2 and 4. As a result of the Nongroup’s insistence, Dr. Zenke acquiesced and tendered his resignation in December 1996. The school board appointed, as interim superintendent, its chief financial officer, Dr. Donald Van Fleet, another traditionally prepared educational leader. He remained interim superintendent until General Fryer was appointed in August 1998.

Shortly after the appointment of an interim superintendent, the DCSB set out to engage the community power structure. They joined the Mayor of Jacksonville in initiating a year-long community dialogue that resulted in a blueprint for Duval schools’ success, the New Century Commission Report (Herbert, 1998). The school board and Mayor jointly commissioned the New Century Commission (NCC) and both appointed members of prominent stature. Those members then appointed subcommittees comprised of other influential community leaders. The Mayor authorized city funding for the study that enabled the commission members to secure the services of the local state university for assistance in facilitating the dialogue and drafting the report. Thus, 155 recommendations emerged, not from the legally

constituted school board, but from outside the board. This community event and the resulting report were publicly heralded by the community power structure as a mandate for change (Mitchell, 1998).

The school board commissioned a search firm, based in Illinois, to conduct a nationwide search for a new superintendent. This firm was recommended by a prominent business leader to a board member, who brought the measure before the board for approval in February 1998. The school board agreed on two stipulations that guided the firm's search: (a) an earned doctorate from an accredited institution was "preferred but not required," and (b) an experienced superintendent must have led a district in excess of 75,000 students. The firm's advertisements for candidates included the two school board's approved specifications and further described qualified applicants as follows:

Demonstrated administrative ability to achieve high student achievement and possession of an earned doctorate from an accredited institution are preferred but not required. Nontraditional candidates with experience in leading a large corporation or complex organization also shall be considered. (Hazard Young [Brochure], 1998)

As Chairman of the School Board in 1998, I knew how I felt about the potential leadership of a nontraditional superintendent, but I did not have an understanding of how the other six members were formulating their positions and who they may have interfaced with in the community regarding this issue. Florida's sunshine law, F. S. 286.011, interpreted in AGO 92-79, does not allow school board members to discuss views or matters, outside of proper and open public meetings,



that may be voted upon in the foreseeable future. At that time, I saw the trees moving, but not the wind. Though I knew what was happening, and who seemed to be making it happen, I did not understand why it was happening. It is an understanding that can only be derived from the collective voices of the 1998 school board and community leaders from government and business who exercised their influence in the process. This study was undertaken in part to bridge the gap between that which I understood and that which I did not understand about the superintendent selection process over which I presided. More importantly, the study contributes to a more thorough understanding of community involvement and mediating influences in a school board's selection of a superintendent.

The search firm advised the school board to appoint a Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC) that consisted of varying community interests. As board chairman, I began this task by sending out a list of community groups to each board member with the understanding that board members would recommend individuals that would allow representation from all of the groups. Representation was garnered from such interests as school principals, the district Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), Jacksonville's city government, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Greater Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce. With recommendations from each school board member, as Board Chairman, I appointed a committee of fifteen members. Some board members recommended more than one individual. An advance list of appointments was sent to all board members who ultimately indicated their approval before individuals were invited to serve on the SSAC. That committee operated in an advisory capacity to the

school board. They interviewed the four applicants that were introduced by the search firm and submitted their recommendations to the school board who then conducted their own interviews. There were mixed views among SSAC members, but the majority indicated their desire for the school board to hire retired General John Fryer.

### Significance of the Research

This study contributes to a better understanding of the dimension of politics in education and the ecology of educational systems by exploring why and how external forces influenced a case of school board decision making. Wirt and Kirst (1997), prominent researchers in educational politics, stated that qualitative studies are needed to “analyze personal motivations concerning political behavior” (p. 330). They further suggested that the “net of stakeholders” to be studied, in reference to policy making, needs to be more widely cast than the elected policy makers. The de facto policy community that surrounded the selection of Duval’s superintendent spread beyond the elected school board to other influential community members who felt strongly enough about this issue to involve themselves openly and directly in the process.

Other researchers have underscored the need for educators to be more aware of the political aspect of their field. Iannacone (1991) felt that understanding how school districts interfaced within the web of community politics would enable a school administrator to function more effectively in the community. Kimbrough (1964) contended that knowledge of a community’s informal power structure was crucial to obtaining support for local schools. Nunnery and Kimbrough (1971) went so far as to

assert that the quality of public education in the United States is related to the ability of school leaders to understand and influence the political system within which the schools function. They suggested that school leaders need to become knowledgeable of the community power structure and acquainted with local community leaders.

In Jacksonville, as in other communities, school district policymaking is clearly subject to influence by the community power structure. An empirical study of Jacksonville's power structure was conducted in 1978 by James A. Crupi. He concluded that "educational leaders must be continually aware of the community context in which they operate and should not isolate themselves from the larger community environment" (p. 141). The Crupi study provided a foundation for this research, but there are two major differences between the Crupi study and the present study. First, Crupi identified and described Jacksonville's community power structure in general, while the present study described the influence of the community power structure in action, exclusive to their involvement in a high profile, school board decision. Second, Crupi sought to identify and describe Jacksonville's most prominent segment of the community power structure, while the present study focused only on particular power players who were involved in the superintendent selection process.

Some of Jacksonville's most influential community leaders' voices were included in this study. Common and divergent threads were uncovered and then explored inductively. The resulting description from this exploration leads to a greater understanding of the interaction of influences on a major policy decision. This research explored the powerful and the more ordinary citizens' in-grained beliefs about educational leadership and how those beliefs may have influenced the school

board's selection of a nontraditional superintendent. The findings of this study may be useful to school boards and administrators of other large, urban school districts, but especially significant for future decision-makers in Jacksonville, Florida. Government leaders are not typically driven by research when they make policy (Miller, 1999). They look to prevailing attitudes, which is at the heart of what this retrospective study helps to illuminate.

Regarding the political nature of school board decision-making processes, Wirt and Kirst (1997), in a book chapter entitled "Future Research Needs in Education Politics," described the lack of empirical work on the political aspect of education. They suggested that research gaps in educational politics hinder policymakers' ability to devise solutions to many urgent education problems. Community influence on school district policymaking has been studied very little and a more thorough understanding of this unexplored area could yield insight into the driving forces of educational reform (Wirt & Kirst).

In the United Kingdom, Harris (2002) expressed concern about the few research studies that have focused exclusively upon educational leadership practices and approaches at the top administrative and governance level. Hess (2002) claimed that we are "hampered by a lack of localized knowledge of school board level concerns" (p. 7). Burbridge (2002) mentioned the sparsity of studies involving politics in education in his study on educational finance. Referring to Jacksonville, Florida, the focus of this study, Crupi (1978) stated that

very little is known about the way the current system operates, about its political ecology, and about the participation of community leaders in

the political processes of local government bodies. (p. 4)

In addition to the research gap regarding politics in education, the paucity of empirical studies highlighting the superintendency, especially the political nature of the selection process, has also been noticed and cited by several researchers. This study served to fill a clearly identified gap in knowledge of the political ecology involved in school board decision-making, particularly the selection of a nontraditional superintendent. Murphy (1990) expressed that he was troubled by the “conspicuous absence of empirical grounding” (p. 130) concerning the lack of research into the superintendency. Crowson and Morris (1987) were probably among the first to call for additional research into the superintendency since the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report. Small’s (1999) research examining the superintendency of General John Stanford in Seattle represents the only known study of a non-traditional superintendent. She noted the absence of similar studies and argued that a case study on the selection of a non-traditional superintendent would provide useful indicators of when other school systems might be expected to hire from outside traditional ranks of education.

The high degree of context makes generalizations from this study’s eventual conclusions inappropriate. However, to the extent that generalizations are “tools with which we work and are to be shaped in context” (Eisner, 1998, p. 205), other school communities may find this study useful in refining perceptions and deepening their conversation on the complexities of superintendent hiring processes. The results of this study may provide a better understanding of external influences on school board decision-making to similarly situated school board

members, educational leaders, and community members across the nation. In addition, the description of Duval's board members' and community leaders' perceptions regarding important superintendent characteristics may assist other boards in the development of their own priorities when establishing criteria for their next superintendent .

### Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by a threefold conceptual framework. Political ecology, that includes environmental variables, constitutes the most general theoretical landscape. The works of scholars such as Katz and Kahn (1966) and the seminal works of Senge (1990, 1999) framed this study of the political ecology of open systems. Political ecology, serving as the metaphorical language to describe the event under study, is based upon the work of population ecologists Romanelli and Tushman (1994) and biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), among others.

The second frame is community power structures. This frame is drawn from Hunter (1953) and Crupi's (1978) research on community power structures, and McCarty and Ramsay's (1971) study of community power structures' effect on school boards and superintendents. Most notably, Shipps' (1998) study of business leaders' impact on the Chicago public school system offered illumination of a corporate community's frustration with the educational status quo and their resulting actions.

Third, the superintendency itself is the core frame, because the selection of a superintendent is the focus of this study. An overview of the superintendency is drawn from among a number of works, including Glass (1992), Small (1998), Bjork and Keedy (2001), and Brunner, Grogan, and Bjork (2002). The legal framework for Florida's superintendents is also highlighted, as well as Florida's sunshine laws that required the entire superintendent search process to be conducted in open view of the public.

### Definition of Terms

*Community power structure.* The interrelated individuals and groups that influence decision-making in a community and wield power in the policymaking process.

*Influential.* An individual who has the capacity to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means.

*Jacksonville, Florida.* Synonymous with Duval County, as each county constitutes a separate school district in the State of Florida. The City of Jacksonville and Duval County have a consolidated government. The Jacksonville School District and the Duval County School District may be used interchangeably because Jacksonville subsumes all of Duval County.

*Non-Group.* The term ascribed to a small group of Jacksonville's elite that represents a powerful segment of the local community power structure (Raymond, 1999).

*Nontraditional superintendent.* A person having no prior school administration experience as would a school or district level administrator (Small, 1999).

*Political ecology.* The natural interconnection and interface of social and political organizations in a societal ecosystem.

*Retrospective case study.* Thick description of the bounded phenomenon of past occurrence (Merriam, 1998a).

*Superintendent.* The CEO of a school district; the person to whom the Board of Education has delegated responsibility of organizational performance within the school district (Griffiths, 1966; F. S. 230.241, 1998).

## Conclusion

This introduction framed the study in terms of its purpose, significance, theoretical framework, and context. I have also provided the research questions, assumptions and definitions of some basic terms that are further explicated in the following chapters. Chapter 2 further frames the study within the existing bodies of knowledge surrounding the topic of selecting a nontraditional superintendent. Chapter 2 also explains open systems theory and its ecological application to school board decision-making within the larger community. The qualitative methodology and data gathering procedures are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the data in the form of environmental and mediating variables that were identified by this study. Chapter 5 lays out implications and conclusions as well as recommendations for future research and useful considerations for engaging in superintendent search processes.



## CHAPTER 2

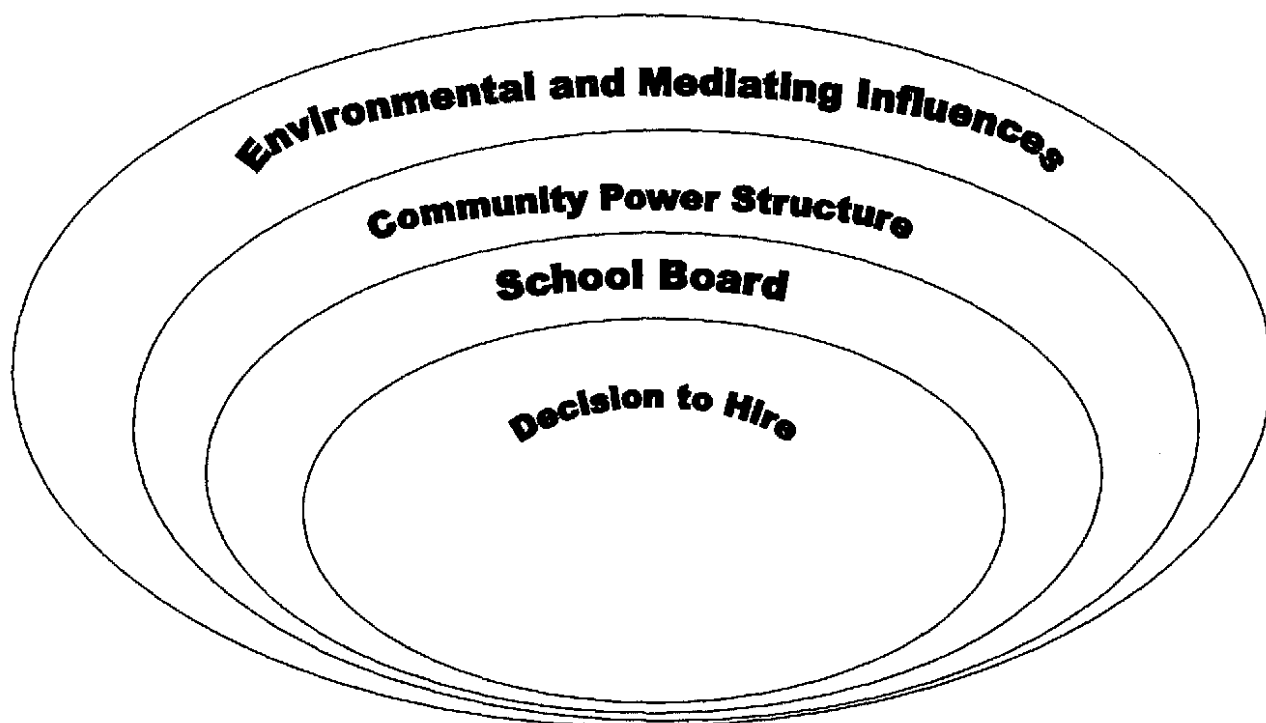
### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Chapter 2 develops the theoretical orientation for this retrospective case study that sought understanding of the complex community dynamics involved in a school board decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent. Pertinent background information and research are discussed. Because this study examined key players' understanding of the external mediating influences and community considerations surrounding the 1998 decision, the political ecology perspective was the primary theoretical framework for this work. The knowledge base on community power structures narrowed the focus of the study to the interrelationships involved in the decision. The core of the conceptual framework was the superintendent selection process itself, which was the basic unit of analysis that delimited the examination of community influence on school board policy (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 34). Those layers, as shown in Figure 1, define the phenomenal dimensions and form the "disciplinary orientation" from which this study was launched (Merriam, 1998b, pp. 46-47).

Political ecology is an evolving concept that helps to describe a school district's place in the community and the larger socio-political frame of which it is a part. Political ecology is an elucidating construct of *systems theory*. For the present study, community power structure is discussed as it relates to the ecological dynamics of the hiring event, primarily using McCarty and Ramsay's (1971) model of power structure typology. Since this study examined community context specific

to the school board's decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent, the study is further



*Figure 1.* Political ecology of hiring a superintendent.

informed by a discussion that bridges several aspects of the superintendency with a brief overview of the recent advent of nontraditional superintendents throughout the nation. The selection and tenure of retired Army Major General John H. Stanford of the Seattle Public School District is particularly highlighted because the Seattle case appears to be similar to that of Duval County, Florida. It is the topic of the only scholarly research known to have been conducted on the selection and tenure of a nontraditional superintendent at the time of this writing (Small, 1998).

The school district superintendency itself is then examined in terms of changing roles, an apparent public confidence crisis, and noted background and

preparation for the job. Lastly, Florida's statutory framework for district level authority and administration places this phenomenon in its legal context. These topics suggest foreshadowing explanations for the growing phenomenon of reaching outside the educational establishment for top leadership. In summary, superintendent selection is viewed in this study through an ecological lens in order to describe key players' thinking during Jacksonville's 1998 superintendent selection process.

### Political Ecology

Finding a definition of *political ecology* is difficult. Like others before me (e.g., Long, 1958, and Crupi, 1978), I used the concept of political ecology as a tool to metaphorically describe the interrelationship between an organization, such as a school district, and its environment. *Webster's New World Dictionary, fourth edition*, defines *ecology* as "the complex relations between an organism and its environment" (Agnes, 2000, p. 450). The modifier *political* delimits the meaning to a political context. In addition, *population ecology* is another biological term that has been used by organizational theorists to explain organizational dynamics in an environmental context (Hawley, 1950). Bateson and Bateson (1995) wrote of an "ecology of the mind," an epistemological recursiveness that seeks knowledge of the relationship between the patterns of the biological world and our understanding of it. Though the term political ecology has taken on multiple meanings, most being related to the field of environmental science operating in a political arena (Raffensperger & deFur, 1997), I used this fluid and evolving concept more narrowly to describe the school district's place in a larger system of society.

The developing concept of political ecology is a subset of systems theory and both have their origins in the life sciences. The scientific principles of interrelationships are illuminating to the study of an organization functioning within society and analogous to an organism living within its environment. Therefore, political ecology offers a metaphorical language in which to describe a school district operating within the community and the complex dynamics of that relationship. All systems are subsystems of larger systems. Bateson and Bateson (1995) contended that the study of any unit of existence is incomplete absent inclusion of the larger system of which all matter and energy are a part. The ecology of energy exchange between open systems and their environments calls attention to the dependence of a system upon inputs. Open systems theory suggests permeable boundaries of organizations, since they affect and are affected by their environments. One important role of an open system is the mediation and translation of influences between systems, subsystems, and supersystems (Katz, Kahn, & Adams, 1980). Political ecology provides explanatory power to accomplish understanding of that mediation and translation in the examination of social systems.

The health and well-being of a school district cannot be assessed in isolation from its web of interrelationships among other entities in the external environment. Other entities may include local and state governments, businesses, higher educational institutions, churches, and families. Environmental impact is a primary determiner of comfortable stability and painful transformation. Population ecologists, relatives of political ecologists, posit that organizations, such as school districts, operate in a survival-of-the-fittest world and must adapt to an ever-changing

environment, continuously reframing for a more favorable relationship with their external web of interface (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Repositioning may involve strengthening internally as well as garnering external resources such as people, money, legislation, and media. Effective leadership, according to population ecologists, bridles organizational inertia by anticipating the intermittent jolts that signal an end to stability and the beginning of transition periods. Those jolts are introduced by the external environment and do not originate from within the organization itself. The resulting transitions, referred to as *punctuated equilibrium* (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994), interrupt the inertial stability (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Sastry, 1997).

Can school districts successfully perform to the expectations of the general public absent the entire community assuming its share of responsibility for student outcomes? Contemporary educational theorists say no. Scholar after scholar has articulated the folly of viewing a school or school district as the only institution in the social ecosystem responsible for poor student achievement. *It Takes a City* dispels the notion that a messiah can be hired to fix the schools (Hill, Campbell, Harvey, Herdman, & Reed, 1999). In *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, Tyack and Cuban suggested that instead of using schools to reform society, reformers should consider social reforms to make the schools' jobs more reasonable (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The solutions posed by Tyack and Cuban (1995), and Hill et al. (1999) are consistent with the works of classical organizational theorists such as Katz and Kahn (1961) and James Thompson (1967) emphasizing the impact of external influences in

in open systems where the players are social actors as well as rational agents of change (Scott, 1992). One powerful work, *Building Civic Capacity*, reported the findings of an eleven-city study that pointed to the failure of cities to build civic capacity as a cause of failing schools (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). They defined *failing schools* as a product of community-wide failure and not the membrane-bound cause and effect, in and of themselves. This is a radical, yet logical, departure from the popular notion of exclusively blaming the education establishment for poor student achievement.

Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) recognized the multiple and complex causes of school failure and challenged the practice of zeroing in on the schools as if they were insulated from the society responsible for input, output, and throughput (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Basically, this book dispelled the notion that school districts can successfully perform to the expectations of the power structure and general public without the entire community assuming its share of responsibility for student outcomes. In addition, the major reform initiatives originate from outside the educational establishment as “people outside the education system have intensified the pressure for more radical and fundamental change” (Stone et al., p. 10).

One vehicle used by outside forces to impact education has been study groups. A number of appointed commissions and committees, heavily comprised of noneducators, have studied possibilities to fix public schools. They generally recoil at the notion of “more of the same” and their reports result in disturbance of the equilibrium and breaking through the established patterns which have stood in the way of reform. Focusing on major reform, the Florida Governor’s Commission on

Education Report (Governor's Task Force on Education, 1998), in addition to the New Century Commission Report of Duval County (Herbert, 1998), outlined recommendations for school reform, but did not detail the cost estimates which may have precluded or compromised their implementation. Further, many of the recommendations within both reports went beyond the purview of the local school district. These recommendations were dependent upon such entities as universities, state and local governments, the business community, and families for enactment. Implicit in both of these blueprints for school improvement was the requirement that school leaders crusade for the commitments of these other community entities to do their part in fulfilling the agenda of reform. Thus, viewing a school district as a subpart of a greater whole requires a shift of mind from Western traditional thinking that tends to view organizations as if they were isolated from other organizations and their environment.

The tendency to focus on fixing schools without fixing their environment justifies the need for a critical public to undergo a shift of mind from seeing isolated parts to seeing a whole ecosystem comprised of schools, families, businesses, government, and so on. Because influence does not run in only one direction, communities affect schools just as schools affect communities (Senge, 1990). This application of social ecology can be more thoroughly understood through a brief exploration of general systems theory.

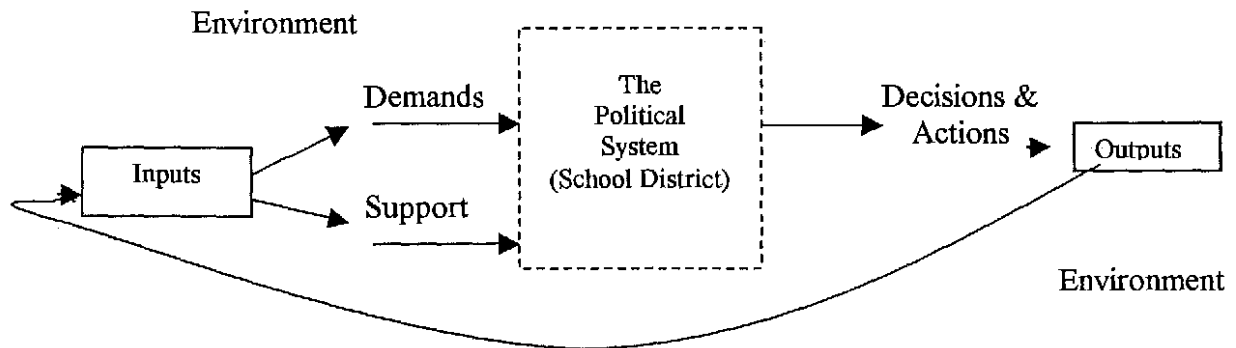
## Systems Theory

Systems theory was first introduced in the 1940's by a biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, in his attempt to view an organism holistically rather than viewing its individual organs, cells or organelles. He also emphasized that all organisms interact with and depend upon their environment for survival. Systems theory has been defined as the study of the abstract organization of phenomena. Applications are especially appropriate to the soft science domains of sociology and political science, as they relate to political ecology. A relative of systems theory is cybernetics, which studies how systems function and network. Both systems theory and cybernetics require a system to be studied in the substrate in which it is embodied. An open system is one whose border is permeable to energy or mass (Heylighen, 1996; Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

School districts are best understood as open systems, evidenced by the organization's location and identification with respect to their permeable boundaries with the environment. The characteristics of an open system, such as importation of energy, throughput, and output, can be found and traced in and through a school system (Katz & Kahn, 1966). A recurring dilemma is the necessity to balance the management of internal operations while concurrently monitoring the environment and responding to external exigencies. Traditional educational leaders tend to focus internally, as in a closed system; yet an educational system is an open system, embedded in a larger context of social action and community (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). The complex interaction impacts both the school and the community such that boundaries between them may be indiscernible. Wirt and Kirst (1997) offered a



conceptual framework for understanding the political web of American public education. In that context, they defined politics as “a form of social conflict rooted in group differences over values about using public resources to meet private needs” (p. 4).



*Figure 3. Simplified model of a political system*

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— From *The Political Dynamics of American Education* by F. M. Wirt & M. W. Kirst, p. 58.

Copyright 1997 by the McCutchan Publishing Corporation.

Note: Input is received by the political system in the form of environmental support and demands. Output results in decisions and actions. This output then recycles back as part of the future input.

In an attempt to convey this understanding, Wirt and Kirst adapted David Easton’s (1965) simplified model of a political system as shown in Figure 3. They show that a steady flow of public input, in the form of support and demands, determines decisions and actions that translate into output. However, from a pure ecological perspective, no diagram is capable of conveying a holistic understanding of a school district functioning within its environment. Diagrams, by their very nature,

are limiting and only useful in communicating shorthand versions of situations they are designed to depict. Therefore, this simplified model is useful in helping the reader to partially understand the symbiotic relationship that exists between a school district and its community. Further, it helps to illustrate the point that a school district cannot be viewed in isolation from the community in which it is embedded.

The preceding sections on political ecology and systems theory have considered school districts as open systems and explained that they do not function apart from the larger community of which they are embedded. The following section applies open systems theory to the leadership of school districts.

### Leadership in Open Systems

Idealization of great leadership leads to an endless search for a hero-CEO who can rescue our children from recalcitrant institutions. Disenchantment arises when miracles fail to spring forth and creates a spiral of searching for yet another hero-leader (Senge, 1999). Whenever influence is largely perceived to run exclusively from the chief executive officer of a school district, the one person “called” to save the school district is expected to save the community at large as well (Brunner et al., 2002; Lashway, 2002). Stone et al. (2001), drawing from their 11-city study, charged cities with failure to build “civic capacity” for schools. This is a reversal of the linear thinking that failing schools are a cause of declining cities.

Eisinger and Hula (2004) explored conditions under which cities resort to selecting nontraditional school system leaders. As the present study has done, they couched their description of these conditions within the frame of open systems

theory. Their article included Jacksonville's selection of General John Fryer in their analysis of a number of cities that reached outside the educational establishment for leadership, but they could have been referring exclusively to Jacksonville when they stated,

The main diagnosis that leads a city to turn its schools over to a gunslinger from outside the education profession is the conviction that the crisis in the public schools can be traced in large measure to its character as a closed system, wedded to traditional and inefficient ways of operating, resistant to truly new ideas, and unresponsive to community desires. (p. 634)

Senge added postmodern perspective to the view of school system maladies and characterized Western thought as closed and limited in scope. He proposed five disciplines for change: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) shared vision, (d) team learning, and e) systems thinking. Of these five disciplines posited as leadership principles for organizations, the fifth, "systems thinking," ecologically serves to make all the other disciplines work together for organizational success. The *systems thinking* view, that open systems are influenced by their external environments and maintain stability through homeostatic mechanisms, he called "the fifth discipline." The fifth discipline stresses the importance of viewing "wholes" rather than parts, interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and processes of change rather than snapshots (Senge, 1990).

Senge's interdependency theory is incongruent with the apparent mental models of some who are oriented toward simplistic solutions to complex problems,

look for scapegoats to blame for perceived failures, and even manufacture a public education crisis. Berliner and Biddle (1995) asserted that hype escalates as more and more people repeat the phrase, “public schools are failing,” and ignore their contextual environment. Negative mantra spawns a vicious spiral of eroding confidence in public education and gives way to various alternatives, such as voucher and charter schools, as stakeholders demand escape valves for public school children. According to Wirt and Kirst (1997), policymakers do not generally consider program evaluations and empirical research as they contemplate public educational policy. They do, however, consider opinion polls like the Public Agenda Foundation opinion poll that told them the public feels that the schools have been “captured by teachers” (p. 6). This is one of many indications that the public sees educational leaders and experts as unresponsive to their concerns. Linear, snapshot thinking coupled with the repeating reinforcement spiral about public schools perpetuate short-sighted policies (Senge, 1990).

Viewed through the lens of systems theory, educational improvement comes from many people in many places, not just from the top of the organization. In *The Leadership of Profound Change: Toward an Ecology of Leadership*, Senge (1999) described how opinion leaders and policy makers typically opt for a “hero-CEO” who can “pump new life into the organization” (p.1). He asserted that, in order to effect lasting change, the focus should be on “leadership communities rather than hero-leaders” (p. 5).

This section has described school districts and their leadership as open systems that are affected by their external environments. I now turn attention to one

major environmental influence, *community power structures*, that have been shown to have enormous impact on school districts and their respective leadership.

### Community Power Structures

Local elected bodies may themselves be governed by more invisible kingdoms such as business regimes. According to Burns (2002), cities need regimes because elected officials cannot govern alone. Local elected officials lack the capacity to govern alone because cities operate in a context of scarce resources. Elected officials must create the capacity to govern with private interests who control the financial resources and business decisions that are vital to overall societal welfare. Business leaders guide the economy and own productive assets, but they do not have absolute authority over policy decisions (p. 56). Lasting reform strategies depend upon the underlying forces including attitudes and assumptions of the larger society in which the organization resides (Senge, 2000).

Floyd Hunter's (1953) case study of Atlanta's community power structure described an informal coalition of white business leaders who played a central role in local governance. That covert group, comprised of business insiders, the news media, and some government officials, overrode Atlanta's formal governmental structure and dominated policy development at that time. This non-pluralistic condition existed before blacks enjoyed significant political strength and was unrepresentative of Atlanta as a whole. Hunter explained that the coalition, with the advantage of insider position power, guided the community's policy response to social change. Hunter's logic was that the disenfranchised are not capable of

challenging the power elite; the disenfranchised must either reconstitute the coalition or become part of it.

Referring to the Hunter study as a “path-breaking work,” Stone (1988) argued that it introduced the concept of “preemptive power” (p. 85). The power structure, representing economic interests, preempted other community interests and the legitimate government. Stone’s generalization was that policy-making preemption is inevitable because local governments command too little resources and authority to set policy on their own; therefore, an informal structure fills in.

Jacksonville has a history of the community power structure influencing public policy. Crupi (1978) examined participation of community influentials in political processes at the levels of state legislature, city council, and school board of the city studied here. He identified, ranked, and described civic involvement of the most influential people in the city. Influentials were identified through a nomination process and rank ordered according to the influence ascribed to them by others. No educators were in the top 30 nominations and only two were among the top 56. Forty-six of the 56 nominees, who were all leaders in their industries or occupations, were interviewed. There was consensus among all 46 interviewees that eight particular individuals were the most influential citizens in the county. Those eight leading influentials were then interviewed to gain insight into the nature of the county’s power structure.

The Crupi study revealed covert control of the city government and school board. Behind-the-scenes “power wielders” made decisions and then used local newspapers to steer public opinion toward their goals (p. 122). Key findings

regarding these influentials included (a) frequent contacts among this group occurred at Chamber of Commerce meetings, a common social club, and various recreational activities; (b) most lived in the same neighborhood area; (c) 72% had a private educational orientation; and (d) they turned to their own friends and the legislature, instead of the local school board, to address local educational issues. Crupi also mentioned that they generally did not involve themselves in school district issues even though a scientifically conducted poll had shown that the number one problem perceived by the county's citizens was education. Crupi concluded that the county's community power structure was close-knit with extensive inter-relationships and interaction patterns and that they had an "extremely high degree of political efficacy with respect to their ability in influence" (Crupi, p. 142).

These conclusions have striking resemblance to the Hunter (1953) study. But Hunter advanced his study farther than Crupi by comparing the elite issues of concern with those of more ordinary citizens. Hunter asked "Top Leaders" and "Sub-Community Leaders" to rank seven issues in order of importance. Twenty-three of 26 "Top Leaders" cited a "Plan of Development" as their top community concern. That was in sharp contrast to the 18 of 22 "Sub-Community Leaders" who reported "Improvement of Schools" as their major issue (pp. 214-223).

Raymond (1999) investigated the "antecedent of the [Duval County] school board's decision to remove Larry Zenke from his position as superintendent of schools" (p 1). His findings resulted in a description of "a powerful behind-the-scenes CEO club called the 'Non-Group'" that were "focused on the management of the public school system in a coordinated fashion as to be described as an orchestrated

‘crescendo’” (p. 31). Raymond stated that one business leader, who spoke on behalf of the group of “tightly knit” business and government leaders at a Rotary Club meeting in 1996, called for “stronger leadership” and “a new direction” for the city’s schools (p.1). This Rotary Club speech reflected the great frustration with Jacksonville’s public school system on behalf of the business and civic community. That frustration centered on the idea that a “reliable system of public education is a requisite for growth and economic prosperity” (p.33). These open comments facilitated the power elite grumbling into action. Zenke’s resignation took place 17 months before General Fryer was hired.

Recognizing that power structures differ among communities, a massive study was conducted by McCarty and Ramsay (1971) to illuminate various types of community power structures and their impact upon school district leadership. Enlisting the help of numerous research assistants, they qualitatively examined the community context in which 51 school districts operated. The research design relied upon in-depth interviews with 51 school superintendents, the school board members in those 51 districts, and community leaders and power figures in each of those school districts. The criteria used in selecting community figures was according to the number of times a person’s name was mentioned by the superintendent, school board members, or other community influentials. The resulting model described decision-making by school boards according to the respective community power structure classifications posited, as shown in Table 1. In addition, their description was extended to the way in which superintendents perceive their roles and were perceived by others. As in the present study, McCarty and Ramsay examined the particular



community context in which the school board and superintendent operated. Their major conclusion was that the nature of the power structure affects the nature of decision-making and the way a superintendent must behave if he or she is to survive in a particular community (McCarty & Ramsay, 1971).

Accordingly, McCarty and Ramsay posited four major typologies of community power structures: dominated, factional, pluralistic, and inert. Boards of education exhibit the type of decision-making that corresponds to the particular kind of community power structure of which they are a part. For example, a dominated power structure results in a dominated board and the superintendent, in such an instance, must play the role of functionary. He or she would tend to take cues from the power structure, sanctioned by the board, and be an administrator rather than a developer of policy. As such, the power structure would determine the direction of the school district consistent with the prevailing themes in the dominated community. The dominated type community has an elite, pyramidal power structure with only a few at the top “calling the shots,” usually from “behind the scenes” (p. 36).

A factional community power structure would result in board members, usually elected from districts, who profess contrasting ideologies. Generally speaking, both the board and the superintendent would take their cues from the faction exercising power at any given time. To be effective they must behave in such a way that they can also work effectively with opposing groups, rather than taking strong stands on controversial issues. The superintendent, in a factional community, must assume the role of a political strategist.

Table 1. Types of Community Power<sup>1</sup>

<b>COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE</b>	<b>SCHOOL BOARD</b>	<b>ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT</b>
<b>Dominated</b>	Dominated	Functionary
<b>Factional</b>	Factional	Political Strategist
<b>Pluralistic</b>	Status Congruent	Professional Advisor
<b>Inert</b>	Sanctioning	Decision-maker

<sup>1</sup>From *The School Managers*, by D. McCarty and C. E. Ramsay, p. 22. Copyright 1971 by

Greenwood Publishing Corporation.

The other two types of power structure suggested by the model are pluralistic and inert. A pluralistic structure is one that is controlled by many interests. The board is likely to be open-minded and the superintendent is a professional advisor, rather statesmanlike, and not limited to implementing the opinions of a few. The community with an inert power structure results in a rubber-stamp board in response to actions initiated by the superintendent. Though four categorized power structures and their corresponding impact were isolated in the model, McCarty and Ramsay acknowledged that there is no single power structure that must be reckoned with for every community situation (McCarty & Ramsay, 1971).

Dorothy Shipps (1998) conducted an historical study of the business influence on educational policy and practice in Chicago, beginning with the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. Drawing from documents and interviews, Shipps pointed to the highly organized character of key Chicago corporate interests that

enabled their high degree of influence on the public school reforms of the nineties. She also indicated that their frustration with traditional educational leadership of the eighties was a factor in their coalescence. Chicago's business leaders' view that the superintendency was a barrier to educational reform was reflected in the statement of one corporate executive:

We would propose a deal and he [the superintendent] would say "no." See, we were trying to get him to accept higher standards of performance. He would give us 400 reasons why performance couldn't be improved and why he couldn't be held to a higher standard. It was ridiculous. (p 170)

Later, the Reform Act of 1995 gave sweeping power to Chicago's mayor. Two major aspects of that legislation were that the mayor was given unrestricted discretion in the selection of the five member Chicago School Board and that the mayoral appointed superintendent was now a "CEO" (Shipps).

The perceived substandard condition of the Chicago school system resulted in a complete dismantling of the school board and reconstitution of all the schools, as has also occurred in San Francisco and New York. The idea was to destroy a dysfunctional organization and replace it with one committed to improvement by breaking up the faculty and staff of a failing school and rebuilding them from scratch. This action appeared to overlook the community context in which the schools must operate (Tucker & Coddling, 1998).

William J. Bennett, former U. S. Secretary of Education, had earlier warned of Chicago's looming crisis during a 1987 visit. Calling it the worst school district in the

nation, he placed all the blame on the educational establishment for the schools' demise and vowed to battle the "sick condition of American education" (Bennett, 1992). Here, it seemed that the results of the educational crisis were that those in power would look outside of the educational establishment for leadership, allowing the established school system to totally take the fall for failure to increase student achievement. One year after Bennett's Chicago visit and public criticism, the Illinois Legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. Chicago then experienced five different superintendents in the following four years (Shipp, 1998).

This section has described the profound impact that some community power structures have had on school districts around the nation and in Jacksonville. The type of community power influence may determine the type of school board and superintendent leadership that is needed by a school district to thrive in its environment. The following section describes the American superintendency in terms of its evolving role, preparation, confidence crisis, and the more recent advent of nontraditional superintendents.

## The Superintendency

### *The Evolving Role of the School Superintendent*

The last two decades have seen an enormous change in the role of the superintendent throughout the country. The changing role of the superintendent, through the nineties, has been a transition from professional educator and public servant to that of businessman. Intermediate stages, especially in the 1970's, required the superintendent to be an "educational statesman" and "political strategist." But in

the 1980's, the superintendent was required to be a collaborator, because the need to work with others increased under heightened public exposure (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002). Higher education, policymakers, constituents, and the local, state, and federal levels of government, as well as school and district administrators, often have conflicting perspectives of an educational leader's roles and inflated expectations (Cuban, 1998; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002).

As early as 1978, it was acknowledged that superintendents must deal with an ever-increasing number of political interest groups who raise complex issues for the school system. Recognizing this demand, Volp (1978) called for graduate training programs for superintendents and suggested that course work include politics, law, and policy-making. In addition, increased pressure was brought to bear upon the superintendent's position, as 20<sup>th</sup> century reformers attempted large-scale systemic reforms, instituted from the top down (Hampel, 1996). Far from being in an imperial position, superintendents are placed between opposing interests, particularly the pull between the school board and the community, as they strive to meet their own needs for administrative autonomy.

A series of national studies on the superintendency, commissioned by the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), has been conducted about every ten years since 1923 (Bjork & Keedy, 2001). The latest of those studies recommended more practical superintendent in-service education programs and emphasized the increasing political nature of the job. The study found that large districts, those with enrollments above 25,000, tend to be "politically volatile arenas" (p. 279). More than

90% of superintendents serving in those districts affirmed attempts by special interests to politically influence board policy and district operations. In addition, they acknowledged that business leaders attempted to exert subtle influence on educational policy. This study used McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) model of education power configurations to investigate superintendent perceptions of community influences. That model, as discussed earlier, depicted a type of elite, dominating power structure in which a few individuals exert political influence and place the superintendent and school board in functionary roles, taking cues from elites. As pressure for reform increased, critiques on conventional practices of administrative preparation programs intensified and focused on modifying instructional strategies to include a practical blending of theory and practice (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001).

Petersen and Short (2001) investigated the correlation between school board - superintendent relationships and effective policymaking. The major conclusion of this mixed methods study was that a superintendent's ability to garner referent power, as a result of truthfulness and expertise, is essential in successfully persuading the school board and community to adopt the policy recommendations that the superintendent believes are necessary to achieve the district's mission and vision.

Superintendents must also possess the ability to respond to state and national reform initiatives. A 1987 study that examined the implementation of a comprehensive school reform package enacted by the Illinois legislature in 1985 showed that district superintendents react to reform laws with their own, local

counter-reform agendas. Superintendents respond to reform pressures by adopting stabilizing measures that allow for the preeminence of their own leadership (Crowson & Morris, 1987). This has proved especially true as school leaders have borne responsibility for major school reform initiatives such as Goals 2000, followed by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, in the face of complex social and economic factors (Imber, 2003).

Cuban (1998) described three major superintendent roles that are important in advancing the district's mission: instructional, managerial, and political. The instructional role encompasses the responsibility of curriculum alignment with standards and program implementation that can produce higher levels of achievement. In the managerial role, both managing and leading produce conflict in administering the district. Leading means being a change agent, taking risks, and upsetting the natural condition spawned by just managing. The political role involves building coalitions to improve a district's image, implement a desired program, or secure new resources. School chiefs, hired to be instructional leaders, astute managers, and savvy politicians must struggle continually with calls for reform and competing roles in their charge to turn around failing school districts (Cuban; Johnson, 1996).

Superintendents are expected to be educational leaders, business managers, community liaisons, politicians, facilities construction experts, and more. In many cases, traditional educators do not have the background, training, or desire to manage all aspects of the education enterprise single-handedly. As districts seek to redefine the roles and authorities of its leaders, new management structures are tested in an

effort to enhance their organizational capacity to reinvent public education (Broad, 2001).

Fuller et al. (2003) reported the results of a study of superintendents from 100 of the nation's largest urban districts. There was consensus among urban school superintendents that they lack enabling authority equal to the accountability level of CEO expectations. These superintendents were in agreement that current resources and existing authority restrict their effectiveness in a public management position where public expectations are enormously high (Fuller et al.).

It is axiomatic that role expectations for the public school superintendent has changed over the past few years, primarily due to external pressures. Effective superintendents can no longer operate as though school districts were closed systems. They must acknowledge their external environments and adapt accordingly. External support and demands shape superintendent roles; thus, superintendents must be prepared for the political aspects of the job in addition to internal educational and administrative functions. The following section highlights some recent thinking on preparation for this enormous responsibility that must be undertaken in the context of a community interface.

### *Preparation for the Superintendency*

According to one large district superintendent, who managed to serve in the same district for over ten years, traditional leadership training has focused on the inner workings of a school system and largely ignored the intricate web within which today's new breed of leadership must interface (Negroni, 1999). School



districts are not closed systems. That, compounded with the increased accountability demand to effectively educate all students regardless of their readiness, dramatically increases the pressure and expands the role of the superintendent.

Glass (1992) pointed to the correlation between superintendent preparation and success. In his assessment study of the superintendency for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Glass asked more than 2,536 superintendents from varying sized districts to appraise educational administration preparation programs in general. Only 7.9 % rated them “excellent,” 43.9 % rated them “good,” and 44.2 % rated them “fair” (p. 78-80). Also in that study, 36 % of the respondents held doctoral degrees. A similar study was conducted eight years later, again for the AASA. From a random sample of 2,979 superintendents, 64% held a doctorate. In large districts, defined by a student population of 25,000 pupils or more, 79.3% held a doctorate. This later study did not address superintendent opinions of educational administrations but recommended that doctoral programs be expanded and improved because “future educators interested in becoming superintendents will likely need an Ed.D. or Ph.D” (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000, p. 36).

Credentialing for the superintendency varies from state to state. The preparation of superintendents is controlled in part by state departments of education through certification requirements. In most states, a master’s degree is the minimum degree required for certification as a superintendent. In over 30 states, about 20 additional credit hours in educational administration are required. Over 300 higher education programs work with their respective states in granting the superintendency certificate (Glass, 1992).

Critics of educational administration preparation programs, traditional career entry points for future district level administrators, voice that they are usually weak in content and lack practical orientation. In response to that complaint, *Standards for School Leaders* was developed in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), a consortium of all the major professional organizations in the area of school administration, including the American Association for School Administrators (AASA). These standards provide a platform for redesigning preparation programs for superintendents and principals. ISLLC standards address the importance of communication with other entities and building collaborative relationships with community interests. A number of university colleges of education have developed new courses or re-aligned their entire curriculum to reflect the standards. Thirty-five states have based their licensure requirements for school administrators on these standards (Murphy, 2001). Florida was not initially among them and does not require educational leadership certification for school superintendents.

### *A Crisis in Confidence*

Would you want your son or daughter to be a superintendent? This question was put to more than 500 New York State superintendents in a 1998 survey. Only 27 percent said “yes” (Hardy, 1998, p. 22). Many qualified educators are no longer attracted to the job and many incumbents have moved to university teaching or other fields because the self-fulfillment rewards are few, although the salaries are beginning to reach very high levels (Owens, 1998). Salaries alone cannot entice quality

individuals to accept this high-pressure position. They need assurance that adequate support is available to reasonably ensure success.

It is hard for a candidate to prove a previous track record of success considering that the average tenure for a large school district's superintendent is 3.5 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2001). Yet it takes at least five to seven years to see the results of the reforms initiated (Cuban, 1996). Glass et al. (2001) asserted that the widespread belief that superintendents do not last very long has seriously damaged the image of the position. Their ten-year research project surveyed 2,232 superintendents but experienced only a 16.6 percent return rate. The respondents indicated an average tenure of between five and six years. One conclusion of this study was that the short longevity image has allowed the public and editorial writers to view superintendents as "hired guns." Eisinger and Hula (2004) likened nontraditional superintendents to "gunslingers" because they have been recruited to "solve a menacing problem" that the current educational professionals were perceived to be incapable of solving (p. 623). Traditional superintendents tend to migrate to other districts either because of the attractiveness of the new position or the relationship with the school board in the old district (Cooper et al., 2000; Schroeder, 1994). City leaders, searching for a person to turn their own school districts around, are not likely to welcome former superintendents from other districts (Hill et al., 1999).

A 2000 Fordham University study for the AASA used a survey instrument, Superintendent's Professional Expectation and Advancement Review (SPEAR), to consult 2,979 superintendents about their career concerns and future aspirations. The

overall finding was that superintendents are very pleased with their own accomplishments, but worry about the shrinking talent pool of applicants who are willing to succeed them. The researchers concluded that there is a crisis in attracting individuals to the position of superintendent. Of further significance was the finding that large, urban districts, like Duval County, were unattractive to 81.7% of the superintendent respondents who might consider applying for the position. Recommendations for addressing this career crisis included improving access to advanced graduate degrees, making pensions portable from state to state, and initiating economic and non-economic incentives that increases job satisfaction and recognizes their contributions to society (Cooper et al., 2000).

As fewer educators are willing to step up to the challenge of a superintendency, the skepticism that superintendents must overcome has escalated as a result of critics taking aim at public education with a continuous barrage of attacks against its perceived baneful effects on American life. Examples abound, but one in particular is Martin L. Gross, author of a national bestseller that inspired the *Fleecing of America* segments seen on NBC network news. Gross investigated public education and his findings were designed to be sensationally chilling. His book, *The Conspiracy of Ignorance*, indicted public schools and colleges of education as part of his “fight against the Education Establishment and its minions” (Gross, 1999, ix). These culprits, he charged, are “the five million ‘professionals’ who constitute the monolithic force that controls our public schools with false theories and low academic standards” (p. 10). Untrained teachers perform better than “establishment graduates” (p. 10). Citing no supporting studies, he claimed “the best private schools in the

nation avoid hiring state-certified teachers, like the plague” (p. 59), promulgating the notion that traditionally trained educators are evil, nonproductive, or both.

Overcoming cynicism is a hallmark of today’s successful superintendents as continuous muckraking “exposure” of educational failures heaps blame upon the current educational system and its top leaders. Shortly after his appointment as superintendent of the Plainfield Public School District in New Jersey, Dr. Larry Leverett (1999) described the “fractured spirit” (p. 18) that had evolved from a publicly exposed system decline. The K-12 student body of 7,300 students had steadily suffered from low test scores, a high dropout rate, frequent turnover in administrative positions, and an absence of shared vision and strategies to move the district forward. He borrowed education researcher Terry Deal’s words to articulate the condition of the schools: toxic culture. This toxic culture, he said,

focused on the negative, effortless in its response to student and community needs and aspirations and plagued by misinformation and defensiveness. Hope for revitalizing the school district had long since been devoured by cynicism, negativity, false starts and a community marginalized by district leadership. The community was sick and tired of being sick and tired. (p. 18)

Superintendent Leverett’s strategy for success became engaging the community members in dialogue about the fate of schools (p. 19).

The preceding 3 sections have discussed several aspects of the superintendency. Superintendents’ evolving role, preparation, and a crisis in confidence have seriously impeded school districts’ ability to attract enough

individuals to the superintendent position. That challenge is compounded by a high degree of attrition, especially among superintendents of large, urban districts. Researchers, such as Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000), have offered some solutions to the problems of addressing the needs of those traditionally prepared superintendents. However, some districts have turned to individuals from other professions than education in an attempt to secure leadership that is a match with the changing role of a superintendent. The following section addresses the phenomenon of nontraditional superintendents.

### *The Advent of Nontraditional Superintendents*

The traditional professional career path for a superintendent of schools has been something like teacher, principal, associate superintendent, superintendent. According to the Assistant Director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), 99% of superintendents, serving over 14,000 school districts, are educators. Most of these traditional superintendents have risen from the ranks of principal or central staff administrator (C. J. Reid, personal communication, March 2, 2005). However, Senge (1999) suggested that some school boards, at the insistence of community constituencies, have searched for a “hero leader” who may not necessarily possess this traditional educational and experiential background. Communities and school boards may be placing all confidence in one top leader while largely discounting the impact that other community factors may have on overall school district success (Brunner, 2002; Cuban, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Kirst, 2002; Stone et al., 2001; Van Wart, 2003). We have over-romanticized the notion of

the ultimate leader and thus formulated unrealistic expectations of what he or she may reasonably accomplish, in a system profoundly affected by its external environment (Senge, 1999).

John C. Stanford, the successful, unorthodox superintendent of Seattle public schools and former U. S. Army major general, seemed to understand the importance of enlisting the aid of local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and volunteers to create more effective schools. In his book, *Victory in our Schools*, Stanford told the story of galvanizing an entire city into action to turn around a “culture of the Purple Heart” (1999, p. 12). He characterized Seattle’s school culture as one in which educators expected to “fight hard and get wounded rather than fight hard and win” (p. 12). Believing that all children can learn, he held teachers, principals, parents, communities, as well as students accountable for student performance. Since General Stanford was the apparent vanguard of military metamorphosis into school leaders, this literature review places special emphasis on his well-documented legacy.

Stanford told the school board, “Give me a mission and I will get it done,” at his job interview as he stood in contrast to more conventional candidates for the position of Seattle’s superintendent of schools (Darlin, 1996, p. 66). An Army pilot with no education credentials, Stanford rose through the ranks because of his skill in logistics. The school board grasped for this logistical skill to reverse the trend of the previous thirty years.

A case study on the selection and tenure of Stanford highlighted the growing tendency to ignore candidates with education backgrounds in favor of people from business and military careers. This practice raised serious questions about the talent

pool and the preparation of some who follow the traditional career path toward the superintendency (Small, 1999). Stone et al. (2001), however, countered those questions with a salient question which answers itself:

Who is more likely to have the greater commitment to children and learning: people who chose to enter teaching, or those who decided to make their mark in business, politics, government, or the armed services? (p. 4)

Seattle School Board member and retired business magnate Don Neilson expressed a different view at the time Stanford was being interviewed.

If you want to transform an institution that has been stagnant for decades, the last place you look for a leader is inside that institution. We need a non-educator. (Stanford, 1999, p. xv)

When Seattle was searching for their top educator, public frustration with their school system was justified by some notable facts. Enrollment had dropped to half, from 100,000 students to fewer than 50,000 from 1991 to 1995. One-third of the district's parents sent their kids to private schools, compared to the national average of 13%. Per pupil spending rose almost 12% during these same years, but teacher pay was up 22% in the same period. Test scores were at the national average. A mission oriented, strategic minded general yielded tangible hope for a school board and community thirsting for inspiration and courageous leadership. They sought a leader prepared to fight the enemy without, as well within (Stanford, 1999).

Stanford identified the enemy within as the system's educators. He charged that public schools have the vices of a monopoly, "an inward kind of thinking that is



more concerned about the comfort of the people who run the system than the public it is supposed to serve” (Small, 1999, p 59). The number of expulsions weighed heavily in principals’ evaluations during the pre-Stanford days. This led to leniency in dealing with troublemakers, so Stanford quickly changed the look-good-on-paper type of management. He reassigned one-third of all principals and vowed to fire anyone who refused to shape up. “Principals as CEOs” (p. 31) was his slogan when he arranged for them to compete for teachers, pick their own staff, and bear responsibility for their schools’ security, maintenance, and food service. These organizational changes in a school system, resulting from radical change, correspond to the finding of a sociological study that analyzed the resistance to change as experienced by a university department. Findings indicated that the change process resembles the process of death, dying, and rebirth (Zell, 2003). It appears that those who hired Stanford expected him to make war upon and kill the old school system and then nurture the birth of a new system.

To mobilize his forces, Stanford recruited three other non-educators. He appointed another general, Julius Johnson, as his chief of staff. He appointed City Councilman Thomas Weeks, who gave up his council seat to oversee the school district’s human resources department. He selected Joseph Olchefsek, a certified public account, who later became successor to Stanford, to be the district’s chief financial officer. With their help he formulated a new teacher’s contract, modeled after the Saturn contract between General Motors and the United Auto Workers union. “We want them (the union) to realize that they don’t need the protectionism they have” said Johnson during the 1996 negotiations (Darlin, 1996, p. 70). This

major departure from employment as a property right is one piece of evidence of the death and rebirth of the Seattle school district.

While Stanford was revolutionizing Seattle, retired U. S. Army Colonel Raymond F. Arment III was busy reading *What They Don't Tell You in Schools of Education about School Administration*, by educational scholars John A. Black and Fenwick W. English. Noting practical value, he stated that it “helped explain the real world [of schools].” Arment became superintendent of the Eatonville School District in Washington State in 1998 (Matthews, 1999).

Thomas G. Seigel, a former Navy Commander, also made reference to less than sufficient conventional leadership preparation when he became superintendent of the Boulder Valley, Colorado, school district in 1997. He went to the University of Colorado to obtain the credentials required of superintendents in that state. The value he placed on the instruction he received was implied in his statement: “the quality of instruction varied...I don't want it to be just seat time. I want to learn something” (Matthews, 1999). His statement corresponded to one of the 1992 Glass study findings that suggested insufficient preparation opportunities for school superintendents. The Colorado requirements for superintendents are nonexistent in the State of Florida, where most superintendents are elected, not appointed.

In addition to the military, some school boards have looked to the business world and legal profession for their top leaders. San Diego, in the spring of 1999, tapped Alan D. Bersin, a local U. S. Attorney, to be their school superintendent; and it was felt that what he did not know about education, he could learn. According to the deputy superintendent of that district, his attractiveness for that position was based on

his ability to coalesce different community groups (Matthews, 1999). That may be an indication that the San Diego school board understood the essential nature of community engagement for a successful school superintendent. Bersin agreed to resign in early 2005, when the school board concluded that his initiatives were “too divisive” (Gao, 2005, p. A-1).

Joel I. Klein, chancellor of New York schools, developed the skills necessary to run a huge, urban school district in the corporate world by setting antitrust policy. In a *New York Times* feature article on Klein’s selection as superintendent, Eli Broad, a financial executive whose foundation trains educational leaders in business skills, was interviewed. He said that he was convinced that noneducators like Klein are more equipped to run large school districts than traditionally trained educators. Broad joined Mayor Michael Bloomberg in esteem for Klein’s performance. Their reasoning is based on the similarity between a large school district with a multibillion-dollar budget and the leadership needed for major corporations that requires such skills as finance, labor relations, systems operations, and management (Arenson, 2002).

Also cited in the *New York Times* article was another outsider who exemplified differences between the educator’s way of doing things and the ways of business, finance, military, and law. That was Chicago’s city budget director, Paul Vallas. As discussed earlier, he was appointed superintendent of the Chicago Public School System by Chicago’s mayor, Richard M. Daley, in 1995 (Matthews, 1999). Vallas was later chosen to take over the Philadelphia school system in July of 2002 and Arne Duncan, a former professional basketball player, was appointed to succeed

him in Chicago (Arenson, 2002). Vallas succeeded another nontraditional superintendent, David W. Hornbeck, a lawyer who had long history as engineer of educational reform at the local, state and national levels (Merrow, 2000). Other nontraditionals who had served as large district superintendents by the time of Duval's search process were assistant commissioner of education business executive Peter Hutchinson in Minneapolis, government administrator Howard Fuller in Milwaukee, and army lieutenant general Julius Becton in Washington, D. C. (Eisinger & Hula, 2004).

This section has provided an overview of some notable nontraditional superintendents. General John Stanford in Seattle, Colonel Raymond Arment in Washington State, Commander Thomas Seigel in Boulder Valley, Alan Bersin, Esq. in San Diego, business executive Joel I. Klein in New York City, and city budget director Paul Vallas in Chicago have been among those presented as examples of nontraditional superintendents who were appointed in other cities across the nation. The following section focuses on the legal framework that Jacksonville had to work within as they engaged in selecting a superintendent in 1998.

### *Florida's Legal Framework for School District Administration*

Florida school districts' governmental framework is set forth in the State Constitution in Article IX, Sections one through six. Each of the 67 Florida counties constitutes a school district. This produces 67 school districts with widely varying student enrollments, including six very large school districts, of which the Duval County School District (DCSD) is one. The Constitution provides for district school

boards chosen by vote of the electors in nonpartisan elections. Each district must have a superintendent who is elected in a general election; except that a school board may, by resolution or special referendum, employ a superintendent (Constitution of the State of Florida, 1968), as in the case of Duval where the school board appoints the superintendent. According to the Florida Association of District School Superintendents (FADSS), there are 44 elected superintendents and 23 appointed superintendents. All six of the large school districts' superintendents are appointed by their school boards (Vickie Bolton, personal communication, March 2, 2005).

Consistent with the State Constitution, Florida Statute 230.241 provides for the selection, roles and responsibilities, and statutory requirements of the position of superintendent of schools. Whether elected or appointed, Florida superintendents must take the oath of office, devote full time to the office, and serve as the secretary and executive officer of the school board. General powers of superintendents are delineated, according to F.S. 230.32, as follows:

- (1) General oversight.
- (2) Advise, counsel, and recommend to school board.
- (3) Recommend policies.
- (4) Recommend and execute rules.
- (5) Recommend and execute minimum standards.
- (6) Perform duties and exercise responsibilities (F.S. 230.32, 2002).

School Boards who employ their superintendents are free to set "a reasonable annual salary" (F.S. 230.321(3)) and beyond this, superintendents are provided incentives to achieve state certifications. In addition to their contractual salary,

superintendents may receive an additional \$2,000 per year “special qualification salary” for meeting the teacher and principal certification requirements established by the Department of Education (DOE) (F. S. 230.303(4)(a)). If they choose to be certified in this manner, they must complete a course of continuing-education each year. Certification is presented in statute only as an offer, because there are neither minimum nor superintendent specific pre-hire certification requirements for Florida’s superintendents.

The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) bears responsibility for providing non-mandatory leadership development and performance compensation programs for superintendents “comparable to chief executive officer development programs for corporate executive officers...” (F.S. 320.303(5)(a)). Upon successful completion of a two-phase certification program and assessment, a superintendent may be issued a “Chief Executive Officer Leadership Development Certificate” and shall be awarded an annual performance salary incentive in a range between \$3,000 and \$7,500, based upon his or her performance evaluation (F.S. 320.303(5)). Duval County superintendents have not taken advantage of this because all performance incentives are specified within the terms of their contract with the school board.

Florida law contains another possible reason for looking beyond trained educational leaders for a superintendent in Florida. The public records law does not permit the applicants to remain anonymous. Florida Statute 119.07(1) and 286.011 renders resumes and other letters of interest and inquiry in a superintendent search to be public record, a risk that may discourage the best, brightest, and most experienced current superintendents from applying. Publicizing the fact that one is an applicant for

a position in another school district, at least in the initial stages of the search, might be viewed by candidates as career damaging and possibly jeopardize the position one currently holds. This is especially true for high profile superintendencies, likely to receive media attention. It is noteworthy that the same government in the sunshine law exempted the former Florida Board of Regents, of the State University System, from making public the anticipated pool in the early stages of their search for a chancellor, to avoid such possible limitations.

### Summary

This review of pertinent theory, empirical research, and school superintendent trends informed the conceptual framework of this retrospective case study of the relatively recent phenomenon of recruiting school district leadership from outside the ranks of education. Foreshadowed influences suggested from this review guided inquiry into the phenomenon. What role did the direct influence of the community power structure play in influencing the decision to hire a non-educator? Was there a perception among the players in Duval County that a public crisis of confidence demanded a hero leader? What environmental influences affected the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent? What influences were mediated by key players as they considered the type of superintendent needed by Duval County? This study contributed answers to these questions, making a significant contribution to the body of educational leadership knowledge.

The political ecology perspective, which was the theoretical basis for this research, sheds light on what Cuban and Usdan (2002) referred to as the dilemma of

countering the passions of policymakers and corporate leaders who seek short-term solutions in core myths surrounding the superintendent's job, to address long-term, ingrained community problems. Systems theory explicitly positions school districts as subsystems of a greater political ecological system where influence and outcomes are both cause and effect, running multidirectionally. Absent systems thinking, the body politic may tend to focus on changing the school system, even when the literature indicates that schools cannot produce results alone. This view overlooks the superintendent's position in the larger web of an ecosystem that includes statutory frameworks, court orders, collective bargaining agreements, community support, available money, and the readiness of the entering student population.

It is important for the education community to understand the attitudes and perceptions of community players who are more likely to perceive greater educational problems and propose a greater number of solutions than education professionals who are attached to the status quo (Stone et al., 2001). Understanding the influence of the community power structure on the operations of a school board and the process of superintendent selection contributes corresponding understanding of how and why certain decisions are made. Prescriptions for curing school woes are suggested, even demanded, by outside critics (Nielsen, 1998). Co-opting outside critics, through greater understanding of the community ecology in which a district must function, is crucial to formulating beneficial partnerships and creating the civic capacity necessary to sustain lasting reforms (Rogers, 1995; Stone et al., 2001).

This chapter discussed topics in the existing literature that are foundational to the present study. They included political ecology and the related theories of open



systems theory, leadership in open systems, and community power structures. The superintendency was also discussed including the subtopics of evolving roles, preparation for the superintendency, confidence crisis, and the advent of nontraditional superintendents. Finally, Florida's legal framework for school district administrators was covered. The following chapter will describe the methodology that was used in collecting and analyzing data to learn of key players' collective persuasions that impacted the school board's decision to select a nontraditional superintendent.

## METHODOLOGY

### CHAPTER 3

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the research design for this retrospective case study. The qualitative approach is discussed in terms of the specific purpose of exploration and description in the paradigm of constructivism. The aim was to describe and interpret how the participants made sense of a phenomenon, community engagement in selecting a nontraditional superintendent, using political ecology as a medium of expression. Participant selection, researcher roles, contextual background, data collection strategy, and the data analysis technique and procedures are described in this chapter. This study was approved by the University of North Florida's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and a copy of the approval is included in Appendix A.

#### Rationale for Qualitative Design

The goal of this research was to build a rich description of a complex phenomenon that is largely unexplored in the literature. I sought to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of Jacksonville, Florida's community leaders who were involved in the 1998 superintendent search. This retrospective description yields insight into why the Duval County School Board (DCSB) was moved to hire a nontraditional superintendent. A descriptive, exploratory study of the participants' points of view was an appropriate qualitative design for studying this phenomenon

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2003). Marshall and Rossman (1998) stated that one cannot understand human actions without understanding

the meaning that participants attribute to those actions—their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds; the researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction. (p. 57)

A qualitative study, such as the present study, may be both descriptive and exploratory. A descriptive study documents and describes the phenomenon of interest by questioning the actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes of a phenomenon. Exploratory approaches attempt to discover the “salient themes, patterns, or categories of meaning for participants” (p. 33). I explored the 1998 superintendent search event and described identified themes that were generated from the reflections of school board members and community leaders.

Merriam (1998) asserted that qualitative research can discover how and why people feel as they do in certain situations and that it is applicable in understanding the spectrum of perspectives from participants’ points of view. A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, framed by a general systems theory paradigm that seeks to explore and describe the relationships involved in the event studied (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Qualitative studies are also appropriate for studies that do not aim to control variables and are flexible in nature. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cautioned that “the design of a naturalistic study cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold...” (p. 225). This study can be considered naturalistic because of its contextual and ecological nature (Bogden & Biklen, 1998).

Thus, the research design was modified as gathered data directed. Eisner (1998) warned against specificity in a qualitative proposal and stated that “a pre-formulated plan of procedure indifferent to emerging conditions is the surest path to disaster” (p. 170).

Miles and Huberman (1994) asserted that qualitative research designs cannot be “taken off the shelf.” They are subject to modification and customization as the research proceeds. Given the variety of qualitative research strategies and possible modifications thereof, I was faced with “trying on” different ones for the most perfect fit with the data. After some trials, I selected what Merriam referred to as one of the more commonly used qualitative approaches, *basic interpretive*. Basic interpretive is appropriate when “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Data collected through interviews are inductively analyzed to identify recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data. A central characteristic of this approach is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructionism is the foundation for a basic interpretive qualitative design. Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43).

*Symbolic interactionism* is a perspective that informs basic interpretive qualitative research within the context of the larger society (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). Because this study sought to discover multiple realities, rather than a single reality, and the “social constructions” of the key players of the 1998 superintendent search

process, symbolic interactionism was appropriate in explaining the meaning that participants expressed regarding particular constructs. However, “no agreement exists among social scientists about the use of symbolic interactionism nor the importance of its various concepts” (Bogden & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). This approach assumes that human experience is mediated in interpretation. Events, such as a superintendent selection process, do not possess their own meaning; rather, meaning is conferred on them. Humans create their own world and their behavior can only be understood as the researcher delves into their views of the world. Marshall and Rossman (1999) classified symbolic interactionism as one of the typologies of qualitative research, but others have frequently termed it synonymously with qualitative research (Bogden & Biklen). I found it useful because it is ecological in nature and thus fits the theoretical frame of this study: political ecology.

The term symbolic interactionism was first coined by sociologist Herbert Blumer in 1969. He stated that an individual’s responses to another’s actions are “based on the meaning which they attach to such actions” (p. 79). In this vein, the cause of behavior is a socially influenced process. Behavior is enacted according to how the “me” is interwoven with the “other.” Individuals struggle with their own realities and how they are interpreted by others in order to be acknowledged as real. Understanding the perspectives of others is fundamental to symbolic interactionism. The result of symbolic interactionism, as a form of basic interpretive research, is the creation of a coherent fabric of woven voices that can also be separated into common threads of beliefs, values, and personal realities (Blumer, 1969; Jacob, 1987). This

study explored, in retrospect, the meanings of experiences as they were mediated by individual interpretation in the case of hiring a non-traditional superintendent.

This present study is a modified case study within the policy arena. Yin (1994) defined case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 23). The present study fits Yin’s definition but is somewhat modified to fit the multidimensional and multifaceted nature of policymaking (Weiss, 1988). Merriam (1998b) stated that a case may be a bounded event with an identifiable number of people that can be interviewed (Merriam, 1998b). But policy actors consist of both formal policymakers plus a diverse set of constituencies from outside the elected governing body “who press their demands on these formal leaders” (Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980, p 32). A complete set of outside influences would be impossible to identify so policy case studies are limited according to the legitimate policy actors’ recall and identification of the influential population.

Case studies are also appropriate for “situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context” (Merriam, 1998b, p. 29), as in the present study. Case studies may also be supported by the need to use “common language,” as opposed to scientific language, to allow non-researchers to more easily understand the results. Case study designs may be justified when the “goal of the case study is essentially descriptive and of historical significance” (p. 39).

Descriptive case studies are especially appropriate where little empirical research exists (Patton, 1990). As explained in chapter 1, there is scant research

regarding the topic of this study: the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of key players who participated in a case of hiring a nontraditional superintendent. Case studies focus on process, rather than on outcome. Yin (1994) suggested that “how” and “why” questions are particularly appropriate for case studies. How and why this particular event came about as chronicled in this retrospective case analysis uncovers explanatory concepts without focusing on the outcome. Case studies of particular occurrences might lead to concrete and contextual knowledge that may otherwise remain unknown. Such contextual knowledge is needed to more thoroughly understand the phenomenal complexities of an event (Merriam, 1998). Using language from Doll (1993), the present study is recursive, or looking back at things “in a new light, for the first time” (p. 289). I explored not a measurable or tangible outcome, but rather why a superintendent hiring process unfolded as it did, within its community context.

## Procedures and Methods

### *Site and Social Network Selection*

This retrospective study took place in Duval County, Florida, where the school system had recently undergone a thorough review from the classroom to the school board by the community at large. This review was accomplished via the New Century Commission on Education. Jacksonville’s business community, along with other community leaders, took this opportunity to urge “radical reform” through the 155 recommendations of the New Century Commission report (Herbert, 1998). During the time of that highly participative study that involved over 3,000 community

members, Jacksonville's school district had an interim superintendent and the school board had postponed the search process for a new superintendent until the New Century report was formally delivered. The impact of that study is discussed in the section on *Researcher Role*.

### *Data Collection Strategies*

The research strategy was to identify, collect, and weave together the school board members' voices, combined with the voices of community leaders who assumed a role in the Duval 1998 superintendent selection process. Analysis of those voices illuminated attributes that influential community leaders expected of Duval County's top educational leader and revealed other considerations that were important in the decision-making process from a political and ecological perspective (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

To gain knowledge about the prevailing attitudes of local educational leadership that existed upon the onset of the superintendent search and the general type of leadership desired in order to achieve recommended reforms, in-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. Key players were asked to reflect on the ways they experienced this event. Their points of view are evidence of their own thoughts, attitudes, beliefs about the event studied (Jacob, 1987). Separate interview questions were constructed for school board members and community influentials, respectively, as shown in Appendices B and C.

A modified "snowballing" technique was the chosen participant selection strategy to target participants who could yield information and perspective about the



decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998b). Symbolic interactionism calls for small samples, purposively chosen, and carefully selected according to criteria that lead to insiders who have stories to tell about the research topic (Jacob, 1987). This study was delimited to a bounded group who were at the epicenter of the superintendent search process, starting with the school board members of that time. School board members of 1998 were the core participants and were interviewed first, followed by eight members of the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee. Four other elite community influentials, whose names repeatedly recurred in the initial interviews, were also interviewed. The research population comprised those who had the ability to influence, as determined by whether they were part of that bounded group who participated in the selection process, and chose to exercise their influence in the selection process.

It was helpful to think of the data collection process as “data making.” Morse and Richards (2002) distinguished between data collection and data making in that qualitative researchers collect not actual events, but representations. They stated, “to speak of data as being collected is to imply that data preexist, ready to be picked like apples from a tree” (p. 87). Indeed, data garnered for the purpose of this research could not replicate the actual event studied. The data were interactively negotiated by the researcher and participants, and findings and conclusions were constructed by transforming the actual happening to a form that could be handled in the process of analysis. Thus this work should not be viewed in terms of the accuracy of the participants’ recall, but in terms of the accuracy of their recall of

how they perceived the event at the time of the interview (p. 99). In addition, it should be understood that access to participants' perceptions could only be gained through their observable behavior and explicit statements.

As a tool of the research process, I actively listened to gain insight into the minds of the informants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) as participants individually expressed their own views of the phenomenon. I was careful to construct the questions and ask them in such a way as to allow the participants' personal impressions to appear in full view, uninfluenced by my own recollections. Because I purposefully allowed the participants to tell their own story, I did not find many opportunities to "provoke responses...emotion, opinion, expectation, and answers that are germane to the inquiry" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 1) Though the questions were pre-structured, interviews took on a conversational tone.

The process for this study was the "elite" interview, focused on influential, prominent people in the Jacksonville community because all of the participants were acknowledged as influentials in this particular event because they were either (a) members of the school board, (b) members of the Superintendent Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC), or (c) identified as an "influencer" by a school board or SSAC member. School board member and SSAC participants were able to report their views on district policy, history, and context that surrounded the decision under study. Other elites interviewed were selected as a result of being named as an influence by other participants. Those elites included elected officials and persons of prominence because of their social, public service, or financial positions in the community. My former role as school board chairwoman and a key participant in the

process was an advantage in conducting this study because it facilitated both access to these individuals and candor in the interviews. In addition, Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that another advantage of interviewing elites is that they are most often savvy, well-informed people who are able to substantially contribute meaning to a study. This was true, indeed, for these participants.

I began the interview process with a former school board member whose discussion helped me to formulate the theoretical orientation for this study. This participant spent more than two hours confirming things that I remembered about the superintendent hiring process and brought to my attention things that I had either forgotten or never known. The considerations that emerged from this first interview enabled me to target additional considerations surrounding the event and revisit the literature for grounding into foreshadowing variables that may have resulted in hiring a nontraditional superintendent.

From there I phoned all of the other five school board members who served during the period of focus. They all readily agreed to participate and scheduled an interview. Three took place in offices, one in a home, one in a lunch setting, and one in my office. Two board members' schedules precluded me from interviewing all board members before I began to interview members of the community advisory committee. I then scheduled interviews with eight members of the superintendent search advisory committee who were mentioned by school board members. All agreed to interviews that lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. In the interview conversations with both of these groups, four prominent community leaders' names were mentioned by most as having had an influence on the eventual hiring decision. I

then interviewed all four of these influentials, two in their offices, one at Jacksonville's River Club, and one by telephone due to that participant's illness. The telephone interview was audio-taped by speakerphone and the informed consent form was mailed to this participant, signed, and returned.

### *Confidentiality*

This study was approved by the University of North Florida's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and a copy of the approval is included in Appendix A. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in this study (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997) with a signed release form assuring confidentiality of responses, as shown in Appendix D. To protect the informants' identities and to increase the likelihood of candid input, pseudonyms were used in the descriptive account. Readers who are knowledgeable of Jacksonville's local politics may well be able to guess who these individuals are. Though participants were aware that they might be identified because of their high profile positions, I sensed that some would prefer to be masked. Therefore, the participants are disguised even though their stature may prevent them from remaining totally anonymous to all readers. All participants indicated their permission for their names to be used in the research report by signing an additional line indicator on the informed consent form. One participant, the former mayor of Jacksonville, graciously offered permission for his name to be used because "it's hard to hide the identity of the only Mayor of Jacksonville at that time" (personal communication, J. Delaney, October 14, 2004).

### *Validity*

It was of paramount importance that the findings and conclusions of this investigation be corroborated and well-founded. I sought confidence in this study to the greatest degree possible in the following manner. First, reliability of information was enhanced through interviewing as many members of the aforementioned research population as possible to create a reasonable cross-check of the participants' perceptions and to accommodate for outliers. Second, clarification of my role in the event and the presentation of an honest and rich description of the participants' shared experiences safeguarded against highlighting only those themes illuminated by my own philosophical stance. Third, local newspaper articles and artifacts were included among the data to further corroborate information. One major artifact was Fryer's letter of recommendation from General Colin Powell as shown in Appendix E. Triangulation using multiple data sources that included personal interviews, newspaper articles, artifacts, and literature research helped to build justification for themes (Merriam, 2002). Fourth, conflicting views were accounted for as well as similar and recurring patterns.

### *Researcher Role*

My key concern was viewing this event from the other participants' perspectives and serving as the human instrument through which the data were mediated and interpreted. Therefore, I gathered data and qualitatively analyzed the phenomenon of steering currents that affected the DCSB's 1998 superintendent search process and outcome. Other researchers may study this same event and view it

differently through other than the ecological lens. That the interpretation of participant accounts was influenced by my own point of view is not considered a liability in producing a credible product (Eisner, 1998; Peshkin, 1988). I studied the dynamics surrounding a major school board decision of which I was a part, retrospectively, six years after the event occurred. I served as the interviewer in the data collection process, analyzer of those data, and synthesizer of the final written product. A perceived limitation of these roles may be that I was chair of the Duval County School Board at the time of the superintendent selection process. Mindful that my 1998 outlook impacted data collected in 2004, I was overtly conscious of the need for self-transparency as I collected data from my 1998 self with the same scholarly approach that I collected data from other key players.

Unlike the positivistic approach that would require strict precautions to eliminate researcher bias in the research design and detachment from the research process, personal judgment was retained. A priori knowledge and attentiveness are considered enabling research qualities that can capture the most significant details of a topic under study. My subjectivity was “transacted” with data from interview transcripts and other documentation to build upon existing knowledge and create new knowledge in a constructivist approach (Eisner, 1999, pp. 48-50). Peshkin (1988) stressed the importance of minimizing researcher subjectivity, but felt that subjectivity was both inevitable and beneficial to the research work. It should be noted, however, that the present study is not about my assumptions, perspectives, or actions. It is about the collective, retrospective views of participants that affected the hiring decision.

### *Researcher Background and Point of View*

I was a biology and ecology teacher in Duval County at the time that I was elected to the school board in 1994 from a predominately conservative district. My experience on the school-board moved me from a positivist world-view toward a more constructivist, post-positivist outlook, in appreciating issue complexities and living with the multiple realities of varying vantage points. One example of my emergent perspective was a shift from viewing the school district as an isolated entity. I became keenly aware of the community context and its influence, both positively and negatively, on the schools' performance. Another example was that other school board members influenced my thinking, as I probably influenced their thinking during the time we served together, in the spirit of listening and honest debate. Each of us had unique views but we only acted as a body of the whole.

When one board member made the motion to hire retired General John Fryer as superintendent, I cast my vote in favor of that recommendation. I was abundantly impressed with Fryer in the school board's interview process, but my reasons for favoring Fryer over the other candidates also revolved around signals from the community at large. Before the search process began, I felt that a portion of the elite community power structure sufficiently communicated their desire for someone outside the field of education. I received oral communications from several members of the "Nongroup," a small group of powerful community leaders, explicitly stating their desire for an "admiral" or a "general." As part of the inquiry for this study, I interviewed the primary individual who approached me regarding hiring an admiral

or general and he generously expressed his reasoning that is presented here in chapter 4. I also express in chapter 4 my reaction to his influence, weaving my 1998 view into the overall fabric of key players' voices.

I supported Fryer for two major reasons. I came to believe that Fryer's military leadership background equipped him to interface better with the school district's environmental influences than other applicants with an educational background. In addition, as Chairman of the DCSB, I was responsible for leading the implementation of the 155 New Century recommendations. The New Century study, described in Chapter 1 and the *Site Selection and Social Network* section of this chapter, as a community mandate for change, made it clear to me that the community power structure demanded noticeable change from the new district leadership. I felt that the selection of a nontraditional superintendent would symbolically communicate that direction.

### *Inductive Data Analysis*

Having acquired an enormous volume of data through transcription of the audio-taped interviews, I sought the most appropriate method of reducing it to meaningful analysis. I began by reading and re-reading the transcripts to get a feel for the major categories of ideas. Certain ideas had already become apparent in the interview and transcription process but coding the actual material, according to obvious themes, led me to all the transcript material that linked data with those ideas. Color-coded topics within the transcripts allowed me to see segments that were unseen when the data documents were viewed as a whole. Using an ecological



approach, I extracted some major topics but sought to express the story as a whole. From the major categories, I was able to identify themes and sub-themes that answered the two research questions.

Bits of data, in support or contradiction of each other, linked together to form themes (Eisner, 1999). Observed patterns were color-coded to identify themes and categories of environmental and mediating variables that may have affected the hiring decision. The categories then became explanatory constructs for looking outside the educational establishment for leadership. These constructs arose inductively, signaled by recurring language and patterns of belief that linked or divided participants. Searching for patterns from the color-coded interview transcripts, I inductively identified causal themes as they became apparent from the response patterns. In addition to themes, nuances from divergent points of view were also illuminated. Through questioning the data and reflecting on the conceptual framework, I found coherence among the generated constructs (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and was able to ecologically conceptualize why the school board, as a whole, made the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent and how and why the community affected or attempted to affect that decision. The findings are described in narrative and interpretative form, using thick, rich description, in the tradition of Eisner (1998).

The goal was to create an artful description and interpretation of the phenomenon, through the perspectives of some who were involved, that would enable the consumer to experience this event vicariously (Mooney, 1975). Interpreting the data and evaluating how helpful the resulting conclusions might be to the future

direction of public education decision-making increased the value of this work (Eisner, 1998). The ongoing research process was continuously recursive, returning both to the literature and to all respondents' accounts of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998b).

### *Limitations*

Limitations of this study included the number of participants, the lapse of time from the event, and the participants' somewhat faded memory. Though most key players were interviewed, a few were unavailable. Six years from the event, most participants firmly stated that they could not remember specific components of the event and could only remember large themes. The limitation of their recall of details, resulting from the lapse of time, was somewhat balanced by the benefit of their less emotional responses. Being removed in time from the event allowed for the richness of hindsight and enabled me to ask, "Now, six years later, what do you think of the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent?"

### *Research Questions*

The overarching research questions were:

1. What were key players thinking, feeling, and perceiving, during the period of the superintendent search process, that led them to favor, or not favor, hiring a nontraditional superintendent?
2. What was the nature of external influences on the school board, affecting their decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent?

### *Interview Questions*

Interview questions were formulated to stimulate responses that could provide broad understanding to the research questions without explicitly asking those research questions. My motivation behind these open-ended interview questions was to allow the participant to speak freely without leading them in a particular direction. In addition, these interview questions simply opened up the conversation and allowed the discussion to remain on track with the purpose of the inquiry. A separate list of interview questions was constructed for school board members than for community influentials, as shown in Appendices C and D, respectively.

### Summary

Justification for the value of this qualitative research topic resides in the need to “delve in depth into complexities and processes” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 57) in order to gain understanding of the influences that resulted in hiring a nontraditional superintendent. Exploring the phenomenon of recruiting leadership from outside the ranks of education was accomplished by probing the conceptual world of key players to capture the drama of Duval’s 1998 superintendent search process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This understanding is important for educational and community leaders because the selection of a superintendent affects many areas such as fiscal priorities, curricula, and student achievement. The data collection method allowed for the flexibility of open-ended interviews. Key players’ attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs merit exploration and their voices were woven together and

expressed through an ecological perspective. The complexities of this historic event were explored and served to build a rich description of composite mindsets, using a data analysis approach referred to by Merriam (2002) as “basic interpretive qualitative research” that is informed by phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (p. 37). Therefore, the purposes of this study were both exploratory and descriptive (Marshall & Rossman, p. 33). This research was an odyssey in search of a deeper understanding of an evolving national phenomenon: the selection of a nontraditional superintendent.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### CHAPTER 4

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a descriptive analysis of the data collected through exploratory interviews, supplemented by other sources such as local newspaper articles. Synthesized through a tradition of qualitative research known as symbolic interactionism, this is a description of the political milieu and identification of some environmental and mediating influences that affected a very important school board decision. In addition, how participants' currently view the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent six years after the event is also illuminated.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the political ecology surrounding the decision to hire General John Fryer as Duval County's superintendent is described by interweaving my own perspective of the event with the expressed realities of others who grappled with the tentacles of that policy decision. The realities of such a complex event can only be partially understood, even with most of the key players' voices included in the final product. This presentation enables the reader to look back on Duval County's superintendent selection process in a new light, with and through the eyes of school board members and community leaders who played a key role.

The 1998 superintendent selection dynamics are more clearly brought into focus through the lens of political ecology and the perspective of symbolic interactionism where the "me" is interwoven with the "other." This chapter

presents a fabric of woven voices that can be separated into individual realities and becomes the basis for the chapter 5 conclusions and recommendations set forth (Blumer, 1969; Jacob, 1987). Because I could not often find words that were more salient than the participants' own words, I made use of ample excerpts from the interviews.

This chapter is not a chronology or historical account of the event, but an account of the thinking of key players, in retrospect, of the search process. First, the involvement and impact of the community power structure on the school board's decision is discussed. Secondly, five other influences are discussed. Three of the identified influences are contextual and two are mediating variables that were negotiated by community members and school board members. Three contextual influences were identified as notable parts of the environment in which the superintendent selection process occurred. Two mediating variables became apparent as participants explained their impressions of the four candidates who offered themselves to be Duval County's superintendent. Last, the participants' expressions of what they now think of the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent, six years after the event, are presented.

### Community Power Structure Involvement

The findings of this section are consistent with research that has revealed the existence of community power structures and their impact on school districts (Crupi, 1978; Hunter, 1953; McCarty & Ramsay, 1971; Shipps, 1998). Raymond (1999) carefully documented the existence of Jacksonville's community power

structure and illuminated their activism and influence in the departure of Superintendent Larry Zenke in December 1996. The time period of the present study is roughly one year after the focus period of Raymond's study. Raymond documented some key players' perspectives on the superintendent's departure and I document the perspectives of key players just preceding the arrival of the new superintendent of Jacksonville, Florida.

I began this study by putting forth two assumptions: (a) that the DCSB did not make the decision to hire a non-traditional superintendent in isolation from the larger community, and (b) the informal power structure directly influences the form and substance of school board decisions. This section provides a vantage from which to test those assumptions. In particular, it helps to answer the question of whether Jacksonville's informal power structure influenced the decision. School board members' perspectives are described in the first subsection, followed by members of the community advisory committee.

### *Board Members' Perspectives of Community Power Structure's Involvement*

Duval County, though a single school district, is comprised of seven members from seven separate, single-member, electoral districts from within the county. Members are elected by constituencies from their own electoral district which results in board representation of varying philosophies and interests. Approaching school board business from the varying vantage points of seven members frequently resulted in divisions and split votes on some controversial issues. Because of the open clash of conflicting philosophies among board

members, the public had grown to perceive the board as factional and we always received unfavorable ratings in local polls.

The 1998 school board demographics were 4 female and 3 male members, and 5 Caucasian and 2 African-American members. One member held a doctorate degree, 4 members held master's degrees, 1 member held a law degree, and 1 member held an associate's degree. Four members, including me, had worked in the school district as teachers and administrators prior to being elected to the school board.

This section presents the way in which each school board member remembered influences and attempted influences from the Jacksonville community. Each school board member conveyed a unique perspective and recall of the community power structure's involvement in the final decision. Their revelations were sometimes surprising to me, probably due to Florida's sunshine law that restricted communication between members during our service together. However, with the exception of one, all board members made some reference to at least one community leader that they had communicated with about the selection and they acknowledged the existence of some power elites' influence. All members expressed clear knowledge that local business and political leaders were greatly concerned about the condition of public education in Jacksonville. While giving deference to the community leaders who involved themselves in the process, each and every board member expressed that their personal decision on how to vote in this matter was theirs and theirs alone.



Board Member and former school district administrator Don Johnson, saying that he spoke with one major business and political leader about who the new superintendent should be, firmly asserted “but no-one influenced me.” He also stated that “I didn’t even want an educator to come in from the outside, I wanted someone from here in Duval County.” Johnson’s desire to install a local person is somewhat illuminated by another former district administrator, Board Member Wayne Nemeth. He said, “The power structure did not want Don to be the superintendent.” This is discussed more fully in a later section on *Distrust*. In addition to Nemeth’s recollection on the potential of a school board member becoming the superintendent, Nemeth also remembered that one community influential telephoned to persuade him to support Fryer. That person of influence was community leader Frank Hagan, who was the person most frequently referred to by participants throughout the data collection process. Hagan’s influential community stature is discussed later in this chapter.

Board members Nancy Newman and Candace Griffin shared my view that some business leaders, like Hagan, involved themselves out of pure motivation to improve education in order to create a higher quality of life in Jacksonville. Newman was a former school administrator before being elected to the board and continued to lead a large non-profit organization as executive director while serving on the school board. Griffin had served in a leadership role on the County Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) before being elected to the board. Griffin stated that

The misnomer is that people believe that the business community, the

powers that be, want things to be their way, and that's not true. They're not looking to control, they just want a seat at the table. They want to be able to lend their expertise to the system.

Board member Newman, who made the motion to contract with a national search firm to assist with the search and selection process, stated that she "had a great deal of involvement with the business community and the Mayor" during the process. She detailed some of their guidance to her that included receiving recommendations of national search firms from Gaston Winn, a powerful and well-respected business leader.

As we moved toward the selection of the [search] firm, my recollection is that the business community wanted to be helpful and wanted to be sure that we did a legitimate search.

Referring to the final selection of Fryer, Newman stated, "Frank Hagan and Ed Prescott [Non-Group member who was not a participant in this study] never said to me 'you need to vote for this guy.'" She stressed, "their involvement was not so much to influence the selection. It was to make certain that the process was open and fair and that we did a thorough search." Newman's perspective is corroborated by accounts from business leaders that appear in this study in the *Community Power Structure Perspective* section.

Another school board member, Curtis Jones, remembered that two influentials "met with me and talked about the superintendent choice." Jones had served as a school administrator before being elected to the board. He wanted to be clear that he did not view this meeting as sinister.

One of the things that was key in our selection process had to be our business community. They played a key role and I didn't see anything wrong with that.

Some influentials comprised a powerful segment of the Jacksonville's community power structure. This was an elite businessmen's group that became known as the Non-Group, as defined in Chapter 1. According to Raymond (1999), members of this group preferred to be regarded as an "unofficial" group, but

The Non-Group is a formal organization of behind-the-scenes business leaders. So formal it is, that they established their charter in November 1993. The Non-Group, then, modeled themselves after other such "city groups." They were also influenced by a state-wide group, the Florida Council of 100. The Non-Group...meets on a monthly basis and is loosely purposed by self-defined objectives *de jour*. (p. 38)

Board Member Madeleine Smith felt that she had earned a reputation of "making up my own mind" with the Non-Group. Smith was an attorney who served as an advocate for her constituency that represented a somewhat disadvantaged segment of Jacksonville. She said that one Non-Group member occasionally called her but "I couldn't be influenced by the Non-Group... We spoke occasionally, but they never approached me about superintendent qualifications," probably because of Smith's immovable resolve. Smith did say that she was aware that the Non-Group attempted to influence other board members. She recalled that many community people said that the superintendent choice would be "outside of the box" and also recounted a clamoring rumor that

the Non-Group had already pre-selected a businessman who had previously experienced a short tenure as a nontraditional superintendent in Charlotte, North Carolina.

There was this fellow out of Charlotte... They were courting him for the position. When I was Chairman, they kind of described that superintendent to me. What the Chamber and the Non-Group pretty much wanted was a complete shake-up of the system because that was one of the things he had done [in Charlotte]. That was going around as a rumor that he was going to be the next superintendent. It would be interesting to find out if they already had John Fryer in mind and whether or not he had some connection with the Non-Group. I don't know if they steered us to Fryer or were just trying to steer us to someone outside of the box.

It is noteworthy that Smith was the only board member to refer to her electorate constituency when asked "What do you recall about the community's involvement in the process?" Every other board member responded to that question in terms of those community leaders who they had known exhibited recognizable interest in the selection process. When Ms. Smith was asked about the community's involvement in the process, her answer was based on those who were not involved in or informed of the issue of superintendent selection. She interpreted "community" as those people from her electoral district that she still felt allegiance toward. It was apparent that Ms. Smith's passion for those she felt were disenfranchised, uninvolved, and uninformed was her primary

motivation in arguing for a traditionally prepared educator whose focus was education rather than politics.

The school board made the final decision to hire General Fryer as a body of the whole. I was part of that body and had interface with three notable members of the Non-Group: Gaston Winn, Frank Hagan, and Ross Neilson. I met with Ross Neilson about the search process, and he stated that he would prefer having an “admiral or a general” as superintendent. My memory of that period is laced with buzz from community power elites that was too loud to ignore or forget. I, like the other board members, feel compelled to stress that I voted my heart and conscience when I voted for Fryer and did not feel coerced. But I felt a natural desire to please those who so obviously cared about the quality of our school district and community. Reasons that board members, including me, cite for voting in favor of hiring Fryer are discussed in the *Mediating Variables* section of this chapter. However, from my perspective, it was a feeling of comfort to know that my position on this important matter was in harmony with and supported by Jacksonville’s community power structure. As population ecologists posit, living organisms continuously seek a harmonious relationship with their external web of interface (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994).

### *Community Power Structure Perspective*

The preceding section highlighted board members’ perspectives of the community power structure’s influence on the decision. The present section will examine how the superintendent selection process was viewed from the

vantage of Jacksonville's community power structure. For clarity, the community power structure participants are divided into two groups: (a) members of the Superintendent Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC) and (b) those power elites who were peripheral to the process, yet influential. Some power elites served on the SSAC but the SSAC represented a broader range of interests. SSAC members who were not participants in this study were an insurance executive, a public utilities executive, a state legislator, the chairman of the District Advisory Council, the Duval County Teacher of the Year, a retired district employee, and an engineering executive. The SSAC members who participated in this study are briefly described as they are introduced in this narrative.

All community leaders who participated in this study were very frank, salient, and conversant about their involvement in the search process. They also expressed their individual thoughts and feelings of that time as well as how they interfaced with and were influenced by other leaders in the community. Interviewee data point to established linkages among most Jacksonville community influentials as they sorted through variables that were apparent to them. Community leaders interfaced with each other and the school board in a variety of ways as the event unfolded. The nature of their involvement is described in their own words. They all appeared to hold each other in high regard and value the opinions of particular members of the elite business community. Power elites who did not serve on the SSAC were interviewed because their names recurred in the interviews with school board members and SSAC members.

Earlier I stated that, during the period of the search process, Ross Neilson made clear to me that he, along with other prominent business leaders, would prefer an admiral or a general as superintendent. In his interview for the purpose of this study, Neilson said that he remembered that discussion with me, even where it took place. He then went on to explain his 1998 position and reasons for caring about the public school system from a businessman's perspective.

As a businessman, leading a large company in this city with a large number of employees, as Chairman and CEO of it...I looked at the school system and what it was doing to this community. I also looked at it as one of the people who was meeting regularly with other peers, other CEO's, and we were looking at the things that were in dire need in this community... [referring to new hires, educated in Duval County, who were unprepared to enter the workforce] we were having to do background work on simple math and English and understanding basic narrative.

Neilson then shifted his focus from the school district's weaknesses to a commentary on why some business leaders decided to take an active role in being a catalyst for school system change.

I evaluated, as it related to our company and other CEO's in the community and other leaders in the community evaluated their needs. I began to realize that we needed to do a lot more than we were doing. Others that were in leadership roles had more background in education than I did and I relied on their judgment. I

certainly relied on Frank Hagan, for example. And I looked around the country and saw a few instances where a naval officer or air force or army general type [led other school districts]. And I think we all felt the way I did, that with a general officer, who had risen to the great height of a general in the military, that they had the obvious specificity that they needed to get there and they had the general oversight ability that was needed to lead. A group of people in the community began to realize that we needed very strong leadership for our school system. Our mutual friend, Frank Hagan, led that effort on behalf of hiring John Fryer, the general. I didn't know John Fryer. It was simply that we were looking for a person with strong leadership skills and were open to accept an officer from the military because of the things that he brings to the table.

Another Nongroup member, Gaston Winn, shared Neilson's perspective on the need for strong, nontraditional leadership for the school system. However, he said that a military background had no greater impact on his view than some other nontraditional profession.

There was a realization that many of our schools were underachieving. Leadership begins at the superintendent level, so there was a great deal of interest in the superintendent search. The fact that he had qualities and proven leadership and the fact that he had had some educational leadership experience while he was in the Air Force was appealing. But if he had come out of business



with finance or any other profession, law for example, I would have been equally intrigued. Qualities of leadership and coming from a fresh point of view were certainly factors that I felt required us to take a further look [at Fryer].

According to Winn, Mayor John Delaney “took quite an interest in public education, perhaps more so than any previous mayor that I can recall. I thought that was important. I thought that was meaningful.” Indeed, two months before the search process was officially launched by the school board, Jacksonville’s only daily newspaper affirmed that Mayor John Delaney had pledged the city’s full support in locating a search firm (Mitchell, 1997). Under Jacksonville’s consolidated government, the city handled most purchasing matters for the school system at that time.

Mayor Delaney confirmed that public education was very important to him. When interviewed for the present study, he exuded passion for “how well we prepare our children for the future.” Regarding his involvement in the superintendent search he recalled,

I was talking with some of your colleagues...I know I talked with some community people. Many of us had professional and personal alliances and we were going to think the same way.

There were no official liaisons between the Mayor and school board but Delaney remembered the late Don Brewer, a heavy hitting political and business leader who chaired the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC), saying

You kept me in the loop pretty well and our mutual friend, Don, who was the liaison for us. Don was going back and forth between us and other school board members and he tried to make sure that we were all coming together.

John Stone represented the Greater Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce on the SSAC. His interview responses were very contemplative and deliberate as he added additional insight on the web of influences that were alive and well during the time that we carefully considered who our next superintendent should be. He explained the nature of the linkage that he formed between the Chamber and the school board.

It was understood that my positions would be in line with the Chamber leadership, but I was going to do what I wanted to do. You had other influences on you that I didn't have and vice versa. A lot of people who were involved in economic development, recruiting other companies to come to town started realizing that education was more important than everyone had perceived before in the sense that companies were looking to come to town and they said, "tell us about the school system."

Another Chamber leader who did not serve on the SSAC, Dan Rushing, drew a direct connection between the Chamber and the final decision to hire General Fryer by describing some history leading up to this event. That history helped to understand the critical mass that foundationally resulted in some business leaders' activation to achieve a world-class school system of which they could be proud. He illuminated important connections between people, events,

attitudes, and statements that resulted in a sense of urgency to impose a major change on Jacksonville's public education system. He also recalled the way in which the SSAC craftily encouraged the school board to select from among the four candidates introduced by the search firm. This move effectively restricted the board from casting these candidates aside and launching a new search. This may have been a result of the community power structure's fear that a school board member may have been maneuvering to become the superintendent. As Rushing phrased it,

I recall the pressure that the advisory committee brought to bear on the school board by voting to ask them to choose among the finalists was a good thing and may have prompted the action that the school board ultimately took.

Rushing also shared that he had talked with Non-Group member Frank Hagan, Chamber leader John Stone, and others about the potential selection. He added strength to other community voices that cried out for a "strong leader." He also volunteered the surprising information that he had spoken with John Fryer "when it became apparent that he was a leading contender for the job." He did not indicate how this opportunity presented itself.

Members of business community had been crying out for leadership, strength, vision... We needed strong leadership [to lead the school district]. There was a general consensus, among business leaders of that time, that the school system was a big, big part of the problem and not part of the solution. It was a real weak link that we had in our community... I do

specifically remember talking with John Fryer when it became apparent that he was a leading contender for the job. I do not think that I had any other conversations with other candidates for the job. I encouraged him to keep pursuing the job. I indicated to him that we needed someone with strong leadership skills and a nontraditional background in the position of superintendent.

Rushing described another event that no other participant in the present study mentioned: a Chamber leadership trip to Chicago, in 1996 shortly before Dr. Zenke resigned as superintendent, may have been a trigger for Jacksonville's business community to activate on behalf of the schools. Rushing's description of what was learned in Chicago corresponds to the Shipps (1998) historical study which chronicled business influence on Chicago's public school system through the decade of the nineties. After Mayor Richard Daley gained control of the school board and superintendency in 1995, he appointed a nontraditional superintendent, Paul Vallas. Rushing explained how Chicago's experience played a prominent role in Jacksonville's business leaders' subsequent actions.

I can remember that we took a trip to Chicago, about 1996. And we heard Mayor Daley make a talk about how he had taken over the Chicago public schools. And there was a lot of buzz on that trip about this being something that ought to be considered in Jacksonville, because we needed someone to come in here and provide strong leadership and turn this situation around. Now we found that, under the Florida Constitution, a mayor can't do that. It was available to Mayor

Daley in Chicago, but it wasn't available to Mayor Delaney as an option. I think that kind of action by a mayor of a major city created quite a bit of talk about, hey, what should we do in Jacksonville of a dramatic sort of nature to get this situation turned around and pointed in a better direction. This trip stimulated dialogue and conversation about this and I recall Mayor Delaney made an effort... Something drastic needed to be done to get this system righted.

Rushing's account of the October 1996 Chicago trip fits with Raymond's (1999) major finding that during the months preceding Superintendent Zenke's resignation, "there was a period of activism on the part of the city's business and civic community, who became increasingly interested in the public school system" (p. 1). Raymond also found that the business community believed that "Zenke's replacement could even save the City, since the school system's current course was thought to be hurting Jacksonville's ability to thrive economically" (p. 68). Noted businesswriter Karen Brune Mathis (1996), claimed in her *Talk of the Town* column that: "the stars were lining up for a major push by business leaders into the operations of the ... public schools" (p. D-2). Only one week later, this FTU article was followed by the headline: "Zenke Names His Price" (Desmon & Roman, 1996, p. A-1). That article chronicled Zenke's proposed resignation terms and put to rest any notion that he might continue as superintendent. That event preceded Fryer's appointment by eighteen months.

Another participant and member of the Community Advisory Committee, Harry Fouraker, added historical perspective to this event. Fouraker's sharp

memory was a vast resource on how business leaders had been involved in the selection of Jacksonville's superintendents since the first appointed superintendent in the 1960's. He explained how the Citizen's School Action Committee (CSAC), which Fouraker once chaired in the late 1960's, played a key role in hiring Dr. Cecil Hardesty, the county's first appointed superintendent.

Ish Brant was the last elected superintendent we had. We brought Cecil Hardesty in right about the time of consolidation [1968]. We were trying to get our schools accredited... We took the position unanimously that the school system was broken and, in fact, in trouble and we needed to do something and we're here to tell you that we're going to change things. We're going to fix it because it is broken. I knew we needed to remove Ish and knew it might take a while because he was so deeply entrenched. We had to change the school board before we could change the superintendent. We changed the whole form of government. All that leads up to how Ish was removed... Dick [Montgomery] and I were on the phone in Ish Brant's office, with his permission, calling Hardesty who was on vacation at his place in Canada where he liked to trout fish.

Switching gears from how he was involved in a superintendent selection of the past to how he was involved in the superintendent selection of 1998, Fouraker said that he was an enthusiastic member of the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC). He lamented that "people who were looking for homes in Jacksonville asked 'where was the better school system, Clay or Duval County?'"

The obvious answer had to be Clay,” referring to a growing adjacent county. Given his longtime involvement in education he seemed qualified to evaluate the degree of community interest in the 1998 search process by saying, “the community was interested in public education more so than at any other time.” He expressed his thoughts and linkage with another influential on the advisory committee as the candidates were being interviewed.

Frank [Hagan] chose to be a dedicated, committed American and spend the family money wisely. I love Frank Hagan. All the things he’s done over the years... And we were sitting there and I would look at Frank for his responses. He would look back at me and we were on the same page from the get-go... I had only sought counsel from a couple of close friends. The superintendent has to have a personal relationship with all the Rotarians in the city, which in every city in the world tend to be the leaders in the community. We had three oranges and an apple [referring to the four candidates who were interviewed.] I thought it was time to take a step forward. That he was different was his extra quality. We had no trouble figuring out that we wanted John Fryer.

Another businessman who served on the community search committee was P. Joseph Knight. He echoed the same high regard for other elite influentials, and great value for their opinions, that other business leaders expressed through the interviews. He recalled,

The screening committee was exceptionally refreshing. Folks that

had been engaged in education for many, many years, going back to the sixties, such as Frank Hagan, who is very passionate about public education. I was impressed with Frank's engagement that day. I was impressed with Joel Vickers' [not a participant in this study] engagement that day, who was the VP of the [Gaston Winn] company. Additionally, John Stone, attorney, who served at the pleasure of the Chamber. They all realized that the strength of the community is going to be based on the strength of our education system, K-12. They understood that. They got it. That was important to the discussions that went on with that group. The people who were part of that group came with a purpose, not an agenda. The community was looking for leadership that would take the school system forward. We had lost faith in the traditional educator's ability to lead. We had tried it over and over again with leadership inside the educational system. We weren't making the giant strides that we needed to move forward.

Up to this point, the community participant's voices presented have been those of prominent business leaders and the mayor. Other individuals played key roles in the process as well: Madison Harper, a high-ranking elected city official, Dr. Randall Grange, a high school principal, Maxine Jacobs, a former district administrator and member of the NAACP, and Mary Sanford, the President of the Duval County Parent Teacher Association (PTA). These four individuals are not part of Jacksonville's Non-Group and only Harper served with the Chamber of Commerce. But they represented important constituency forces on the



Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC) that cared deeply about the outcome of the hiring decision. Their perspectives are significant and they spoke about the power structure as if they were outside of the major sphere of influence.

City official Madison Harper was conversant on the status of public education in 1998 and its impact on economic development. Remembering how she viewed business interest in public education, she said,

I know that there were some coalitions between the Chamber and total business community because of the impact of our school system on economic development in terms of recruiting businesses to our city. I remember talking to [Chamber leaders] Dan Rushing and Sam Mallard [not a participant in this study] with the Chamber about that.

Harper recalled how, just previous to the superintendent search process, the business community demanded quick implementation of the New Century Commission recommendations for school reform, as discussed in the *Background* section of Chapter One. At the meeting where the New Century Report was delivered to the school board, the *Florida Times-Union (FTU)* noted, “apathy will no longer be tolerated at any level.” The FTU article also documented that at this school board meeting,

A number of political, community, and business leaders were in the audience, including Mayor John Delaney and developer Gaston Winn. (Mitchell, 1998)

Harper added her own ecological perspective of the impact that other entities had on public education in Jacksonville as she expressed,

With the breakdown of the family, the school system was having to adjust to new family structures and teachers were having to bear the burden of, not only teaching, but serving as a conduit to many social services. All this made us aware that the education system was a vital part of the fabric of our society.

In seriously deliberating which candidate could provide great leadership, as she served on the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC), Harper explained that she was “open to someone other than career educators. Proven leadership is transferable.”

Dr. Randall Grange was a high school principal who came to serve on the SSAC determined to give preference to credentialed educators. He explained that, during the candidate interviews, his initial resolve melted and he concluded, “I think we need to give him [Fryer] a chance.” How he viewed the currents of influence in the SSAC screening is best expressed in his words:

I sensed someone steering the process, but I don't say that in a negative way because my sense at the time was that this person was sincerely concerned with our getting the best person for the job. And I'm talking about Frank Hagan. Frank Hagan indicated that he had written or had called or contacted General Colin Powell. I think that was a very influencing move to say that 'I've gone this far into checking this person's background. And everything I get on this person is that it is a high quality person.' And I felt that because of his stature in the community, once he indicated that he had gone to that effort to check on the person, then people

listened to him. Plus, the other candidates did not help themselves any with some of the problems that they had had in their previous districts.

Another SSAC and NAACP member, Maxine Jacobs, recalled some “gossip” that the superintendent had been pre-selected by business leaders and that the interviews were pro forma.

I heard, and naturally you hear gossip about everything, that the superintendent had already been selected. I heard the gossip that business leaders had gone out and found Fryer and worked primarily through a couple of school board members. But that may have been spin that was just accepted as reality.

Mary Sanford was appointed to the SSAC because of her position as President of the Duval County Council of PTA’s, a council comprised of school PTA presidents’ from every school in the county. She personally preferred Fryer above the other candidates because she felt that he was more of a man of conviction and morals. She said that, among her membership, there was a difference of opinion on the idea of a nontraditional superintendent between teachers and parents. Understandably, teachers wanted an educator, but parents were open to a nontraditional. She said,

Teachers were concerned over the fact that we would have someone without a strong educational background. Parents were open to having someone who was not completely immersed in the education system.

Aside from attempting to represent her constituency on the SSAC, she expressed a revealing view of other SSAC members. She observed,

There were a lot of members whose children were not in public schools. There were a lot businessmen and they were very vocal and overpowering. I felt that when I voiced my thoughts I was just patted on the head as a PTA mom. I knew immediately that they were interested in the General. Maybe it was the way they addressed the General that was different from the other candidates.

During the data collection process, the name most frequently mentioned was Frank Hagan. He granted an interview for this study and did not hesitate to express his attitude and perspective of the type of superintendent that was needed in Duval County. As with many other elites, he took charge of the conversation and spoke with great authority and precision. He clearly remembered the way in which he was involved in the selection of a nontraditional superintendent and how he personally called General Colin Powell to verify a letter of recommendation (Appendix E) that I had received, as Chairman of the DCSB, for Fryer.

As I recall, you had received a letter of recommendation from General Colin Powell. I called General Powell and he took my call right away. He said that he wrote that letter of recommendation personally. He said that it was not a staff-driven letter. He said that he knew General Fryer fairly well. He indicated that he had been associated with him in two areas. The first was that he had been a White House Fellow with General Fryer... Secondly, he said that when General Fryer was the Commandant of the National War College that John reported directly to him as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He said that General Fryer was well-read, his relationships

with Fryer were entirely satisfactory. He felt that General Fryer would do a very good job and that he had done a good job in every instance where they had a relationship.

In addition to articulating the stellar reference from General Powell, Hagan used the term “excitement” to describe Fryer and “not a regular run-of-the-mill candidate.” Hagan also said that he, as a member of the Board of the National Institute on Education, and its deputy director had experienced “long discussions about what it’s going to take to get good schools.” He went on to say,

We both came to the conclusion that, without strong support from the business community, we’re never going to have, we were never going to accomplish the things that we need to accomplish. Business leaders have a real role to play and they have a real argument to make which is our economy depends on our educational system... You must well remember that I expressed my strong belief that we should seek out a candidate that had truly earned the credibility of distinguishing themselves as a leader. There were four candidates, three were former superintendents, and I think one of them was a superintendent at that time. I really felt that they were not going to bring the excitement and change that this community needed.

Hagan’s community stature and direct influence in the selection of a nontraditional superintendent is well supported by the preceding excerpt from his interview as well as by other participants who have a deep and enduring respect for

his contributions to Jacksonville, and in particular to Duval's education system from pre-school to higher education.

### Environmental Influences

Three contextual elements that influenced the hiring process were (a) Florida's sunshine laws, (b) a climate of distrust among some key players, and (c) relentless negative media coverage of the school district. The following sections discuss the way that these environmental constructs loaded the search process up front and may have influenced the selection decision. These constructs add understanding of this study's context and help to inform the "how" and the "why" of the superintendent hiring process.

#### *Florida's Sunshine Laws*

A number of participants made reference to a poor candidate pool. The candidate pool was shaped by F.S. 119.07 and F.S. 286.011 (2001) long before the search process began. As discussed in Chapter 2, these state laws required all letters of intent, resumes, applicant information, and school board discussion of applicant information to be public record. Publicizing the fact that one is an applicant for a position in another school district might be viewed by prospective candidates as career damaging, possibly jeopardizing the position one currently holds. In addition, a non-selected candidate might become tainted as a perceived loser, especially if one is not among the finalists. Indeed, one Duval County school board member, Nancy Newman, believed that a major contributor to Dr. Zenke's

downfall was his application to be superintendent in another school district. As public record, that application was highly publicized around the state, particularly in Jacksonville.

When Larry Zenke threw his hat in the ring for the Palm Beach superintendency. Remember, he came out and said that I'm gonna apply for that job down there and then he withdrew his name from consideration after about two weeks. I can recall people in the community, at that time, just grassroots people, saying, "he must not want to be here."

I remember that one of the search firm executives commented that Florida's public record laws were the most extreme of any state in the nation. It is little wonder that more candidates, who may have been outstanding superintendents of other school districts, did not apply.

### *Climate of Distrust*

In addition to the sunshine laws, distrust among players revolved around the engagement of a national search firm. I did not begin this study with the element of distrust in mind as a possible contributing factor in the selection process. However, it has emerged as such a glaring variable that should not be ignored in this research. Some players feared that the process could be rigged from the inside on the part of some school board members and school district administrators. Others feared that the process could be and was rigged from the outside via business and civic interests. Those who felt that the process might be

rigged from the inside believed that a national search firm would protect its integrity and fairness. Those who felt that the process was being orchestrated from the outside believed that a national search firm actually facilitated this outside orchestration.

Some board members and business leaders were suspicious that a school board member was vying to be the superintendent. They felt such a ploy could be truncated by hiring a search firm that would lead the board in a nationwide search. Two months before the search was officially launched by the school board, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Jacksonville's only daily newspaper affirmed that Mayor John Delaney pledged the city's support in locating a search firm (Mitchell, 1997). That was quite legitimate since, under Jacksonville's consolidated government, the city handled most purchasing matters for the school system.

Newman, the school board member who made the motion to contract with a national search firm, stated that she "had a great deal of involvement with the business community and the Mayor" during the process. She detailed some of their guidance to her that included receiving recommendations of national search firms from Gaston Winn, a powerful and well-respected business leader.

As we moved toward the selection of the [search] firm, my recollection is that the business community wanted to be helpful and wanted to be sure that we did a legitimate search.

I remember a number of people saying to me, 'you need to hire a search firm, you can't let the board do this.' I remember talking with Gaston Winn and he said, 'here's the top firms that we've used,



you ought to use them, and I'll be happy to contact them for you.'

...Then, if you recall, we did an agenda item, asking the interim superintendent to put out an RFP for a search firm. I don't know if you remember this, but it got delayed. It was supposed to happen and then it didn't happen. So we had to come back and say wait a minute now. Get it here...One board member wanted us to use the Florida School Board Association (FSBA). In fact, the President of FSBA had been assured that they were going to get a contract from the board to do the search for us. He told me that, before we ever selected a firm. I talked with him and he said, 'Oh, we're going to do it. I'm bringing you names of people. I finally figured out that the one person on our board whose goal in life was always to be the superintendent had been having conversation with him...Moving up toward getting a process going to select a firm, you could see the roadblocks coming and then I began to suspect that Mr. Johnson was probably thinking that if he could get the FSBA [Florida School Board Association] to do the search then he could become one of the nominees to be the superintendent. I remember the night that we voted to pick that search group, Hazard, Young & Attea. I had thoroughly combed three or four firms who had responded to the RFP, and it seemed like this was the group that knew more about doing educational searches and I remember that as we were coming up on doing this that we didn't have a formal motion in the agenda...Others knew that we were up against

manipulation and sensed that we needed to get a firm in place to move this quicker. And so we did it.

Chamber leader Dan Rushing was probably one of the “others,” referred to by Newman, who felt that we should contract with a search firm. In his interview, Rushing added explanation as to why certain individuals felt that we needed this outside help.

Some of the members of the business community felt that a fix was in to make sure that he [a school board member] got the job. As I recall, Mr. Johnson was rumored to be considered as an alternative, along with Van Fleet [the interim superintendent during the search process].

That was very frightening to people that I talked with.

As mentioned earlier, Board Member Nemeth’s memory of Johnson’s aspiration to become the superintendent was corroborated in a *Florida Times-Union* (FTU) article that described the 5-2 school board vote to commission a national search firm. This article detailed reasons that Nemeth and Johnson attempted to “stall the search” by keeping the interim superintendent in place until after the following school board election. Those reasons revolved around a suspicion that Johnson was maneuvering for the interim superintendent to be a place-holder until a subsequent board was elected that might appoint him as superintendent (MacDonald, 1998).

Recall of Duval County’s history on superintendent selections also contributed to the guarded stance of some key players. P. Joseph Knight, a member of the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC), reflected on

his understanding of Duval County's history in previous superintendent selections.

There was enough knowledge of how certain superintendents had become superintendents in Jacksonville. It was almost a 'good old boy' system. That suggested, 'let's not do that again. Let's not be incestuous in the way we select. Let's open up to any and all qualified candidates and take a look at what it is that they want to do, and do it. Some were afraid that there may be some insiders who were vying for the position.

Other players distrusted the search process from a different angle. Unlike those who feared that the process could be rigged from the inside, others feared, and still suspect, that the process was rigged from the outside. Interestingly, all African-American participants voiced their suspicions that some business leaders somehow engineered the process to achieve the result of a nontraditional superintendent. Board member Curtis Jones recalled meetings with candidates that were held outside the official SSAC and school board interview processes. I was surprised to hear this from Jones, as well as several other participants, making reference to community leaders personally speaking with a candidate before the school board had reached a decision, because I knew of no meetings with candidates outside the official interviews. Jones stated:

I remember that the candidates were treated differently by the community. There were [unofficial] meetings scheduled for the candidates. One of the candidates was not interviewed by

a certain group. He became upset with our process and withdrew his name. I never did find out why. I thought he wasn't getting the same amount of time as other candidates. I thought that was strange. I thought that the process was supposed to be an open and honest process, even if you were leaning one way or the other.

SSAC member Maxine Jacobs remembered what she termed as "gossip" that the superintendent had already been selected before the interviews ever occurred.

I heard the gossip that business leaders had gone out and found Fryer and worked primarily through a couple of school board members. But that may be spin that was just accepted as reality.

School Board member Madeleine Smith mentioned, "the Non-Group pretty much wanted someone who they thought would shake up the system." Then, when asked how she compared the backgrounds of the four candidates, she said,

I think we had some of the poorest candidates I had ever seen. I think it was all a set-up. I think they [business leaders] went out and found the weakest candidates they could bring. The search firm probably already knew what the mission was and they just brought some people in.

Those who felt that a national search firm would protect the integrity of the selection process were countered by those who felt that it had the opposite

effect. SSAC member Mary Sanford doubted her own feelings about the search firm's slate of candidates, but said,

I know that a professional search firm brought these individuals here, but I wondered if someone pulled the most boring superintendents out for the interviews on purpose so that John Fryer would look so good that we would say that we have to go in that direction. Now, I know that didn't really happen. But I did wonder if that had been orchestrated.

Board member Johnson, who others suspected wanted to be superintendent, said that "the search process was contaminated by the search firm" and that the search firm was "incompetent." Johnson further stated,

One of the candidates from Texas approached me in the hallway [during the school board interviews] and said that he had no serious intentions. He said that the firm accosted him in a restaurant because they needed bodies to apply.

The vote to contract with a national search firm was a 5-2 split. I voted in favor of Newman's motion to contract with Hazard, Young, Attea, Ltd because I felt that we needed the assistance of a professional consultant to scan the nation for someone who exceeded our expectations. When I searched my memory about whether I had believed that Board Member Johnson wanted to be our superintendent, I believed that he did. But I do not remember whether I believed it because of a substantial foundation of fact or because of the talk that may have been accepted as reality when repeated statements, including the news

article, went unchallenged. For the purpose of this study, I asked Mr. Johnson whether he did want to be superintendent in 1998. He replied that two considerations were important to him and were misconstrued by others. Those considerations were: (a) a local person should be appointed as superintendent, and (b) the board should have had the opportunity to examine all the search firms who responded to the request for proposal (RFP) before “forcing the vote for one of them.”

All players were concerned that the process was fair. Some were on guard against perceived threats from the outside, and some were on guard against perceived threats from the inside. That is the precise reason why the SSAC was formed and comprised of representatives from the various segments of the community, as described in Chapter 1. In my opinion, that was also the reason for contracting with a reputable, national search firm who could access desirable candidates and advise our board on tried and true procedures that could help to avoid pitfalls. I had felt that both the national search firm and the community advisory committee would increase confidence in the process and contribute to the quality of the final result.

### *Negative Media*

Participants of this study concurred that negative media coverage toward the school district and school board was relentless and that its effects were more damaging than constructive for the school district. Board Member Newman said,

The press was merciless in saying, “terrible school district,

everybody's failing, the board is awful," and we were having a hard time fighting that negative publicity. They [the media] did everything they could to destroy it [the school district's relationship with the community]. They did everything viciously, viciously to paint the worst, most negative picture they could. I remember that a good day, when we were on the board, a good day was a day when we weren't on the front page. And that wasn't very often.

Other key players agreed with Newman's description of the destructive nature of the media's role in shaping a distrustful, frustrated, and fragmented relationship between the school district and the community. Dan Rushing said.

I don't think the media play a very productive or constructive role. As I recall, the media tended to accentuate the negative and stir the pot and assign blame. I don't think the media played a very productive role and they didn't help to bring about any constructive dialogue to tell you the truth.

When I asked SSAC member and businessman P. Joseph Knight about his perception of the media's role in shaping the relationship between the school district and the community, he replied with his view of how damaging messages are promulgated through the community and affirmed his belief that the local newspaper attempted to do their part in bringing about educational reform in Duval County.

They played a huge role. Though not too many folks read the

newspaper, the average citizen gathers bits and pieces when they hear someone in their break room say, 'did you read that article in the paper this morning about this or that?' That becomes a true fact because it comes from the mouth of someone that you work with and trust. Now that person may have not understood the article, distorted it, or hit it right on the bean, but you got these little conversations going on out there where perception is created. I think the newspaper was well intentioned in trying to spur on the reform, but it became a negative situation.

This section has focused on three environmental variables that had an impact on the decision to select a nontraditional superintendent, Florida's sunshine laws, a climate of distrust, and negative media coverage. The following section discusses two other variables that were mediated by key players as they weighed differences among the candidates in the context of what each player felt was needed by the Duval County School District (DCSD).

### Mediating Variables

What were key individuals thinking during the interview process? A number of impact variables were brought to light as considerations of these key players as they confronted the decision. Certain differentiating factors sufficiently recurred as themes as to warrant recognition of two key mediating variables. Those mediating variables were major tipping points that either swayed most participants' positions or confirmed their pre-formulated positions during the interview sessions.



The tipping points revolved around Fryer's military background and his enthusiasm exhibited during his interviews. Therefore, two key constructs form the topics of the following sections and constitute the key mediating variables distilled from the interview data: 1) background differences; and 2) presentation differences.

### *Background Differences*

Participants were not asked explicitly whether they viewed Fryer's military background more favorably than the three traditional candidates' backgrounds. Rather, they were prompted to explain how they related Fryer's background with that of the other candidates'. I began analysis of how these key players viewed the traditional versus nontraditional backgrounds by extracting from the transcripts any language that illuminated what impact the backgrounds of the four candidates had upon each participant's position. At this point, the search was narrowed to four candidates who were presented by the search firm.

Knowledge of key players' initial mindsets is important to understand how they mentally negotiated pre-formulated positions in juxtaposition to what they learned during the interview process. Among 18 participants, 7 stated that they approached this process predetermined to select a credentialed educator. Six others indicated that they were already positioned, before the candidates were officially introduced, to support a nontraditional candidate. Four were open minded to traditional and nontraditional possibilities at the onset. I, also, was open to both possibilities. Indeed, I was quoted by the Florida Times-Union (FTU) just previous

to the candidate interview processes, in response to a reporter's question designed to elicit which candidate I was more likely to support, that "I'm just looking forward to meeting all four" (Mitchell, 1998). Five of the 7 key players, who were initially inclined toward the traditional, changed their minds during the interview process and decided to support General Fryer. Including me, 4 of the 5 professed "open-minded players" were sold on Fryer during the interviews. Only one participant remained emphatic throughout the hiring process, and throughout the years since that event, that the superintendent should exclusively be drawn from the pool of traditional educators.

Two business leaders, Fouraker and Hagan, descriptively framed a reconciliation of the choices before us. Fouraker said, "We had three oranges and an apple... That he [Fryer] was different was his extra quality." Hagan added comparative descriptions of the four candidates sufficient to conclude that the nontraditional background variable had a powerful impact on the community's favorability scale.

There were four candidates, and the three former superintendents, and I think one of them was a superintendent at that time. I really felt that they were not going to bring the excitement and change [that this community needed.] I felt the other candidates had more direct experience in educational matters. But it struck me that General Fryer was a good nontraditional candidate and I felt that he had a good deal to offer. My recommendation to you was that General Fryer was well qualified and one that could do a good job as superintendent of schools.

Was the military aspect of background differences a major mediating influence on community leaders who involved themselves in the hiring process? The results were mixed but the preponderance of participants indicated a preference for a nontraditional superintendent, though not necessarily from a military background. Some suggested other nontraditional backgrounds would have been equally intriguing such as law or business. John Stone, SSAC member representing the Chamber, stated, "I did not feel that Fryer's military background played any greater role with me than someone who had come out of any other profession, law, for example. I was certainly looking for somebody who was nontraditional..."

Hagan, Neilson, and Rushing, all prominent business leaders, were among those community leaders who leaned towards a nontraditional candidate from the beginning. They felt that the Duval County's situation dictated a nontraditional leader to invoke "major change from the status quo." Rushing stated "I think a school system could hire Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, and he would be an excellent school superintendent." Other influentials such as Chamber leader Stone, Non-Group member Winn, and businessman Knight said they were just looking for the best person for the job. According to Winn,

The qualities of the person are certainly more important than where he or she came from background-wise. And I think that good superintendents can be found in both universes: the traditional and the nontraditional. It depends upon the process and the person more so than whether he or she is academic or nonacademic in terms of background.

One primary rationale for supporting a nontraditional candidate from the beginning was the perceived ability to command respect. Some participants felt that the political clout issue could best be addressed via a military person or a successful business CEO rather than a traditional educator. Citing Fryer's reference from General Colin Powell, Griffin said that one reason she supported Fryer was "we needed someone who could come in and stand shoulder to shoulder with [the] upper echelon in our community and who could be comfortable with Chamber leaders." Mayor Delaney echoed her reasoning by saying,

I thought the odds were that someone, a general, admiral, or above, would be more likely to command more respect. That military presence, it was a new cachet. It was a cachet that was going to help him.

Delaney also stressed the value of an outsider's ability to question policies and practices that insiders have a tendency to blindly continue because that is the way it has always been. He aptly described that phenomenon by saying,

Traditionally the superintendents started as school teachers and worked their way up the system and there's a lot of good to that. Knowing the system and knowing education early is a positive. There's also the view that someone outside can see problems that someone on the inside doesn't see. I use the analogy that if you get a crack on the wall in your house you notice it the first day or two but after that you stop paying attention and you don't even realize it's there. You get numb to it and you don't see it anymore.

In summary, most participants were looking for someone who could lead the school district in a different direction than had been experienced. One participant stated, “Obviously, we needed to change a lot of things and the only way we could do that is to get someone very strong, definitely outside the current system.” As school board chair, I believed that major changes required a different vision for the district and a high energy level to overcome its inertia and change its course. Energy, enthusiasm, and vision are topics discussed in the following section that explores the construct of how the candidates presented themselves to the Jacksonville community and school board.

#### *Candidate Interview Presentations*

According to the National School Board Association (1981), “handled well, the interview is the most useful tool in the hiring process” (p.1). It can produce information about the candidate’s interpersonal and professional skills that are difficult to obtain from resumes, references or other documents. Interviewers can hear, not only what is being said, but how it is said. With that, they can register a “reading” on the interviewees (National School Board Association).

Participants recalled how they “read” the candidates during the interview process of May 1998. The way in which the four candidates presented themselves spoke profoundly to the community Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC) as well as to the school board. Interestingly during the interviews for this study, most participants gave special distinction to Fryer by referring to the candidate group as either “the General and the others” or “Fryer and the others.”

Board Member Newman had initially resisted the notion of hiring from outside the educational arena. She described how her aversion receded as she sat on the sidelines during Fryer's interview with the community SSAC. She noted nonverbal behaviors of the SSAC members as Fryer engaged his audience.

And I remember sitting there [during the community search committee interviews] and I didn't pay much attention to him because I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to like him. But I watched the committee, and I watched their body language and their engagement. And they went from a very passive kind of arms folded across their chest cynical posture to a very open, lean across the table demeanor with John Fryer. I remember that I started listening to what he was saying. And I realized that this guy had really done his homework. I also realized that he had a tremendous amount of passion. And having dealt with a former superintendent who had no passion at all, I thought it would be really extraordinary to have someone who clearly wanted to work hard and help students learn. And that was his focus.

Like Newman, most participants cited "passion" as the notable attribute that set Fryer apart from the traditional candidates. Even those who opposed hiring a nontraditional superintendent were impressed with Fryer's passion and enthusiasm. In contrast to Fryer, they observed that the other candidates appeared "burned out." Some members of the SSAC said that they found the three traditional candidates lacking enthusiasm and appeared "beaten down by their superintendencies." The following three

SSAC participant conversation excerpts are remarkably similar about their impressions of the candidates:

SSAC member and businessman P. Joseph Knight said,

What I heard from the other candidates sounded good but it was the same old thing. I almost felt like they had been burned out by all their years of service. And what I saw in the General was that this was a new career and ‘I have a passion for wanting to make a difference.’ I was bored with the same old same old from the traditional candidates, with no fresh plan. I’ve interviewed thousands of people in my capacity of business. The ones that make the difference are the ones who have a passion and who talk about what they can do for the organization.

SSAC member and City Council member Madison Harper echoed the sentiment of Knight. She described her impression of the candidates by saying,

The other [traditional] candidates seemed to be tired of their profession in some way. They were very anxious to be interviewed, but it was almost as if they were promising not to change things too much. I thought General Fryer showed he could come on board and be an effective leader and have the energy and drive to get things done. They [traditional candidates] seemed burned out, and I remember that so vividly. In some ways I felt they were just trying to get to Florida for their last hurrah and retire. They lacked the passion that I felt from John Fryer.

SSAC member and PTA President Mary Sanford added corroboration to the accounts of Knight and Harper.

I wanted to tune out the others because it was what I had heard over and over. The others were kind of milk-toast. I thought it was just more of the same, but don't we need somebody who has a vision for us and some enthusiasm? They were saying that they knew how hard it was to work with school boards and parents, but we all know it's hard...I wondered if someone pulled the most boring superintendents out for the interviews on purpose so that John Fryer would look so good that we would say that we have to go in that direction.

SSAC and NAACP member Maxine Jacobs did not hesitate when asked about her reaction when she learned that a General had applied to be our superintendent. Though her basic position was that all superintendents should be traditional educators, she "moved off her dime" in deference to Fryer's case. Reflecting back to when she heard that a General was among the candidates to be interviewed, she said

I didn't like it. One of the first things I thought was that people aren't going to say 'aye, aye, Sir.' I thought the person should be an educator. But I really thought that Fryer was very well informed and I was impressed by the amount of research he had done prior to the interview about Jacksonville and our school district. I was impressed with one of the others but not the other two. When you compared these others to Fryer, he [Fryer] looked better. Fryer had the energy. Even though I did



not want a non-educator, I was captivated by him. He had gone into the internet and knew so much about our schools. I was not going to vote for him, but I thought if he wins, he has the passion to do a good job.

School board members remembered their impressions of the candidate slate during the official candidate interviews with the school board. The traditional candidates made no positive impression on this researcher and I cannot remember much about any other candidate than John Fryer. All three traditional candidates faded beside Fryer's charismatic presence. What I remember about Fryer is that he was well-read on educational best-practices and he articulated some of those practices in the form of a proposed educational plan. He also spoke with great confidence and persuasion about his vision for our school district and his purpose for offering himself as our superintendent. He was absolutely impressive.

Other board members said it differently but they remembered the candidates as follows: School board member Don Johnson said,

Those with a practitioner's background did not seem to have the charisma and drive and leadership that was necessary for what our needs were in this community. The military background candidate did a terrific job in the interview, but lacked practitioner's depth. So you had to almost choose whether you wanted to go with potential or experience in public education. That was kind-of my assessment of those [interviewees].

Board member Nancy Newman put it this way:

After reminiscing about Fryer's description of the mentoring that he had done in Washington, D.C. I was impressed because he was so attached to this young man...and my thoughts were this is a guy that has a great deal of passion about this. I didn't see that in the other candidates. I saw tired, end-of-career men that, quite frankly, I thought they just wanted to retire and so they can be down here in lower cost-of-living Florida, be here for a couple of years and then go on to retire. They appeared to be tired and worn out and they had no answers when we asked questions of them that were new and refreshing that they might do to help urban schools. Well, Fryer already had a plan.

The Jacksonville community read about Fryer's passion on the morning following his interview with the SSAC in the FTU headline: *Fryer: Job "Just struck me right in the heart."* Fryer was quoted in this article saying,

It's a big district and it's a big challenge and it just struck me right in the heart. When you fall in love or when you find that niche you just know is yours, it just happens. It was an emotional thing" (Mitchell, 1998, B-1).

Board Member Candace Griffin remembered that,

He was brighter than anyone else we'd interviewed and probably a lot of people that I've encountered from educational institutions.

He had incredible passion, which was not the case among those [candidates] that were in the educational arena. I think some of their passion had been snuffed out.

Board Member Wayne Nemeth did not mention Fryer's passion, as most other school board members recalled. But he pointed to a distinction between Fryer's persona and the other candidates.

Having been a general and having a good personality made him stand out from among the other candidates.

Fryer was not Board Member Curtis Jones' first choice. Jones preferred Dr. Larry Vaughn, a recently terminated superintendent from Wichita, Kansas. After the 5-2 vote to appoint Fryer, Jones changed his vote from Vaughn to Fryer in an attempt to show support for the selected candidate. He expressed a mild perspective, not enthusiastic but not critical, of Fryer's strong persona and viewed all four candidates favorably.

When I looked at the experienced ones and listened to them answer some of the questions I thought, having been in education, they were on the right track. My vote was for one of them, but he came in second. But I thought we were fortunate to have some good quality applicants and I don't think we had any duds.

Madeleine Smith was the other board member who was on the "2" side of the 5-2 vote. Unlike Jones, Smith did not offer to change her vote as a welcoming gesture for the next superintendent of Duval County. And, unlike Jones, Smith did not view the four candidates favorably.

I never wavered from my position that the superintendent should be an educator. Our field [of applicants] wasn't that great at all. None of them even had the qualifications that Zenke had.

### Retrospective View Six Years Later

It would have been a missed opportunity had I neglected to probe how the participants generally felt about the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent six years removed from the event. Six years is sufficient time for emotions to evaporate in order to view the action more clearly. Six years also allowed for a track record for participants to perceptively assess whether anything new was learned about advantages or disadvantages of appointing a nontraditional superintendent. It was beyond the bounds of this study to address specific outcomes accomplished or not accomplished during Fryer's tenure. Participants' responses to this question remained clear of assessing Fryer's performance. This portion of the inquiry was only an attempt to gain an understanding of whether the participants felt that the decision was good for the district and community overall, as an additional point of interest.

With the exception of one school board member, the participants favorably viewed the 1998 decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent. Another participant indicated that they continue to favor the idea of hiring a nontraditional candidate, but believed that Fryer's overall record was "disappointing." I include myself among those who judge that the decision was good and that it was the right decision for Duval County at that time. It is my observation that the district has turned a corner with regards to the core mission of adequately educating students and the public's perception of the district.

I shall begin with the outlier, Madeleine Smith. Smith has not changed her conviction that the superintendent position should be filled only by an educator.

She said that she voted against the motion to hire General Fryer in 1998 and she would stand against a similar motion to appoint a non-educator at any future time. Nothing that has occurred during the six-year experience with a nontraditional superintendent has altered her position. She said,

If you really want a model for a good education system, you have to have a good educational leader because that's what it's all about.

If you're focused on education, and not politics, all those other things [that a nontraditional leader would bring] are used as extra tools to get it done.

As mentioned earlier, Board Member Smith was the only board member who translated the word "community" to be her electoral constituency of historically disenfranchised members of the Jacksonville community. The district from which she was elected is demographically comprised of a preponderance of people who had historically suffered from poverty and less than optimal educational opportunities. It is interesting that other board members, including me, did not relate the term "community" to the very people who elected us. I believe that those we care most about are the first who come to mind when relating this study's topic to the "community." Upon reflection, if the topic of this study were something different, such as prayer at graduations, I would have first thought of my own electorate, rather than the community leaders or the community at large. Further study is required to understand whether this reaction may be a latent bias among some of us.

Others indicated that selecting a nontraditional leader was the right decision for Duval County in 1998, but it may not necessarily be right for future appointments. One Non-Group member of peripheral influence in this event, Ross Neilson, had been involved in more than one decision to hire a top educational leader outside of the education establishment. He said that hiring a nontraditional individual may not always be the best decision every time. Referring to the two cases where he helped to steer the process toward the selection of a nontraditional leader he said, "That doesn't mean that I would always go there. I think there are times and places where we absolutely need the academician."

Another Non-Group member, Gaston Winn, who was also involved in more than one appointment of a nontraditional educational leader to head an educational organization clearly agreed with Neilson. However, he stopped short of an evaluation of the 1998 decision to appoint Fryer. He spoke in general terms about educational institutions that are faced with selecting their leaders from either a traditional or nontraditional background.

The advantages [of a nontraditional] would be the fresh approach, applying private sector or business sector methods, perhaps being able to build a broader constituency by having a broader point of view or broader personality, being able to think out of the box, to come up with new and different ideas instead of conventional solutions. The disadvantages obviously are a steeper learning curve, an initial skepticism particularly on the part of people in the system, probably a tendency to make a few more mistakes early on by not

knowing the answers right away. Perhaps not having quite as many connections in the educational field among superintendents or senior administrators to call upon when advice or assistance is needed. On balance, I would simply say this: The qualities of the person are certainly more important than where he or she came from, background-wise.

Other business leaders, SSAC members Stone, Fouraker, and Knight, in addition to Chamber leader Rushing, looked back on the decision and emphatically concluded that hiring a nontraditional superintendent was the right decision for Duval County. Rushing's elaboration seemed to express the general hindsight of other business participants.

Clearly, in my view, the system is better off today than had a traditional candidate been hired. I can't prove that. You know, you can't prove the unknown. But my perspective is that Fryer has been able to make certain very key changes throughout the system that a more traditional candidate would not have been able to make or perhaps, would have not thought of making. He brought a fresh perspective to the whole operation.

Participants who represented the views of teachers, principals, parents and more ordinary citizens also believed that hiring Fryer was positive, overall, for the school district. SSAC participants Sanford (PTA President), Harper (city council member), Jacobs (NAACP member), and Grange (high school principal) pointed out that the fears of a general moving in as their top boss and educational leader had proven to be unfounded. However, a concern was voiced that Superintendent

Fryer may not understand nor accept the education culture. Their comments on the thoroughness of Fryer's understanding regarding the job of educators was summarized by Grange's statement:

The job of a principal is one that he [Fryer] may have some ideas about, but that's not understanding to the extent of someone who's been in the fire understands it.

With the exception of Board Member Smith, participants generally asserted that the overall effects of hiring General John Fryer have been positive.

Performance issues were mentioned by former board members and community leaders that revealed an honest perspective of negative marks as well as positive achievements. However, participants recognized that perfection and the total absence of negatives were impossible in such a large and complex system. As advantages were weighed against disadvantages, there was strong agreement on the preponderance of satisfactory considerations regarding the tenure of Superintendent John Fryer.

### Summary

This chapter described notable ecological dynamics of the DCSB decision-making process in conjunction with representatives from community constituencies that included some power elites. The 1998 school board members who collectively made the formal decision to appoint General Fryer as superintendent no longer serve on the DCSB. Looking back, six years later, that decision has been described in the context of a greater dynamic than the school board itself. That dynamic included a



set of interrelated contextual variables that were identified as (a) Florida's sunshine laws, (b) a climate of distrust that the process may be rigged from the inside or engineered from the outside, and (c) a high degree of negative media coverage. With input from community leaders, board members personally and collectively negotiated certain variables in making the best choice from among four candidates who were presented to the Duval County School Board by a national search firm. In selecting from among the four finalists, two predominant mediating variables for community members and school board members were identified as (a) background differences (b) presentation differences during the candidate interviews. Finally, the participants generally believed then and at the time of their interviews six years later that hiring a nontraditional superintendent was a good decision for the time. Chapter 5 will relate these findings to the research questions.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### CHAPTER 5

#### Introduction

Having presented the data, I now answer the research questions that guided the study. Constructs derived from the data analysis provided explanatory power to sufficiently answer the following research questions:

1. What was the nature of external influences on the school board, affecting their decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent?
2. What were key players thinking, feeling, and perceiving, during the period of the superintendent search process, that led them to favor, or not favor, hiring a nontraditional superintendent?

Though the research questions cast a wide net for open-ended inquiry, answers to these questions are now distilled into more concrete key constructs. The constructs identify and describe participants' retrospective perceptions, according to their interview statements, of some major complexities and interrelationships of groups and individuals surrounding the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent. The two research questions cannot be totally separated and are both answered in the following section on Political Ecology of the Hiring Process. Question 1 is answered in the sections on *Nature of External Influences* and *Environmental Variables of Influence*. Question 2 is answered in the section on *Mediating Variables*.

The discussion of the political ecology of the hiring process is followed by a section on Lessons Learned which distills the findings into salient implications for

educational practitioners. Recommendations for future research are offered and a summary concludes this chapter.

### Political Ecology of the Hiring Process

The Duval County School Board is the legally constituted body that made the formal decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent in 1998. This study affirmed the assumption that the school board, being an elected representative body, did not act in isolation when making that decision. This study also affirmed that the community power structure directly influenced the form and substance of the decision to hire General John Fryer as superintendent. But it did not definitively answer the question of whether the school board would have selected a nontraditional superintendent absent any external influence. As with any system operating for and in a larger ecosystem, certain external forces may be perceived to have affected the decision process, but it cannot be proved that the outcome was affected. Influences not identified in the present study might have influenced the process as well. The primary external force identified by this study was Jacksonville's community power structure.

Contextual or environmental variables that influenced the process were (a) Florida's sunshine laws that rendered all applicant information to be public record, (b) a climate of distrust both within and beyond the groups responsible for the decision, and (c) relentless negative media coverage about the school district and school board. The decision process was further mediated as related in all accounts by the school board and SSAC member perceptions of (a) the background differences between Fryer and the traditional candidates, and (b) the contrasting presentations

between Fryer and the traditional candidates during the interview processes. Impressions of these variables have lasted over six years. Study participants, with one exception, continue to have an overall favorable view of the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent.

### *Nature of External Influences*

Bateson and Bateson (1995) contended that the study of any actionable event is incomplete absent inclusion of the larger system of which all matter and energy are a part. The ecology of energy exchange between open systems and their environment calls attention to the dependence of a system upon inputs. According to open system theory, boundaries of organizations are permeable, since they affect and are affected by their environments. One important role of an open system, such as a school district, is the mediation and translation of influences between systems (Katz, Kahn, & Adams, 1980). Political ecology provides explanatory power to yield understanding of that mediation in the examination of a school board's action in a larger social context.

A school board's actions cannot be assessed apart from its web of interrelationships among other entities in the external environment. Organizational theorists such as Katz and Kahn (1961) and James Thompson (1967) emphasize the impact of external influences in open systems where the players are social actors as well as rational agents of change (Scott, 1992). During the decade of the nineties, a number of school districts nationwide experienced external pressure to reform from business and political leaders. Some of the well-documented cases of

this external influence resulted in the appointments of nontraditional superintendents. Chicago, Seattle, San Diego, Philadelphia, and New York City are some school districts that preceded Jacksonville in the appointments of nontraditional superintendents as their respective community power structures demanded a higher quality of education.

    Jacksonville has a history of its own community power structure's involvement in public education. Crupi (1978) identified and described some key elites who steered public policy, including school district policy. Raymond (1999) described Jacksonville's powerful Non-Group's involvement in the removal of Superintendent Larry Zenke, which occurred just seventeen months before the school board hired Dr. Zenke's permanent replacement.

    Jacksonville's community power structure did exert influence on the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent. Interview data strongly support that six of seven school board members, including this researcher who was school board chairman during the period examined in this study, experienced direct communication with community influentials about the leadership needs of the school district as we launched a nationwide search for Duval County's top educational leader. The one board member who did not communicate with a member of the Non-Group stated that she was aware that influences abounded between the community power structure and other board members. Those communications were perceived by most school board members, including me, as natural and welcome input from the community that we served. According to Burns (2002), elected officials must create the capacity to govern with private

interests who control the financial resources and business decisions that are vital to overall societal welfare. The corporate sector must be involved in public education because schools do not have the internal capacity to systemically change and overcome the societal woes to sufficiently educate all students.

To describe the nature of this external influence, it is important to understand why the community power structure involved themselves in selecting the superintendent. Community influentials expressed strong concern over the state of Duval County public schools and their impact on economic growth. They asserted their collective belief that major changes were necessary and most community influentials felt that a nontraditional superintendent was more likely to accomplish the changes necessary for noticeable school improvement. They wanted major change and they wanted a transformational leader. Stone et al. (2001) asserted that major reform initiatives originate from outside the educational establishment as “people outside the education system have intensified the pressure for more radical and fundamental change” (p. 10).

Frank Hagan was the premier influence in the superintendent selection process, evidenced by abundant participant references to him and the respect attributed to him by other community leaders. One member of the community Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC) stated, “I would look at Frank for his responses...” Others were awed that he delivered a personal validation of General Colin Powell’s letter of recommendation of Fryer. Non-Group member, Neilson, believed that “Hagan led that effort to hire Fryer.”

### *Environmental Variables of Influence*

Just as a fish is affected by its medium of water, the process and result of the superintendent selection process was affected by external environmental influences. In addition to the community power structure's open and direct influence, all of Jacksonville's key players in this process, including members of the community power structure themselves, were influenced by other variables that were part and parcel of the event context. Three interrelated contextual variables that manifested themselves through the data analysis were (a) Florida's sunshine laws, (b) a climate of distrust among key players, and (c) negative media coverage.

The superintendent selection process took place in within the framework of Florida's sunshine laws that may have discouraged some highly qualified individuals from applying. This study cannot definitively conclude that the small and perceived to be weak candidate pool was a result of state laws that rendered candidate information to be public record, but it is a reasonable consideration that these laws were a major contributing factor. As stated earlier, applying for a high-profile position in the public spotlight can be career damaging for experienced superintendents in their current districts.

Another environmental variable was that the search process was clouded by distrust from suspicions that someone on the inside was maneuvering to impact the final result as well as suspicions that outsiders were steering the process. The climate of distrust was a reason for engaging a national search firm to handle the process. It is difficult to resolve distrust when engulfed in what one superintendent of a New Jersey district called "toxic culture" (Leverett, 1999). That was the case

in Duval County because the atmosphere in which the search process took place was greatly impacted by media criticism. Public opinion had been galvanized to think that public schools were performing poorly through both local and national news and editorial accounts. Whether media reports and discussions were accurate or sensationalized, the barrage of negativity elevated public demand for definitive change to a crescendo. The media charged atmosphere resulted in a public that went beyond a heightened concern for change to a shrill assignment of blame. That blame centered on the top leadership, promulgated cynicism toward the traditional educational establishment, and suggested that the solution to the school woes was a different type of leader. The assumption was that the product of our schools, sufficiently educated youth, would improve with a distinguished and “strong” leader at the helm.

Distrust toward the school board’s ability to select the district’s top educational leader was also apparent from the community power structure’s view. There is strong evidence from participant statements that some did not feel they could totally count on the school board to make the decision without intervention. A majority felt that somebody different was needed and they mistrusted the factional school board’s ability to think outside of the box. Being elected from districts with varying demographics, the board was factional. The findings from this study indicate that nontraditional leadership was more equated to educational reform than traditional leadership at that time.

The power elite segment of the community rose to the occasion and became a dominant force in the superintendent selection (McCarty & Ramsay,



1971) because of the importance they placed on quality education in Jacksonville's drive to become a world-class city. Eisinger and Hula (2004) identified two assumptions of a typical city that selected a superintendent from outside the education profession. These cities operated under the assumptions that "order at the top is supposed to bring order to the classroom" (p. 635) and that the school system was incapable of changing without a "shock to the system" (p. 634).

Jacksonville's power elite was convinced that the school system would not change without their direct involvement and influence. This is a social application of the ecological principal that a system's inertia and stability must be disrupted by an external force in order to redirect its path (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). After propelling the initiative of the New Century Commission blueprint for the future of Jacksonville's schools, they then turned their attention toward the leadership of the school system. Gaston Winn affirmed this attention and articulated a reason for their intense interest in the superintendent choice, "Leadership begins at the superintendent level, so there was a great deal on interest in the superintendent search."

The foregoing contextual variables describe noteworthy portions of the environment in which the selection process took place. The outcome of the hiring decision may or may not have been different had these conditions been absent. These variables did contribute to a harsher environment and presented themselves as barriers toward an exhaustive search on behalf of a well-informed policy community that operated in a spirit of trust. Assuming my own share of responsibility for the distrust and negative publicity, it is my hope that the present

study contributes to a more informed school board and community and to a healthier environment for the next Jacksonville search and for other urban school districts engaged in such a search.

### *Mediating Variables*

The energy of the selection process reached a climax at the point of the Superintendent Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC) and the school board candidate interview sessions. During the interview sessions, key players were moved by two overriding factors: 1) background differences and 2) presentation differences. Background differences were apparent through the written resumes submitted prior to the interviews. Key leaders' predisposition to a nontraditional versus a traditional superintendent was largely in place before the interviews occurred, even before the curriculum vitae were read. Presentation differences between the candidates became overwhelmingly apparent during the interview processes. SSAC and DCSB members directly observed these differences during the respective interview sessions. Other key community leaders who were not part of the interview processes learned of the candidates' comparative qualities through either communication with SSAC or DCSB members or direct communication with at least one candidate.

"We had three oranges and an apple" precisely expressed the preponderance of key players' attitudes. The apple was clearly viewed as most impressive and a preferable choice by most participants. "That he [Fryer] was different was his extra quality," "not a regular run-of-the-mill candidate," and "that

military presence...was a cachet that was going to help him” can be extracted from the interview data to reasonably conclude that the apple appeared shinier than the oranges. Fryer’s military background and experience in national and global arenas made a solid difference in his appointment, especially when contrasted against three traditional superintendent candidates.

That the Colin Powell letter was memorably intriguing to many participants relates to the notion of connection power. Hersey and Blanchard (2001) wrote that connection power is a perceived association with an influential person or organization. Connection power corresponds to French and Raven’s (1959) concept of referent power where an individual is empowered by way of identification with a respected and influential person, such as Colin Powell. Fryer’s connection or referent power, garnered by his association with Colin Powell, overshadowed the expert power of the other candidates’ K-12 educational knowledge and experience. The Powell letter was a symbol of Fryer’s connection or referent power conferred upon him by certain members of the Jacksonville community, the Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC) and the school board.

People were influenced according to what they felt was important in the superintendent selection. In contrast to the preponderance of participants who were impressed by Powell’s letter and Fryer’s global military experience, two participants were unimpressed by those variables not directly related to public education. Madeleine Smith and Maxine Jacobs felt that superintendent selection should be an educational decision rather than a political decision. Both Smith and

Jacobs favored hiring an educational expert who had the formal training of a doctorate in educational leadership. Smith said “the greatest quality of a superintendent has to be his focus on education, not politics.” Referring to Powell’s letter, Jacobs said,

How much does Colin Powell know? Now, if Fryer had been recommended by the chancellor, a University President, or the principal’s association, I would have been impressed.

Most participants of the present study wanted a transformational leader. This conclusion is grounded in themes that emerged from interview data that included the recurring terms, “passion,” “vision,” “enthusiasm,” “change agent,” and “major change.” Consistent use of these terms revealed strong agreement about the type of leader desired and the type of leadership they believed that Fryer would provide. Such terms correspond with transformational leadership theory and convey the image of a transformational leader (Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1985; Bennis, 2003). Study participants did not observe these qualities in the traditional candidates but were overwhelmed by these qualities from Fryer. These descriptors also revealed why key players felt inspired by Fryer and unaffected by the other three candidates.

Though this study cannot determine why these particular traditional candidates’ presentations were unimpressive, it is understandable that the traditional candidates’ energy and enthusiasm may have appeared worn down by their superintendencies. Research, such as the Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) and Glass et al. (2001) have documented a career crisis in the

superintendency due to the enormous challenges that face these educational leaders. Hill et al. (1999) stated that “city leaders, searching for a person to turn their own school district around, are not likely to welcome former superintendents from other districts.”

The attitude described by Hill (1999) correlates with Senge’s (1999) suggestion that some school boards, at the insistence of community constituencies, have searched for a “hero leader” or “savior” (Hill, 2001) who may not necessarily possess this traditional educational and experiential background. Communities and school boards may be placing all confidence in one top leader (Brunner, 2002; Cuban, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Kirst, 2002; Stone et al., 2001; Van Wart, 2003). The findings of this study contribute support to Senge’s (1999) assertion that community constituencies and school boards have over-romanticized the notion of the ultimate leader and thus formulated unrealistic expectations of what he or she may reasonably accomplish in a system profoundly affected by its external environment.

Business and political interest in Jacksonville’s public schools was at an all time high during the selection process, as was noted by all participants in this study. I believe this interest eclipsed the community interest shown through New Century Commission (NCC) study (Herbert, 1998) because it represented hope that the NCC recommendations would be fully implemented through fresh leadership. One elite business leader acknowledged, “...there was a great deal of interest in the superintendent search.” Mayor Delaney corroborated business leaders’ accounts that he “took quite an interest in public education, perhaps more

so than any previous mayor.” A Chamber representative said, “A lot of people who were involved in economic development, recruiting other companies to come to town, started realizing that education was more important than everyone had perceived before...” Another Chamber leader said, “Members of the business community had been crying out for leadership, strength, vision [from the superintendent].” Yet another business leader said, “the community was interested in public education more so than at any other time.” The data of this study provide strong support to conclude that the community power structure’s interest in public education indeed crystallized around the superintendent search process. This was due to their opinions that “leadership begins with the superintendent.” It was also evidence of the hope they placed in the incoming superintendent.

There is little doubt that Jacksonville’s community elite was zealous, “crying out for leadership, strength, vision” from a single person who would be the next superintendent. This event could be viewed as a test case for Senge’s (1999) assertion that “at the insistence of community constituencies, some school boards have searched for a ‘hero leader’ who may not possess a traditional and educational background” (p. 1). Further, the community power structure in this case followed the same pattern of other endeavors, such as the Florida Governor’s Commission on Education (Governor’s Task Force on Education, 1998) that recoiled at the notion of “more of the same.” They wanted a disturbance in the equilibrium and inertia that they perceived as the district’s resistance to reform.

## Lessons Learned

Significance from this study lies largely in its implication for future Duval County School Boards and other similarly situated school boards across the nation. Because a school system is an open system, it receives input from the environment in the form of support and demands (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). School district officials should be aware of the larger community's interest and impact on such important decisions as hiring a superintendent. Even more important, educational and community leaders should understand that effective school district leadership is not concentrated in one person. Effective leadership is the orchestration of an entire community assuming responsibility for a quality public educational system and operating in concert as a "leadership community."

In response to the finding of the climate of distrust surrounding Jacksonville's superintendent selection of 1998, I recommend that future school boards, who may be involved in selecting a superintendent, make affirmative effort to resolve any distrust issue that may exist before embarking on a superintendent search. Two barriers to effective communication on this type of endeavor are the sunshine laws and negative media coverage. Given these barriers, an understanding on the importance of relationships is explicit from the present study. Board members and concerned community members should look for ways to foster a healthy relationship among all key groups and individuals.

Further significance of this study for policy makers and practitioners rests on at least three implications for future school boards of Duval County and other similarly situated school districts. One is that the larger community, especially the

power elite, should be considered and included when making major policy decisions such as hiring the district's top educational leader. Two, nontraditional backgrounds offer a fresh approach and new ideas that are intriguing to concerned citizens pushing educational reform. When a community power elite and the school district governing structure have a strong desire for reform, a nontraditional candidate may have an edge in a pool of traditional candidates who offer to lead the same way that they have led other school districts. Three, school board members should make an effort to work with community leaders to resolve distrust issues before embarking on a superintendent search.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

This description of identified variables that affected a school board decision to hire a superintendent provides a steppingstone for future exploration. More complete knowledge of influences that affect school district governance should be pursued through additional research. Other school district case studies may lend additional corroboration to the conclusions of the present study. The conclusions formulated from this single case should be explored in greater detail and through other district level case studies.

In addition to more case studies on superintendent selections, I recommend study of two other issues that arose in the present study. One is the effect of similarly stringent public record laws on the pool of applicants for public positions such as superintendent of schools. This environmental variable that impacted Duval's search before it began likely discouraged some qualified superintendents



of other districts from applying. The sunshine laws constrain traditional candidates in ways that may not be applicable to nontraditional candidates because the traditional candidates must risk damaging their relationship with their current school boards and communities if they apply. The damaged relationship may be detrimental to them if they are not selected by the soliciting district.

The other variable that I recommend a study on is the relative merits of utilizing a search firm to winnow down the field of applicants and present a slate of real contenders. In Jacksonville's case, only four candidates were presented by the search firm. A board member mentioned that one of the candidates informed him that he was not a serious candidate for Jacksonville and seemed to imply that he was only doing a favor for the search firm to participate in the interviews. This study raises the question of the search firm's ability to effectively locate enough viable candidates to select from.

### Summary

This study explored and described why the 1998 Duval County School Board reached outside the educational establishment for leadership. The exploration resulted in the affirmation that Duval County's community power structure was a major influence in the process and selection of a nontraditional superintendent. In addition, this study has also identified some environmental and mediating variables that were important considerations of some key players who were involved in the decision. The environmental variables identified were (a) Florida's sunshine laws, (b) a climate of distrust among key players, and (c)

negative media coverage. The mediating variables identified by this study were (a) background differences, and (b) presentation differences among the candidates that were presented to the community and school board by a national search firm.

Local school boards represent the community stakeholders of schools as a public good and do not operate in isolation from the community they serve (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). This understanding of influences that affect school district governance yields more complete and ecological understanding of educational leadership because public schools are grounded and rooted in the politics and power structure of the local community. School boards make policy for open and organic school systems that must function within, serve, and respond to an ever-changing environment and policy community (Burns & Stalker, 1961).

The appointment of a school district's chief educational officer has an enduring impact on educational outcomes that affect and are connected to quality of life issues for entire communities. This is why superintendent selection has become an increasingly significant issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is an enormous responsibility for any school board (Rushton, 2001). The particular elements of the social ecology that were grappled with in the Jacksonville case should be considered before undertaking such an important endeavor as selecting a school district superintendent.

This study demonstrated a propensity among community leaders to seek reform of public education in Duval County. Nontraditional backgrounds were more equated to reform and change in a symbolic sense (Bolman & Deal, 1991). The echo of reports from other large urban districts that had hired nontraditional

superintendents galvanized Jacksonville's influentials to promote radical reform through the selection of a nontraditional superintendent. Jacksonville can be viewed as part of a chain reaction that swept across the country as community leaders and school board members looked outside the education establishment for leadership with hope that the chosen leader would transform their school district. In so doing, because the school district is a subpart of the larger community, it is believed that economy and other quality of life issues will improve. Whenever influence is largely perceived to run exclusively from the chief executive officer of a school district, the one person "called" to save the school district is expected to save the community at large as well (Brunner et al., 2002; Lashway, 2002).

School districts, formally governed by school boards, are open systems and are influenced by their external environments. They strive to maintain stability through adapting to, negotiating with, or resisting environmental influences. Thus, a school board's actions, such as this very important case of superintendent selection, cannot be understood apart from their interrelationships with the external environment. Viewed through the lens of systems theory, educational improvement comes from many people in many places, not just from the top of the organization. In the words of Senge (1999), to effect lasting educational reform, the focus should be on "leadership communities rather than hero-leaders" (p. 5). School board members and community members should strive to become a leadership community where all share the responsibility and the benefits of a quality educational system.

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## Epilogue

Upon the conclusion of this study, Superintendent John Fryer, Jr. resigned effective May 7, 2005. On March 9, 2005, Fryer announced that he would leave the position that he served in for seven years to pursue other opportunities and spend more time with his family. Fryer notified school board members on the night preceding the press conference when he made the announcement. Just prior to the press conference, he also called city and community leaders and sent e-mails to school principals and other district administrators to notify them of his resignation.

Upon receiving the resignation news, the Duval County School Board immediately scheduled a meeting to discuss how to proceed with a new superintendent search. They appointed Fryer's chief of staff, Dr. Nancy Snyder, as interim superintendent who will retire from the district in September, 2005. They also voted to select a national search firm to assist with the search process and they set a goal of hiring Duval's next superintendent by September 1, 2005.

## APPENDICES

- A. Institutional Review Board Approval
- B. Interview Questions for School Board Members
- C. Interview Questions for Community Influentials
- D. Informed Consent Form
- E. General Colin Powell Letter of Reference

## Appendix A

## Institutional Review Board Approval



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS  
 4567 St. Johns Bluff Road, South  
 Jacksonville, Florida 32224-2665  
 (904) 620-2455 FAX (904) 620-2457

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Division of Sponsored Research and Training

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Linda Sparks  
 College of Education

VIA: Dr. Joyce Jones  
 Education  
Signature Deleted

FROM: Kathaleen Bloom, Chair  
 UNF Institutional Review Board

DATE: October 4, 2004

RE: Review by the Institutional Review Board #04-184  
 "Political Ecology of a School Board Decision to Hire a Nontraditional  
 Superintendent"

---

This is to advise you that your project "Political Ecology of a School Board Decision to Hire a Nontraditional Superintendent", has been reviewed on behalf of the IRB and has been declared exempt from further IRB review.

This approval applies to your project in the form and content as submitted to the IRB for review. Any variations or modifications to the approved protocol and/or informed consent forms as they relate to dealing with human subjects must be cleared with the IRB prior to implementing such changes.

If you have any questions or problems regarding your project or any other IRB issues, please contact this office at 620-2498.

sah

Attachments

c: Dr. Kenneth Wilburn

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions for School Board Members

1. What was your reaction when you learned that a General had applied to be our Superintendent?
2. What were the events that influenced the prevailing attitudes regarding the superintendent selection process?
3. What do you recall about the community's involvement in the process?
4. Who communicated with you, in some way, regarding the superintendent search process? How were these individuals involved?
5. What other individuals or groups had an impact on the decision to hire General Fryer as superintendent?
6. How did Fryer's military background relate to the backgrounds of experienced superintendents who applied?
7. How did you view the pool of candidates who interviewed for superintendent?
8. How would you describe the relationship between the community and the school system during the 1990's?
  - a. What role did the media play in shaping this relationship?
  - b. How did the public view the school system? Who shaped this view?
  - c. What do you think the general public expects from our schools / superintendent?
9. What leadership qualities do you feel are important for Duval County's superintendent?

10. Now, six years later, what do you think of the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent? A General as superintendent?

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions for Community Influentials

1. When you learned that a General had applied to be our superintendent, what was your reaction?
2. Why do you feel that public education plays such a major role in the future of our community?
3. When Zenke was forced to resign, what thoughts did you have about the qualifications for the next superintendent?
4. How did Fryer's military background relate to the backgrounds of experienced superintendents who applied?
5. What leadership qualities do you feel are important for Duval County's superintendent?
6. What does Duval's business community expect from our schools?  
Our superintendent?
7. How did you communicate your thoughts about the search process and the desired outcome?
8. What story or stories do you recall that might have meaning today in understanding why we selected a superintendent from outside the education establishment?
9. Now, six years later, what do you think of the decision to hire a nontraditional superintendent? Of a General as superintendent?



## Appendix D

## Informed Consent

As a doctoral candidate at the University of North Florida, I am conducting dissertation research. The title of the study is *The Political Ecology of a School Board Decision to Hire a Non-traditional Superintendent*.

I appreciate your agreeing to be one of the 18-20 participants in this research by granting an interview. The interview will be audio-recorded, but tapes, notes, and transcripts will be in the sole possession of the researcher and will not be used outside of the research project. All tapes will be destroyed upon transcription. All participants' input will be woven together to capture a holistic understanding of the influences that impacted Jacksonville's 1998 superintendent search outcome. Before the interview, please read carefully your rights in this research project:

1. Your participation in this study is on a voluntary basis. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.
2. If at any time you do not want to participate, please feel free to terminate your involvement.
3. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
4. Your participation in this study is confidential and will be protected and known only to me. Pseudonyms will be used in place of names and titles in the final dissertation draft. Your name will not be mentioned in the dissertation or in any subsequent publications of this research unless you give specific permission below.
5. The transcription of your interview will be used only as part of the data collection for this research project. The data will be kept solely in my possession.

You may contact me, Linda Sparks at 737-7533 or the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Joyce T. Jones, at 620-1816 with any questions about the research. You may also get further information about UNF policies, the conduct of this study, and the rights of research subjects from the chair of the University's Institutional Review Board, Dr. Kathaleen Bloom, 620-2685.

Thank you again for your participation in this study. Linda Sparks

.....  
**I, the undersigned, am over the age of 18 and agree to participate in the above described research project. I have received a copy of this document.**

Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

You have my permission to use my name and/or title in the research report.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

**GENERAL COLIN L. POWELL, USA (RET)  
1317 BALLANTRAE FARM DRIVE  
MCLEAN, VIRGINIA 22101**

February 18, 1998

**To Whom It May Concern:**

I was delighted to learn that my good friend, John C. Fryer, Jr., is applying to be the Superintendent of Schools for Duval County. I hope you select him. He will do a great job for you and a great job for the children of Duval County.

I have known John for over twenty-five years. As young officers, we served together as White House Fellows where we got a sense of politics and senior public policy development in Washington. We stayed in close touch with each other over the years and John ended his career working for me. He was Commandant of the National War College and Interim President of the National Defense University, both of which were under my direct supervision as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

John is an educator. Much of his military career was spent leading and training troops for technical jobs and leadership positions. In retirement he has learned about civilian community school issues through his work with the North Thurston School District in Washington. He knows how to inspire and turn on young people.

John is a superb manager. He has run large, complex organizations. He has controlled budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. He has dealt with labor relations, compensation, awards and punishments and all challenging issues facing any business or public official.

John is a leader and has demonstrated that skill in war and peace.

The real reason you should want John is that he doesn't need the job. He wants it because he wants to help young people, because he wants a calling and because, as he told me, he wants to do something with "nobility of purpose." I give him my strong endorsement and you get Carol in the deal. You won't do better! He's a winner.

Sincerely,

**Signature Deleted**