

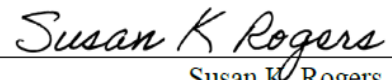
**Kansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Decision-Making Process in Relation to  
Equity and Access to Distance Learning Beginning with COVID-19**


Alishia S. Bush

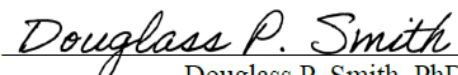
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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study was conducted to explore Kansas superintendents' perceptions of their decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand how Kansas superintendents' decisions were made; who was involved in the decision-making; how the needs of all students, parents, and staff were equitably addressed; how access to distance learning was ensured; and what, if anything, would be done differently—not now—but given what we know now. A sample of 10 Prekindergarten-12 (PreK-12) Kansas superintendents was selected via voluntary responses to an email solicitation for participation. The superintendents during the interviews discussed their perceptions of equity and access in relation to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic school shutdown beginning in the spring of 2020. The results of the qualitative data analysis indicated that initial decision-making was not under superintendents' control, superintendents moved through constantly challenging decision-making process changes over time, and the involvement of a variety of education and community stakeholders was necessary during the district decision-making process to help meet distance learning needs. Based on the study's findings, the implications for actions include making efforts to establish crisis shared-leadership alliances between KSDE and public schools, develop community-based partnerships with local companies, and focus efforts on analyzing and incorporating historical and current crisis data to guide the development of effective crisis plans. Recommendations for future research include building upon the results of this study to determine whether the experiences of Kansas PreK-12 public school superintendents were similar or different

for public, private, or parochial school administrators; conducting a more comprehensive study of Kansas school districts with a sample that includes more female superintendents and superintendents representing districts with more minority students; and conducting a mixed methods study to inform more focused interview questions. To try and mitigate, as much as possible, any dearth of communication and inequitable and inaccessible educational experiences, it is imperative that state education departments and superintendents work together, take advantage of historical and current crisis data, and prepare for the next disaster now.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated first to God and then to my family and ancestors. To God, for anointing me and keeping His hand of salvation upon my crown, hearing and blessing my daily supplication, molding and shaping my transformational and servant leadership walk, and enlarging my territory in ways I have yet to discover.

To my family for their love and unwavering commitment. My husband, Dr. Christopher L. Bush, for his care and devotion towards me—tirelessly ensuring my needs were met, especially during those times when the everyday stressors of life felt excessively heavy. Next, are the jewels that adorn my neck—our sons, Christopher II and Jaq’Son. No words exist that can adequately describe how I appreciate them for enduring my late nights, never (and I stress never) complaining, and for being my chief encouragers. God brought me to it, but He gave me them to help me get through it.

I honor dear Granny, Rosa Lucinda, my beloved Mom, Valerie, no-holds-barred Great-Aunt Carolyn L., and Aunt, Dr. Hameeda Rahman-Woods. I am beyond fortunate to have witnessed these women triumph through life’s journey. Each carries a force of resiliency, strength, and ardent attitude that I am blessed to carry in my own DNA.

It is important for me to include my Grandpa Vernon, who, even after 20 years since his passing, has continued to be an inspiration in my life daily. There is not anything that Grandpa would not have done to see his first granddaughter win. I miss Grandpa dearly and honor him by carrying his, ‘I got you, stick-with-it’ attitude.

To all of my ancestors, for sending my family and me your heartening spirit and prayers centuries ahead of time. You are a tremendous source of healing, empowerment, and strength. I am eternally thankful to you.

## **Acknowledgments**

Completing a dissertation involves the support of a small yet mighty army. My army included support from family, professors, superintendents, and mentors. I am extremely honored to acknowledge the significant role each had in inspiring me to complete this dissertation.

I recognize my family—my husband, Dr. Christopher L. Bush, Christopher II, and Jaq'Son, not only for your love and unwavering commitment but for the sacrifices, some modest and some major, that we endured together. I thank you to the stars and beyond.

Extreme gratitude to my dissertation team. Thank you to my Baker University doctoral program advisor, Dr. Harold Frye, for the encouragement and many heartfelt conversations we had and those conversations that you poured into our cohort. My Baker University dissertation advisor, Dr. Susan Rogers, for your stick-to-it-iveness and my research analyst, Dr. Peg Waterman, for your time and feedback—thank you to you both for thought-partnering through what feels like a gazillion drafts. Your diligence helped me stay on track and write a dissertation that is of quality and good use. Your support and help will not be forgotten. To a dear friend, Dr. Douglass P. Smith, Professor of Information Systems at Emporia State University, for your warm support and willingness to serve on my dissertation committee—an enormous thank you.

An immense thank you to the superintendents who participated in this study. I appreciate each of you for agreeing to be interviewed. Your willingness to impart your voices and experiences helped me collect a comprehensive body of research to complete this study.

My deep appreciation goes to five women who served as some of my greatest sources of inspiration: my Great-Aunt Carolyn L. Wims Campbell, Aunt Dr. Hameeda Rahman-Woods and my spiritual mothers and mentors—Dr. Sandra K. West Lassiter, Rosetta West, and Pamela Berry. Each of you set the bar high and overcame your own challenges while lending your voice and advocating for the underserved, liberating minds, and working to eradicate bias systems—thank you for heroically leading from behind.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The unintended and unprecedented disruption to prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (PreK-12) schools due to the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic “changed the work of many teachers suddenly, and in many aspects” (Kaden, 2020, para. 1). Traditional academic learning changed critically on March 13, 2020, as the U.S. president authorized a national emergency for SARS-CoV-2, the virus known as COVID-19 (Trump, 2020). On March 17, 2020, after considerable consultation with groups representing school and state department administrators, teachers, and school boards, the governor of Kansas signed an executive order temporarily closing all PK-12 schools and requiring superintendents to plan for implementing student distance learning immediately (Hanna, 2020).

Since educators had little time to prepare, the transition from traditional to widespread distance learning created several challenges for administrators, teachers, students, and parents. “This paradigm shift caused ripple effects, and public education may have changed in ways that are yet to be determined. Teachers needed to find ways to connect to students and transition to unfamiliar modes of teaching fast” (Kaden, 2020, p. 1). According to Kaden, superintendents were forced to initiate ill-prepared districtwide plans for distance learning. Kaden (2020) also asserted that teachers were pushed to rewrite their curriculums to adhere to distance learning best practices, students were thrust into learning how to navigate video conferencing applications, and parents found it difficult by personal means or through the district to provide their children with technology and internet resources to ensure their children were adequately connected to

online learning. Technology and internet resources were not new to school learning and instruction; however, “They were new to many [parents and] teachers and the roles of the teacher changed during the crisis” (Kaden, 2020, para. 1). Throughout the online transition, administrators noticed a few positive trends and many barriers that impacted equity and access in teaching and learning (Lederman, 2020). However, at the time of this study, little observable research existed regarding equity and access or other distance learning challenges associated with school districts’ decision-making processes to move from in-person to online learning, beginning with the start of COVID-19.

### **Background**

According to Darling-Aduana (2020), Kaden (2020), and Winthrop (2020), due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020, distance learning became the primary mode of instruction. In many school districts, this mode of learning continued throughout most of the 2020-2021 school year. Some districts were totally online, while others used a combination of online, face-to-face, and a hybrid model (Lieberman, 2020a). However, by the 2021-2022 school year, the Kansas legislature implemented a state law that prohibited all school districts from offering any student more than 40 school term hours of remote learning unless authorized by the district’s board of education for exceptional circumstances or due to a disaster (Education Appropriations and Program Changes, 2021).

This study was conducted in Kansas school districts. Like other school districts across the country, due to COVID-19, Kansas school districts abruptly shifted from in-person learning to remote learning (Yanoski et al., 2021). As part of the remote learning shift, Kansas school districts had to create and implement differentiated learning plans for

student at-home learning (Yanoski et al., 2021). Kansas school districts' distance learning plans included a wide array of resources and proposed strategies designed to ensure continuity of learning for students and a variety of wrap-around supports for teachers and parents (Yanoski et al., 2021). At the start of COVID-19, the distance learning platforms varied by district location and demographics (Yanoski et al., 2021). For example, non-rural and low-poverty school districts proposed strategies to provide teachers, students, and parents better learning resources and supplies, such as internet connectivity and internet-enabled devices, whereas rural and high-poverty districts did not (Yanoski et al., 2021). Districts that provided lower-quality learning resources and fewer supplies encountered less comprehensive learning experiences and more distance learning challenges by the district's teachers, students, and parents (Yanoski et al., 2021). Herold (2020) stated, "Thus, it is likely that the quality of learning experiences was uneven across all districts implementing remote learning" (p. 11).

At the start of COVID-19, during the spring of 2020, 512 school districts were led by superintendents in Kansas (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2021). KSDE (2022) reported that 502,492 students were enrolled during the spring 2020 school year at the start of COVID-19. This total included PreK-12 students, three- and four-year-old special education students, non-graded students, and preschool-aged at-risk four-year-old students. KSDE (2022) also reported that 6,858 prekindergarten students were enrolled during the spring of 2020 at the start of COVID-19. The combined total enrolled student count was reported as 509,350 (KSDE, 2022). Of the 180,612 students who received free lunch services, 92,511 were males, and 88,101 were females (KSDE, 2022). Of the 45,987 students who received reduced-priced lunches, 23,987 were males, and

22,000 were females (KSDE, 2022). Of the 74,986 students who received special education services, 48,498 were males, and 26,488 were females (KSDE, 2022). The demographics from the 512 Kansas school districts can also be viewed in Table 1. The table includes the number and percentage of students by gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and special education status.



**Table 1***Demographic Characteristics of Kansas Students, 2020-2021*

Demographic Group	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	261,052	51
Female	248,298	49
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3,926	1
Asian	15,788	3
Black or African-American	33,586	7
Hispanic	104,784	21
Multi-Ethnic	28,479	55
White	324,175	63
Socioeconomic Status		
Free Lunch	180,612	35
Reduced Lunch	45,987	9
Full-Pay	282,751	56
Special Education Status		
No Special Education	434,364	85
Special Education	74,986	15

*Note.* Adapted from *Kansas Education Reports: Kansas K-12 Report Generator* by

KSDE, [https://datacentral.ksde.org/report\\_gen.aspx](https://datacentral.ksde.org/report_gen.aspx)

## **Statement of the Problem**

During the spring of 2020, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic, state government officials in the United States mandated district administrators close their schools. Winthrop (2020) purported that having had little time to prepare, various school administrators initiated ill-prepared district-wide plans for transitioning from traditional to widespread remote learning. Additionally, Winthrop reported that 90% of students worldwide were affected by COVID-19 as it created challenges to administrators' abilities to plan effectively for and reflect on safeguards against potential risks to equity and access for all students in the U.S.

In Kansas, during the summer of 2020, districts had the opportunity to administer parent and student surveys, conduct staff interviews, and hold community support conferences (Kansas State University [KSU], 2020; Keegan, 2020). These initiatives provided district administrators with opportunities to gain immediate and necessary feedback for the benefit of reflection and appropriate planning for the 2020-2021 school year (KSU, 2020; Keegan, 2020). Along with the district administrator's data collection, it was imperative to capture research that demonstrated a clear understanding of what decision-making factors were occurring in equity and accessibility to distance learning. Researchers (Darling-Aduana, 2020; Jaggars, 2011) have shown that concerns for both equity and access have far-reaching implications for educational institutions, particularly for institutions that serve students from marginalized communities. Jaggars (2011) reported that low-income and at-risk students struggle with online learning because of a lack of equity and access, which hinders the progress of low-income and at-risk students. Darling-Aduana (2020), in addition to Jaggars (2011), stated that marginalized students,

such as those who are low-income and at-risk, may lack appropriate skills “to accessing the primary benefits of online learning, such as self-pacing and anytime-anywhere access to content” (p. 1).

Due to COVID-19’s recency, little empirical research existed regarding equity and accessibility to distance learning beginning with the start of COVID-19. However, regarding distance learning in general, previous research findings have shown mixed results within online educational systems (Maddox, 2015; Nadelman, 2014; Reyes-Sokolowsky, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). Hence, there is little understanding of it and a need to know more about it. Through the results of the current study, it is hoped that more is learned about this topic.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The focus of this study was to explore how decisions were made, who was involved in the decision-making, how the needs of all students, parents, and staff were equitably addressed, how access to distance learning was ensured, and what, if anything, would be done differently—not now—but given what we know now. The purpose of this qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was to determine Kansas superintendents’ perceptions of the decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. The results of this study could provide district superintendents and other education administrators with a better understanding of the implications the decision-making processes have on the school community and work to make any adjustments necessary to ensure equity and access exist in all future decision-making relative to distance learning in schools.

## **Significance of the Study**

Since distance learning became the primary mode of instruction for schools in the United States at the start of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, researchers began to raise troubling questions about the vast number of challenges surrounding distance learning (Darling-Aduana 2020; Kaden, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). Due to the limited amount of empirical studies, research impacting equity and access might help explore and draw conclusions about superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making process and help develop an instrument to measure their opinions. A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach can help to identify superintendents' perceptions. With knowledge of these perceptions, superintendents could strategically tailor academic courses, reallocate monetary resources, purchase equipment, and provide professional development. In addition to superintendents, the results of this research might also benefit other school leader departments and education-related organizations such as principal professional development, crisis management, school board organizations, governmental agencies, and higher education universities. This study's results might inform educational leaders of promising practices that could be implemented to address systemic issues and challenges and work to ensure equity and access exist in all decision-making for student learning, whether in-person or online.

## **Delimitations**

"Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 134). In this study, the following delimitations are included:

- The research was conducted in Kansas PreK-12 public school districts.

- The perceptions of superintendents were collected. Therefore, findings were limited to those administrators only.
- Data were collected through a series of interviews during the summer of 2022.

### **Assumptions**

For this study, assumptions are recognized as statements presumed to be true. Lunenburg & Irby (2008) asserts that “assumptions also influence the entire research endeavor, provide a basis for formulating research questions, for interpreting data resulting from the study, provide meaning to the conclusions, and lend support to recommendations” (p. 135). In this research study, the following assumptions were made:

- All superintendents who participated in the study had a sincere interest in the research.
- All participants understood the interview questions.
- All participants responded to the interview questions candidly and honestly.

### **Research Question**

Research questions are critical components of the dissertation as they serve as the “directional beam for the study” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 126). Descriptive questions ask what phenomena are like and allow researchers to collect information from interviews, questionnaires, observations, or document analysis (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 126). The overarching research question for this study was: What are Kansas superintendents’ perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19?

## **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined using online educational sources. The intent of defining terms is to narrow the range of meaning for specific words or phrases used in everyday language. The researcher hopes that defining or providing particular meaning to these words or phrases would give the reader clarity and better context relative to this study's research.

### ***Access***

In education, the term access can be explained as the elimination of any existing or potential barriers preventing one's equitable or fair participation in something (Bull, n.d.). Access can also "typically refer to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education" (Great Schools Partnership, 2014, para. 1).

### ***Asynchronous***

Wintemute (2022) asserted that asynchronous classes involve students digesting instruction and communicating with each other on their own time as asynchronous classes "run on a more relaxed schedule, with students accessing class materials during different hours and from different locations" (para. 1). Examples of asynchronous learning can include "email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, etc." (EdReports.org, 2020).

### ***Blended Learning***

Great Schools Partnerships (2013a) indicated that blended learning, sometimes called hybrid learning or mixed-mode learning, “is generally applied to the practice of using both online and in-person learning experiences when teaching students” (para. 1).

### ***Decision-Making***

According to Nitta (2014), decision-making is the “process and logic through which individuals arrive at a decision” (para. 1).

### ***Distance Learning***

Berg and Simonson (2016) purported that the term distance learning is often synonymously referred to as “distance education, e-learning, and online learning” (para. 1) and is a form of teaching and learning whose “main elements includes physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication” (para. 1).

### ***Equity***

Great Schools Partnership (2016) claimed that,

In education, the term equity refers to the principle of fairness. While it is often used interchangeably with the related principle of equality, equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal. (para. 1)

### ***In-Person Learning***

Great Schools Partnership (2013b) reported that, in education, in-person learning “is any form of instructional interaction that occurs “in person” and in real time between teachers and students or among colleagues and peers” (para. 1).

### ***Online Learning***

Tamm (2020) asserted that online learning is learning that is enabled electronically. Tamm (2020) stated that online learning, also referred to as electronic learning (e-learning), “is the acquisition of knowledge which takes place through electronic technologies and media” (para. 1). Meyer (2020) further defines online learning as traditional classroom activity moved online.

### ***Perception***

According to Epstein et al. (2018), perception in humans is the process whereby sensory stimulation through various types of stimuli (hearing, sight, touch, movement, taste, and smell) is developed through a pattern of understanding and “is translated into organized experience” (para. 1). This experience is the “joint product of the stimulation and of the [perceptual] process itself” (para. 1).

### ***Remote Learning***

EdReports.org (2022) maintained that remote learning is a general term used “for any type of educational activity in which the participants are at a distance from each other—in other words, are separated in space” (Remote Learning section). However, while separated in space, remote learning is not always separated in time because remote learning can be asynchronous or synchronous (EdReports.org, 2022).

### ***Synchronous***

Wintemute (2022) stated that synchronous classes operate much like traditional classrooms as they run in real-time and have set study schedules, attendance, and live discussions. Students and instructors typically attend together at the same time from different locations using virtual software such as webcams or livestream, which also



involve learning components such as chat rooms, polls, surveys, and sharing of documents.

### ***Virtual Learning***

Meyer (2020) claimed that virtual learning is a learning experience integrated within the curriculum that is specifically designed to be experienced online” (How Virtual Learning Improves on Remote Learning section). The student learning processes and outcomes live online regardless of whether a classroom is in-person or remote (Meyer, 2020).

### **Organization of the Study**

This research study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 covered the background, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research question, definition of terms, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature which addresses the history of decision-making processes during crisis response planning, preparation, and implementation, decision-making processes for distance learning, and decision-making processes for equity and access in relation to distance learning. Chapter 3 consists of research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher’s role, and limitations. Chapter 4 contains descriptive statistics and the findings of the study. Chapter 5 concludes this study with a study summary, findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “The review of related literature involves the systematic identification, location, and analysis of material related to the research problem” (p. 141) and provides “a clear and balanced picture of current leading concepts, theories, and data relevant to [the researchers] topic or subject of study” (p. 141). This literature review sets the stage for a study in which the perceptions of public-school superintendents’ decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning during a sustained public crisis—COVID-19 were examined. The first section provides a historical perspective of decision-making and helps the reader understand the theories for how and why decision-making exists. The second section provides a historical perspective of decision-making in distance learning during crises. In the third section, decision-making, equity, access, and distance learning during COVID-19 are discussed. The fourth section includes emerging opportunities to do distance learning better.

#### **A Historical Perspective of Decision-Making**

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-free Schools (2007) defined a crisis as “a situation where schools could be faced with inadequate information, not enough time, and insufficient resources, but in which leaders must make one or many crucial decisions” (p. 5). Historically, school leaders have been trained and prepared to implement immediate responses to public health crises such as inclement weather (tornados, fires, and ice) and human-induced or anthropogenic crisis (weapons, intruders on campus, drugs, classroom overcrowding, lack of building safety assessments, and

disease outbreak) (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2003; Sokol et al., 2021). However, when it comes to responding to public health crises, the decisions and recommendations made by school leaders are of utmost importance, as the outcomes of those decisions can profoundly impact the academic, health, and wellbeing of all students and staff (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2003; Sokol et al., 2021). At the time of this study, the researcher found that little research existed indicating any school leader across the world had led a properly functioning school through a sustained public health crisis such as COVID-19. In the spring of 2020, at the height of COVID-19, school leaders across the United States and abroad expressed that decisions made in response to the COVID-19 outbreak were extremely more difficult to make than previous decisions made in response to other commonly known school crises (Goudeau et al., 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak was an unprecedented and unique public health crisis that required different responses to teaching and student learning that school leaders had not implemented or yet invented (Goudeau et al., 2021).

### ***Historical Perspective of How and Why Decision-Making Exists***

Over the many years that academicians and theoreticians have studied leadership skills, decision-making has been one of the most commonly emerged skills (Barton, 1994; Brocato, 1990; Khalaf, 2021; Kulp, 2011; Torley, 2011). Brocato (1990) stated that prior to 1980, decision-making in business organizations and education was seen as hierarchically and bureaucratic with a top-down management methodology. Brocato (1990) also asserted that this approach left little room for input from non-management stakeholders.

In business organizations, a lack of non-management voice from subordinates and customers leads to problems such as low manufacturing and production and missed opportunities to meet customer needs (Brocato, 1990). A lack of voice from teachers and other non-administrative staff in education led to anxiety, confusion, and mistrust (Brocato, 1990). In attempts to reverse these trends, business organizations and schools explored and merged various forms of management methods that essentially led to decision-making becoming decentralized and shared. In order to increase workplace morale and boost performance, Kulp (2011) asserted that corporate leaders had to rethink other types of shared decision-making methods (SDM).

According to Kulp (2011), corporate leaders researched and found that bureaucracy hindered innovation efforts and risk-taking, which in turn produced sluggish innovation. As a remedy for improving innovation, corporate leaders took on a reform approach to restructuring, downsizing, and decentralizing decision-making—their primary emphasis (Kulp, 2011). With corporate leaders focused on decentralizing decision-making, this reform empowered employees with greater ownership and control of decision-making within their organizations or what Kulp (2011) referred to as greater SDM. Brocato (1990) reports that by 1987, teacher associations such as the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (NEA) wanted school districts to adopt management systems that would provide teachers with decentralized arrangements that allowed them more significant involvement in school SDM processes. The push for decentralized arrangements led to many forms of school SDM reform (Kulp, 2011). Klinger (2008) and Kulp (2011) revealed that legislation reform mandated school boards put in place frameworks for SDM processes and councils that included

administrators, principals, teachers, and parents who would be actively involved and accountable for daily SDM school business practices and processes.

When crises were addressed, historical information has provided evidence that shared decision-making was an essential leadership skill focused on and used by organizational leaders when responding to situations of disastrous magnitude such as Florida's 10 foreign and 12 American tourists murders, the bombing of New York's World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Aiken, 2021; Barton, 1994; Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007; Torley, 2011). Having highlighted these tragedies, each demonstrated that significant crises had been a catalyst for policy change. For example, only when students were identified as both killers and victims at Columbine High School did public leaders and school leaders begin to address school crisis plans (Adams & Kritsonis, 2006; Kennedy, 2006). Klinger (2008) underscored that another pointed example was the tragic events of September 11, 2001, attacks on Americans that sparked a fundamental change in how the public, in general, and educators specifically, approached safety and security concerns. Klinger asserted that a combination of victimization, guns in schools, and terrorist attacks prompted school leaders to increase the priority and effectiveness of crisis response plans. In public education, a school leader's decisions in response to planning, preparation, and implementation during and after a crisis directly correlate to student achievement and staff success (Aiken, 2021; Barton, 1994; Green, 2006; Khalaf, 2021; Torley, 2011). However, the most recent catalyst for change and according to Goudeau et al. (2021), the most challenging for school leaders to address when trying to meet the needs of students and staff was the COVID-19 crisis. Before COVID-19,

significant crises, like those previously mentioned, were primarily physical crises. As explained deeper throughout the next sections of this literature review, public officials and school leaders similarly addressed the decision-making processes for handling physical crises. However, COVID-19 was a viral disease that caused a sustained public health crisis, unlike a physical crisis (Schuchat, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis required school leaders to address teaching and learning differently than in previous years. COVID-19 required complex decisions and processes that school leaders had not implemented or yet invented (Goudeau et al., 2021). While there was one primary approach—distance learning—that school officials used as an immediate and temporary fix, at the time of this study, the researcher found little research to demonstrate that school leaders had effective and efficient distance learning crisis plans in place that appropriately addressed all student and staff distance learning needs.

### ***Historical Perspective of Decision-Making in Models of Effective and Efficient Crisis Response Plans***

This section includes the literature on the development and approval of effective and efficient crisis plans, what researchers determined to be the top crisis plans most used in schools, and what encompassed community-based crisis plans versus school-based crisis plans. Klinger (2008) highlights that the approval of crisis plans rests on the board of education, and the superintendent drives the creation and implementation of plans. Furthermore, while organizational leaders such as superintendents are entrusted and expected to create effective and efficient disaster and crisis response plans, Cole (2016) demonstrated that school leaders primarily shouldered the responsibility for developing, implementing, and evaluating plans during crisis response planning phases. Green (2006)

suggests that the school leader is most likely to assume authority and responsibility during a crisis. Therefore, the school leader must play the most visible role in developing a crisis plan and educating staff, students, parents, and the community on all fundamental parts of the plan (Green, 2006). Greenbaum et al. (1986) showed that developing a well-organized plan was equally important to the school leader, superintendent, and board of education's roles in crisis planning. A well-organized or effective and efficient plan could mean the difference between pragmatic actions and solutions or danger and panic (Greenbaum et al., 1986).

Green (2006) asserted that the needs of schools and school districts vary enough that each school and district must develop its own crisis plan to meet its strengths and weaknesses. For example, a small rural school's needs may differ from those of a large urban school (Green, 2006). Duke (2002) purported the meaning of safety varies across schools, and differences in the levels of safety among various schools may be a function of several factors such as a school's students, staff, history, resources, problems, and cultural differences, which should be considered when developing effective and efficient crisis plans. Duke (2002) asserted that these factors, especially culture, can provide a perspective on school safety that seeks to understand the normative structure of schools and the cultural contexts in which they exist, the level of personal safety that school stakeholders expect in school, and how school leaders define and develop effective and efficient crisis plans. Green (2006) and Klinger (2008) also asserted that over the last 20 years, school leaders used other outside factors that aided in developing effective and efficient crisis plans. For example, following the 1999 Columbine shooting incident in which students killed and wounded other students and staff and a rash of school shootings

in the years that followed, school administrators across the nation reviewed and revised their plans to include significant input from outside sources such as law enforcement, social service agencies, mental health professionals, and consultants (Green, 2006; Klinger, 2008). These changes indicated that school leaders did not previously include public safety resources in their initial crisis plans. However, since these changes, organizational leaders have taken greater measures to improve their crisis response plans to make them effective and efficient in meeting the needs of all students and staff (Cole, 2016; Green, 2006; Klinger, 2008; Taylor, 2020).

### ***Historical Perspective of Top Crisis Plan Models Used in Schools***

When researching recommendations for the best crisis plans used in schools, several models were found. Community-based and school-based were the two most identified and used by district and school leaders as effective and efficient crisis response plans. Of the community-based and school-based crisis models that were reviewed, 12 characteristics (victimization or discrimination safety, gun security, prevention, protection, response, recovery, mitigation, learning outcomes, resource management, technology, internet, and geographical information systems) emerged that organizational leaders indicated should encompass effective and efficient crisis response plans (Cole 2016; Green, 2006; and Klinger, 2008). Both plans were found to encompass and overlap in some of these characteristics. However, the research from Cole (2016), Green (2006), and Klinger (2008) demonstrated that neither plan, when implemented, was entirely effective and efficient at meeting all the needs of students and staff during a crisis.

**Community-Based Crisis Plans.** Dorman (2003) and Taylor (2020) claimed that community-based crisis intervention models have become more commonplace and seem



to provide more valuable resources when responding to crises. Dorman (2003) and Taylor (2020) suggested that the most promising community-based crisis plans evolved from decision-making input from an array of community participants who contributed to student education. As a means to help maximize a school's ability to handle crises, community-based plans used in schools were found to have been developed with school personnel who knew the school best, such as administrators, teachers, and support staff, and in collaboration with students, parents, and community members (Dorman, 2003). The community-based crisis plan approach, according to Dorman (2003) and Ferri et al. (2020), was also found to have encompassed support from community partnerships, strategies for identifying appropriate programs, strategies for implementing a comprehensive plan, evaluation of the plan, and revision of the plan based upon evaluations. Dorman (2003) and Ferri et al. (2020) stated that community stakeholders collaborate with school personnel to develop comprehensive crisis plans that address specific safety concerns of schools. Dorman (2003) and Ferri et al. (2020) explained that collaborative community efforts are vital because they have served schools in maximizing efforts, helped avoid overlapping services, and allowed stakeholders to focus special situations on specific skills.

**School-Based Crisis Plans.** Kline et al. (1995) stated that school-based crisis plans were developed with a school's general policies and procedures in mind that can be adapted to specific school settings. Unlike community-based plans, school-based plans only included decision-making strategies of the district and school personnel. Kline et al. (1995) asserted that the familiarity of school personnel made them most qualified to develop crisis plans and input decisions in response to crises. The researchers maintained

that school-based crisis intervention models contained three levels of organization: regional resource, district level, and school-based teams. Kline et al. (1995) found that educational regional resource personnel coordinate resources similar to community-based crisis plan models. According to Brock et al. (2001) and Dorman (2003), regional resource personnel seek resources from the community that aid in response to large-scale disasters and are generally employed only following crises that have significantly traumatized large numbers of school students, staff, and community members, such as in the school shootings at Jonesboro, Arkansas and COVID-19.

Dorman (2003) and Brock et al. (2001) discussed distance learning crises. Dorman (2003) stated that the district-level crisis team is responsible for ensuring individual schools comply with current policies, facilitating the sharing of staff and resources between schools, and shouldering the responsibility of training and maintaining school crisis team personnel who provide crisis services to students and staff. Brock et al. (2001) also stated that district-level crisis team members typically have more crisis response training and knowledge than site-based crisis teams and often allow schools to request district-level crisis support and district leaders to request regional-level crisis support at a moment's notice if needed.

Brock et al. (2001) highlighted that developing school-based crisis models is not as time-consuming as community-based crisis plans but can be if higher-level organizational levels are utilized, such as the regional and district levels. Schools that used school-based models to develop their crisis plans were found to have fewer comprehensive plans when trying to meet the needs of students and staff than schools that used community-based models (Dorman, 2003; Ferri et al., 2020). According to Dorman

(2003) and Ferri et al. (2020), schools that used the school-based crisis models were primarily led from the perspective of school personnel and less from that of community stakeholders. When collaboration efforts with community resources were not present, schools seemed to experience greater difficulty meeting student and staff needs during a crisis, such as transportation, food, mental health, and technology resources (Dorman, 2003; Ferri et al., 2020). Additionally, schools that used the community-based approach during a crisis seemed to have met the needs of their students and staff better than schools that used school-based methods (Dorman, 2003; Ferri et al., 2020). While the community-based approach was the most time-consuming to develop, it was also determined to be the most favored to implement in response to a crisis (Dorman, 2003; Ferri et al., 2020).

To this point of the literature review, research was presented on historical perspectives for decision-making processes and how different crisis plan models were used in unique ways to help business and school leaders address crises that dealt with inclement weather and human-induced or anthropogenic crisis. Also presented was a historical perspective on how inclement weather and human-induced crises affected normal school functions and were a common cause for government officials and school leaders to require schools to close for short or prolonged periods of time. When schools were shut down for long periods of time, school leaders had to modify teaching and learning methods for students and staff, and often those modifications included school leaders' decisions to implement some form of distance learning (Dorma, 2003; Jones, 2010; Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). At the time of this study, little empirical research existed that examined school leaders' perceptions of decision-making

processes concerning equity and access to distance learning in schools during a sustained public health crisis.

### **Historical Perspective of Decision-Making in Distance Learning During Crises**

In this section, the historical perspective of decision-making in distance learning during times of crisis discusses how decision-making was used to meet student and staff needs for distance learning pre-COVID-19, what strategies were employed and what measures were used to ensure equity and access existed for all students and staff are discussed. The historical perspective of decision-making in distance learning during times of crisis defines what distance learning was in the past and during the time of this study. This section also provides further context for how distance learning evolved and what the challenges and benefits of distance learning were.

#### ***History of Distance Learning Defined Past and Present***

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning became the primary mode of teaching and learning (Darling-Aduana, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). For this study, distance learning is a term synonymously referred to as virtual learning, “distance education, e-learning, and online learning” (Berg & Simonson, 2016, para. 1) and is defined as a form of teaching and learning whose “main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication” (Berg & Simonson, 2016, para. 1). However, the definition of distance learning has evolved over the last one hundred years.

Taylor (2020) claimed that distance learning evolved from the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic. Taylor (2020) related that distance learning was asynchronous and

involved hands-on learning and working from home for both staff and students. Hertel (2021) and Taylor (2020) purported that government, health, and school leaders' responses to the challenges of distance learning during COVID-19 and the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic were similarly aligned—specifically, out of an abundance of caution for school staff and students' health and safety, schools were shut down and ordered to distance learn. Many of the concerns experienced during the COVID-19 shutdown—sickness and food shortages, also existed during the 1918 influenza epidemic (Hertel, 2021; Jones, 2010; Taylor, 2020).

During COVID-19, the first plan of attack to address sickness and prevent the spread of the virus, at the behest of government health officials, was to shutdown certain businesses and all schools and require all persons to social distance at least six feet apart in public spaces, wear mask coverings, and participate in distance learning (Ferri et al., 2020; Hertel, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Hertel (2021) and Taylor (2020) affirmed that schools were shut down to prevent the spread of the 1918 influenza virus and people were ordered to wear mask coverings, and students were involved in distance learning. Similarly, during the COVID-19 crisis, government, health, and school officials shut down schools and ordered mask coverings and distance learning. However, social distancing was not as stringent a requirement as it was during COVID-19 (Hertel, 2021; Taylor, 2020).

### ***Evolution of Decision-Making in Distance Learning Methods and Challenges***

School shutdowns during the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic brought about different challenges for teachers, students, and their families that included different distance learning experimentations—the collaboration of schools and community was

among the largest experimentation that emerged in the literature (Hertel, 2021; Taylor, 2020). The schools and community collaboration helped address food needs and provide structure and employment skills for distance learning students during the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic (Hertel, 2021; Taylor, 2020). During the food shortages, travel and transportation were not readily available to help families get food supplies.

Transportation was primarily dedicated to medical supplies, nursing staff, patients, and food shipments to convalescents during the 1918 influenza epidemic (Jones, 2010). In 1918, as an introduction to hands-on distance learning, food shortages were addressed by school and community collaborations by teaching students gardening, farming, and agricultural skills as a means to grow their own food to eat and to help feed their families (Taylor, 2020). During COVID-19, schools' and communities' methods for meeting student and family food needs differed from those used in 1918. When schools shut down during COVID-19, with the support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), school officials addressed food shortages in various ways, such as by distributing pre-packaged breakfast and lunch in school parking lots or delivering to neighborhoods by school personnel and community supporters (Gonzalez, 2021).

In addition to sickness and food concerns during the 1918 influenza epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were concerned about student academic learning (Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning took place online as students and teachers had access to technologies such as laptops with video recording capabilities, the internet, and distance learning software that allowed them to stay connected to teaching and learning from home while schools were closed (Ferri et al., 2020; Hertel, 2021; Taylor, 2020). According to Taylor (2020), schools across the

United States implemented varied academic distance learning strategies such as home-school projects and mail-in homework assignments to continue teaching and learning. In 1918, technologies for distance learning did not exist.

However, while school boards, superintendents, and teachers were focused on concerns for students learning to read and write, labor officials were more focused on children developing work skills during the 1918 influenza epidemic that led to school and community development of trade schools and apprenticeship learning (Rich, 2020; Taylor, 2020). To sustain life and help their families, many children had jobs like newspaper delivery, farm hands, and factory work (Rich, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Other 1918 distance learning strategies, such as trade schools and apprenticeships, were developed. For example, the US Department of Labor required male students to take a forced vacation from school and enrolled them into a Boy's Working Reserve program to learn skills and trades in agriculture, manufacturing, and shipping (Taylor, 2020).

In addition to concerns about staff and student illness, food demands, academic learning, and labor skills, government and school officials faced various challenges during both the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were forced to close and implement distance learning. During both public health crisis shutdowns, school officials were overwhelmingly concerned with how they would keep up with teacher funding (Lieberman, 2020b; Taylor, 2020) and how they would address the lack of parental guidance if parents were not at home with students, lack of social experience, and increased student idleness and anxiety (Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). Lieberman (2020a), Ferri et al. (2020), and Taylor (2020) further suggested that distance learning during both the 1918 deadly influenza epidemic and the COVID-19

pandemic caused school leaders to be concerned about the lack of access to direct and individual learning supports for students who required them, the lack of student and teacher learning supplies, and teachers' lack of accessibility to professional development (Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). The COVID-19 shutdown created a need for greater use of technology, and several benefits emerged for teachers, students, and parents alike (Liu, 2021). According to Liu (2021), technology benefits included the flexibility to work and learn from home, integration of multimedia use and technology, asynchronous and synchronous learning, the customization of various forms of learning through the use of learning management systems, creation of new dimensions of student engagement, and development of more supports from community businesses such as cable companies for internet use and computer companies for hardware donations.

Research showed there were a few benefits to have emerged from the 1918 influenza epidemic and even more benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, research also demonstrated that the challenges of distance learning were far greater than the benefits that emerged from either event (Hertel, 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). While Liu (2021) discussed the advantages of technology use, Ferri et al. (2020) discussed its disadvantages. Ferri et al. (2020) contended that problematic concerns emerged from school officials regarding technology use, such as lack of software knowledge and use of hardware by staff, students, and parents. Additionally, concerns for increased gaps in student achievement, barriers, and inequitable experiences for learners with special needs and learners from lower socioeconomic status were heightened during the 1918 influenza epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic (Ferri et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020).



## **Decision-Making, Equity, Access, and Distance Learning During COVID-19**

Decision-making related to equity and access to distance learning during COVID-19 expounds on the impacts of education leaders' decision-making processes throughout the pandemic. Specifically, in this section, how education leaders' decisions addressed equity and access factors that emerged throughout the pandemic is discussed. In this section is found a discussion of the ways that education leaders' decisions impacted the equity and access to education for the staff, students, and parents involved in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Defining Equity and Access in Distance Learning***

For this study, in education, equity is a term that refers to the principle of fairness (Great Schools Partnership, 2016). While the term equity “is often used interchangeably with the related principle of equality, equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal” (Great Schools Partnership, 2016, para. 1). As it relates to access, Campbell and Storo (1996) stated that some people refer to equity in education as having equal access. However, Campbell and Storo (1996) also stated that increasing numbers of educational leaders and advocates had expressed that equal access, while necessary, is insufficient to ensure educational equity exists for all stakeholders.

Decision-making related to equity and access to distance learning during COVID-19 further includes how and in what ways disparaging factors impacted students, parents, and staff access to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Campbell and Storo (1996) asserted that access to systems that are imbalanced towards some students, making them feel a sense of not belonging, is not educational equity. Because of these

inequities, some people have redefined educational equity as equal treatment once access has been fairly obtained (Campbell & Storo, 1996).

***New Equity and Access Disparities Emerged in Abrupt Shifts to Distance Learning***

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES, n.d.) reported that during the 2017-2018 school year, about 21% of all public schools in the United States offered courses entirely online. In contrast, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, online learning numbers increased by about 54% (IES, n.d.). IES reported that at the start of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, an estimated 75% of public schools moved from in-person classes to some form of online distance learning. Before COVID-19 and the abrupt shift to distance learning, in-person teaching and learning was the primary mode of instruction conducted in traditional brick-and-mortar buildings (Toczauer, n.d.). However, at the start of COVID-19, the primary mode of instruction shifted to distance learning, and with this shift, several variations of distance teaching and learning began to evolve (Toczauer, n.d.; Williams & Corwith, 2021). For example, classrooms were flipped into online videos prerecorded and prepared by teachers or by district or teacher-authorized software sites, and some courses were conducted synchronously or asynchronously (Williams & Corwith, 2021) or live held via virtual software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams (Toczauer, n.d.; Williams & Corwith, 2021). Distance learning at the start of COVID-19 also brought the advancement and use of modern technologies such as computers, smartboards, whiteboards, student response systems such as Mentimeter, collaborative and interactive software such as Google Drive and Jamboard, communication systems such as Connexus (Williams & Corwith, 2021). With the unexpected introduction to online flipped classrooms and the advancement of modern

technologies also came unanticipated and immediate challenges for students, staff, and parents to know how to communicate online and use the different technology platforms introduced (Williams & Corwith, 2021). These challenges, combined with longstanding equity problems such as racism, disablism, genderism, and lack of access to technology resources and training, revealed new layers of equity and access concerns and other school disparities within institutions worldwide (Campbell & Storo, 1996; Darling-Aduana, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Williams & Corwith, 2021; Winthrop, 2020).

### **Technology Disparities Emerged Among Teachers, Students, and Parents.**

Williams and Corwith (2021) reported that many teachers and school staff lacked the skills to navigate, use, and teach different technology platforms needed during the sudden shift to distance learning at the height of COVID-19. The global pandemic forced school officials to speedily create professional development training geared toward technology so teachers could quickly learn and begin teaching students while distance learning (Williams & Corwith, 2021). According to Williams and Corwith (2021), even with district officials pushing for technology training and professional development, staff still exhibited challenges and gaps in learning how to use technology, such as understanding computer concepts, attaching links and documents in emails, and learning timeframe—taking some staff days to learn, taking some staff months, and taking some staff very little time to learn throughout their distance teaching time. Technology learning challenges (Williams & Corwith, 2021) coupled with increased job-related stressors due in part to COVID-19 caused high teacher turnover (Steiner & Woo, 2021). By the end of the 2020-2021 school year, nearly one in four teachers (nearly half reported as Black teachers) said they were likely to quit their job compared to one in six teachers before the

pandemic (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Staff shortages further exacerbated inequitable experiences for teachers and students and less accessible experiences for students to receive a free, appropriate, and quality education. For example, class sizes increased due to teacher shortages, and in extreme cases, some districts appealed to local businesses, such as police stations and banks, to help with substitute teaching (Wright, 2022). Some classrooms and schools were temporarily shut down entirely due to teacher and substitute pool shortages (Lambert, 2021). The pandemic classroom and school shutdowns led to student learning loss and caused even greater gaps in reading and math among students with disabilities and underserved Black and Hispanic students (Averett, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021; Vestal, 2021).

Michigan State University (2020) reported that students from lower socioeconomic communities and students from rural communities were found to have less access to technology resources than suburban communities and therefore lacked experience and the wherewithal for resources such as laptops and internet access. Jabbari et al. (2021) and Ferri et al. (2020) reported that parents of students from lower socioeconomic communities were less likely able to afford the cost of the technology resources for their students to distance learn, which led to inequalities and students inadvertently harmed through loss of human interaction and educational achievement. Turner Lee (2020b) reported that districts across the United States offered free 1:1 technology devices to students. However, while students may have received free technology resources, parents of lower socioeconomic urban and rural communities still faced other challenges. For example, both communities lacked affordable transportation to access and use the technology (Turner Lee, 2020b). While students may have had the

proper equipment for learning, if their equipment did not work or they had no or unreliable internet service, they were faced with inadvertent harm to their academic learning (Turner Lee 2020b).

Averett (2021) purported that the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to distance learning also caused parents to become part-time teachers or co-educators to help their students during distancing learning. Like students and teachers, parents also experienced technology learning challenges. Parents, in particular elementary school parents from lower socio-economic urban communities, were tasked with helping their grammar school students learn how to use computers or laptops and any software used by their classroom teachers (Averett, 2021). Many parents from underserved communities struggled to help their students because they did not have appropriate computer skills or knowledge of the educational software their student's teacher used (Averett, 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Reicher, 2020). Garbe et al. (2020) and Turner Lee (2020b) reported that parents were also tasked with ensuring students had access to the internet and Wi-Fi to ensure students could log in and attend their online distance learning courses. Turner Lee (2020a) recounted that during the pandemic, students and parents with no home internet or Wi-Fi service took other measures to gain access by taking advantage of businesses and organizations such as local libraries, coffee shops, or school parking lots that offered free services. However, Turner Lee (2020a) reported that rural parents were less likely to have access to free internet and Wi-Fi services due to not having as many available businesses and a lack of reliable cable or cell phone towers in their rural communities. While students may have had the proper technology equipment, they could not log into their classes without internet and Wi-Fi, which led to unintended harm and loss of

learning (Turner Lee, 2020a). Additionally, Turner Lee (2020a, 2020b) highlighted that by spring 2020, school collaborations with districts and local cable companies began to emerge and offered students free or reduced temporary home internet and Wi-Fi services, including the necessary cable equipment.

**Meal Disparities Intensified.** Before the start of COVID-19 and during in-person learning, public school students were offered free and reduced breakfast and lunch at school. At the start of COVID-19, ensuring that students continued to receive their school meals was another challenge for district and school leaders (Jabbari et al., 2021). According to Jabbari et al., at the start of COVID-19, schools shutdown, and so did student meal services, which created barriers to accessing meals for students. Jabbari et al. reported that approximately 30 million of the nation's students received their daily meals at school, with low-income students, primarily Blacks and Hispanics, being the largest recipients. Jabbari et al. reported that national student food disparities were already on the rise in schools that served the most underserved students but that the onset of COVID-19 exacerbated food insecurities in districts serving large numbers of low-income students. Jabbari et al. indicated that district leaders had to quickly strategize what decisions would be most impactful in lessening student food insecurities. Jabbari et al. explained that district officials' primary decision to address student food needs was to turn their schools into food distribution sites. Jabbari et al. also asserted that urban and suburban districts were more likely than rural districts to have larger numbers of meal distribution at their schools' sites; however, students from urban and rural districts were less likely to have access to their meals due to a lack of transportation.

**Behaviors Intensified and Race and Socioeconomic Disparities Widened.** At the time of this study, little research on the decisions of school officials and their impact on the race, geography, socioeconomic status, behaviors, and social-emotional health of students in distance learning during times of crises existed (Oster et al., 2021). By spring 2021, distance learning studies (Barnum & Bryan, 2020; Jabbari et al., 2021; Mineo, 2022; Oster et al., 2021) began emerging that showed large disparities in student race, geography, socioeconomic status, behaviors, and social-emotional health of students. Data from studies (Barnum & Bryan, 2020; Jabbari et al., 2021; Mineo, 2022; Oster et al., 2021) provided evidence that the lack of decisions on the part of school officials to address equity and access needs in relation to distance learning at the start of the pandemic played a fundamental part in widening the already longstanding equity problems mentioned previously in this literature review. Research results (Barnum & Bryan, 2020; Jabbari et al., 2021; Mineo, 2022; Oster et al., 2021) have shown that the largest equity and access problems were amongst students from historically marginalized communities—Blacks, Hispanics, and students with special needs and disabilities.

When researching student distance learning behaviors, disparaging themes for student learning and social-emotional health emerged. Turner Lee (2020a) highlighted that America's most vulnerable K-12 students faced health and safety challenges when moved from in-person to online during the pandemic. Turner Lee (2020a) asserted that disciplinary actions widen gaps in America's low-income and rural communities. According to Turner Lee (2020a), low-income and rural students were being disciplined or penalized [due to factors not in their control], such as not being able to login to their classes due to poor or no internet or Wi-Fi service, poorly working devices, language

barriers, or due to chronic absenteeism (Dorn et al., 2021). Oster et al. (2021) asserted that students reduced access to in-person learning correlates to poorer learning outcomes, social-emotional mental health, and other behaviors, which impact Blacks, Hispanics, and students with disabilities the most. A survey completed by 16,370 parents throughout the 2020-2021 year across 50 states in America by Dorn et al. (2021) showed that parents of Black and Hispanic students shared more concerns for their student's mental health and wellbeing than did White parents. The survey results of Dorn et al. (2021) indicated that student behaviors such as social withdrawal, self-isolation, fatigue, irrational fears, anxiety, and depression increased. In addition to the concerns presented by Dorn et al. (2021), Jabbari et al. (2021), and Oster et al. (2021), food insecurities (discussed earlier in this literature review) also impacted student behaviors and academics. Jabbari et al. (2021) stated that students who do not receive adequate and nutritionally appropriate meals tend to absorb less information, perform lower academically, and have increased negative behaviors. Despite behavioral and social-emotional health increases, mental health assessments have declined by 6% since 2019 (Dorn et al., 2021). Further, Dorn et al. (2021) claimed that students in low-income schools and urban communities that are predominately Black and Hispanic disproportionately lost learning during the pandemic more than students in high-income rural and suburban schools that are predominately White. From the initial shutdown of schools in the spring of 2020 through the end of the 2020-2021 school year, Black students were reported as six months behind in reading and math, while White students were reported four months behind in math and just three months in reading (Dorn et al., 2021). Hispanic students are reported to have long-term future earning losses of approximately 2.1% and Black students 2.4% if school officials



do not produce immediate and sustained interventions to disrupt the pandemic distance learning loss (Dorn et al., 2021). Supportive educators and environments are critical for all students. Averett (2021) and Dorn et al. (2021) emphasized the importance and greater need for support of historically marginalized students, and Vestal (2021) emphasized the same for students with special needs. Greater supports are crucial in helping to protect historically marginalized students and those with special needs against immediate and long-term adverse behavioral effects and social-emotional harm (Averett, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021; Vestal, 2021).

**New Student Disability Disparities Emerged.** Averett (2021) and Vasquez and Straub (2012) affirmed that little is known about the experiences of distance learning for students with special needs and disabilities because distance learning has been rare—at least prior to COVID-19. However, since COVID-19, research studies (Averett, 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Vasquez & Straub, 2012) on the experiences of special needs students and their families have begun to emerge. Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) asserted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, school officials made very few considerations and appropriate decisions for meeting the needs of students with special needs and disabilities. While the impact of COVID-19 affected education institutions across the United States and some races more than others was reported throughout this literature review, Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) reported that the largest student population disproportionality affected by the pandemic was students with special needs and disabilities. Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) stated that the rapid transition from in-person learning to distance learning due to COVID-19 grossly impacted how special education services were provided to students

with special needs and disabilities. Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) also reported that parents of students with special needs and disabilities and the school staff who worked with them struggled with particular challenges in distance learning that other parents and teachers did not face, mainly due to school officials' struggles to find equitable strategies.

Gross and Opalka (2020) said that only a third of school districts across the United States required teachers to engage, interact, and provide direct instruction. For example, the needs of students with autism, dyslexia, and attention deficit disorders had specific learning needs at school that looked vastly different than at home. Averett (2021) claimed that during the pandemic, school officials failed to provide students with special needs and disabilities with entitlements, therapies, and instructions that fall under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) asserted that parents struggled to support the learning of their special needs students and fill in gaps in distance learning where they felt teachers and school officials lacked responsibility. Neither parents nor teachers were adequately equipped to teach lessons, and both struggled with getting students to focus while online or working from home (Garbe et al., 2020; Reicher, 2020). Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), and Reicher (2020) asserted that parents desperately tried to provide support to help their special needs students in math and reading while distance learning during COVID-19, but that they lacked the content knowledge and pedagogy necessary to help their students, sufficiently. Communication between school staff and parents was also determined to be a major barrier and impacted the quality of

education for students with special needs while distance learning during the pandemic. Averett (2021), Garbe et al. (2020), Gross and Opalka (2020), Kamenetz (2020), and Reicher (2020) reported that the most common underlying factors that contributed to communication barriers were unclear expectations, lack of guidance and individualized support and lack of knowledge and access to online resources and devices.

### **Emerging Opportunities to Do Emergency Distance Learning Better**

As presented throughout this literature review, education leaders' abrupt decisions to adopt distance learning throughout COVID-19 were not without dire challenges and extreme limitations. However, Gurajena et al. (2021) and The World Bank (2021) indicated that while the pandemic offered broad and disparaging impacts that were seen and felt by all stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and communities at large, it also unveiled opportunities for PK-12 education leaders to improve distance learning policies and methods. Gurajena et al. (2021) and The World Bank (2021) reported that due to increased growth in youth populations and graduation rates from elementary through secondary school, there is an increased demand for tertiary education in regions like South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and Latin America. Gurajena et al. (2021) and The World Bank (2021) asserted that education leaders in Africa thrive in distance learning using uniquely designed tertiary education distance learning policies and methods. According to The World Bank (2021), tertiary education is instrumental in promoting growth, reducing poverty, and boosting shared prosperity. Gurajena et al. (2021) and The World Bank (2021) also asserted that tertiary institutions promote flexible learning that offers different ways of meeting the needs of diverse learners,

allowing them the freedom of choosing when and how they want to distance learn—promoting balanced equity and accessibility utilization for all students.

Other emerging tertiary education opportunities identified to be on the rise by Gurajena et al. (2021) are opportunities for educational institutions and businesses to collaborate and strategize for innovative ways to conduct future emergency distance learning better. For example, Gurajena et al. explained that opportunities exist for education agencies and businesses to develop innovative teaching and learning solutions that maximize student learning using technologies and non-academic courses readily available in their community or region. Other tertiary methods mentioned were the development of technologies that utilize low data consumption and mobile transmission applications in low-income regions or communities where access to the internet is minimal and options to offer non-academic courses, which promote skill development in academic and non-academic learners (Gurajena et al., 2021).

## **Summary**

This literature review provided an overview of the historical perspective of decision-making; the historical perspective of decision-making in distance learning during crises; decision-making, equity, access, and distance learning during COVID-19; and emerging opportunities to do emergency distance learning better. While many of the equity and access issues (race, social-emotional health, geography, socio-economic status) in distance learning were long reflected in education prior to COVID-19, as reported throughout this literature review, other equity concerns (technology skills gaps, meal, behaviors, and disability disparities) were specific to and impacted distance learning in unique ways. As a result, while teachers and educational leaders can learn

much from all equity and accessibility efforts pre-and post-COVID-19, there remains the need for education leaders to reflect and be more intentional in strategizing and improving their decision-making efforts to develop the best crisis plans that will be immediate, most effective, and long term to disrupting inequity and accessibility problems for all future distance learning stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and community supporters. Chapter 3 includes detailed descriptions of the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher’s role, and the limitations of the study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to determine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. Chapter 3 provides the details of the methods used to conduct the study. This chapter includes detailed descriptions of the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, interview questions, and data collection procedures. This chapter also includes an explanation of data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher's role, and the limitations of the study.

#### **Research Design**

This study followed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological inquiry. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), qualitative research design involves “the plan for conducting the study” (p. 190) and involves “the overall approach regarding the many ways the researcher bridges the context of the study, development of the purpose, research questions, data collection, methods, and methods of data analysis” (p. 105). Additionally, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that phenomenological inquiry involves both a philosophy and a method, the purpose of which is to explore the meaning of lived experiences and commonalities of individual research participants and reduce their experiences with a phenomenon to a universal essence or common description. Both qualitative research and phenomenological inquiry include a variety of conventional data collection approaches for conducting participant experience research studies, such as interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), Creswell and Creswell (2018), and Lunenburg and Irby (2008) described how the interview is commonly selected as a primary method for data collection in a qualitative study because it involves unstructured and generally open-ended questions and allows the researcher to conduct interviews via face-to-face, telephone, or in group settings and has the potential to elicit rich views and thick descriptions. Also, according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), qualitative interviews are constructed of “predetermined questions, are in-depth in order to capture perceptions, and can be semi-structured to facilitate more focused exploration of a specific topic using an interview guide” (p. 193). For this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with Kansas PK-12 school superintendents. The semi-structured interviews consisted of predetermined open-ended questions and follow-up questions or probes to explore the superintendents’ experiences and perceptions and gather and analyze data.

### **Setting**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) explained that the research setting section “describes and justifies selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem” (p. 13). The setting for this study was the state of Kansas. At the time of this study, 512 school districts were educating K-12 students in Kansas. The smallest district enrolled approximately 170 students, and the largest district enrolled approximately 44,000 students (KSDE, 2022). Although Kansas is primarily a rural state, it has pockets of urban areas (Rural Health Information Hub, 2020). The selection of the Kansas school districts helped to provide this research with data from diverse student populations and communities.

## **Sampling Procedures**

According to Patton (as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), “In qualitative research, selection of the research sample is purposeful” (p. 186), comes in several variations, and is intended for “selecting specific participants, events, and processes” (p. 186). Criterion-based sampling procedures were utilized in this study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described criterion-based sampling as involving the selection of participants who meet a certain set of criteria and working “well when all the individuals studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon” (p. 187). For this study, criterion-based sampling was the most appropriate sampling to use to capture the data and experiences of superintendents employed in the same state, who possessed the same level of expertise or certification, and who governed school districts in the same or similar fashion during the 2021-2022 school year.

The population eligible for participation in this study included all persons serving as a superintendent in Kansas school districts during the COVID-19 crisis (spring 2020) and throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Superintendents meeting these criteria were eligible and invited to interview. The participation of any superintendent who contributed was completely voluntary, and their names were anonymous and could not be identified in this study’s reports or publications. KSDE (2021) reported that superintendents led 512 local school districts. All 512 superintendents were invited to participate in this study. The goal was to interview superintendents across Kansas to capture data from diverse student populations and communities. The district’s size and location could influence how the superintendents’ decision-making processes were utilized.



## Instruments

Phenomenological research (defined in the Research Design section) includes a variety of qualitative methods. Interviews are one of those methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were used as the instrument in this study, allowing participants to be open and candid about sensitive issues related to their experiences with the decision-making process of equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19.

“Qualitative researchers often use open-ended interviews. Typically, these are semi-structured scripts—that is, some questions are developed in advance and some are developed as the interview progresses based on participant responses” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 192). The semi-structured interviews included six open-ended interview questions. All interview questions aligned with this study’s research question. The researcher constructed the interview questions based on the existing empirical research that addressed this study’s research question—What are Kansas superintendents’ perceptions of the decision-making process of equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19? Therefore, it was important to construct interview questions that would allow the researcher to garner empirical and analytical data that demonstrated any emerging contradictions or consensus regarding superintendents’ decision-making processes for providing equity and access to distance learning beginning with the start of COVID-19 that could help them and other district administrators make the best decisions for meeting the future needs of their respective students and communities.

To ensure the validity of the interview questions, the researcher used the peer examination method and a mock interview (described in the Data Collection section).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that peer examinations enhance the reliability and strengthen the validity of the researcher's interview questions by having colleagues or expert panelists who hold impartial views of the research study examine the interview questions. The colleagues or expert panelists provide their interpretations to the researcher prior to the participants' interviews.

On June 12, 2022, the researcher emailed two expert panelists a Request for Expert Examiner (see Appendix A). Both expert panelists were familiar with qualitative research dissertations as they previously obtained doctoral degrees from accredited universities and were previous superintendents of PK-12 public schools. Both panelists responded to the email on June 15, 2022, and provided their analysis of this study's interview questions. The semi-structured interview questions were as follows:

IQ1. Tell me about how decisions were made in your district regarding distance learning and if and how the decision-making process changed due to COVID-19 from spring 2020 through Fall 2021.

IQ2. Who was involved in the decision-making process at each point in time?

IQ3. How did the decisions that were made equitably address the needs of all students, parents, and staff?

IQ4. How did the decisions that were made ensure access to distance learning for all students, parents, and staff?

IQ5. Given what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently regarding distance learning?

IQ6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding the decision-making process related to distance learning?

One panelist stated he had a little apprehension about interview question one and assumed the question was asking how their thinking and processes evolved over time and that they would answer the question in phases as to their understanding and implementation of distance learning and how it changed over time. The same panelist indicated similar apprehension for interview question five, which he felt should be communicated in interview question one. The other panelist indicated no challenges or apprehensions but did indicate that superintendents may struggle to recollect the exact sequence of decision-making processes. Both panelists stated that all questions were appropriate for school superintendents and that all questions appropriately addressed the research topic. Based on the analysis from both expert examiners, interview question IQ1 was revised to make it easier to understand by interviewees. On June 24, 2022, using Zoom—an online video conference software, the researcher conducted a mock interview with an expert examiner panelist using the Interview Questions for Expert Examiner Review (see Appendix B). After the mock interview, no revisions were recommended by the expert examiner.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

As mentioned in the instruments section, the researcher conducted a mock interview. Interviews allow researchers to collect, through descriptive questions, surveys, observations, or document analysis, participants' perceptions of their experiences (Lunenburg and Irby, 2008, p. 126). To help with data collection, a mock interview allowed the researcher to walk through the interview process by practicing asking questions and listening to and receiving responses. Additionally, the mock interview

helped identify any potential biases that emerged and eliminate them prior to the researcher conducting the actual participant interviews.

To obtain prior permission to collect data, the researcher submitted a Baker University Institutional Review Board (IRB) form on May 4, 2022. Once the Baker University IRB granted permission for the study (see Appendix C), the researcher began data collection. Names, emails, and phone numbers were obtained from the Kansas Superintendent Pictorial Directory, which is located on the KSDE website. All Kansas superintendents serving in PK-12 local school districts were contacted via email request (see Appendix D). The purpose of the email was to solicit superintendent participation. The email included information about the purpose of this study, the research question, and a consent form (see Appendix E). The consent form included information regarding the purpose of the study, participant being audio recorded, potential risks of participating, potential benefits of participating, non-compensation, confidentiality, voluntary participation, whom to contact for any questions about the study, whom to contact about rights as a research participant, and participant agreement. Email reminders were sent until the desired number of participants was obtained. Once the researcher recruited the desired number of participants, the names of other interested participants were recorded for contact if any previously confirmed participants could not be interviewed.

Interested participants who responded were given options to choose their preferred interview date, time, and site. Email calendar reminders were sent to participants one day before each interview as a prompt for the upcoming meeting. Each participant was asked to print, sign, and email the signed consent form to the researcher prior to the interview. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, stringent in-person restrictions were

implemented in all Kansas school districts. Therefore, to conduct safe and secure interviews, participants were given options to interview in-person or online via video conference, phone call, or at their respective district office. If conducted at an office, as an added security measure, the participant and researcher wore masks covering their nose and mouth and sat approximately six feet apart.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), semi-structured interviews offer “researchers an opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information” (p. 193). To allow for the greatest degree of comfortability and participant participation, each semi-structured interview was approached in a professional yet inviting manner that enhanced participant cooperation, participant candidness and self-expression, and in a manner that guided continued focus on the discussion of the research topic. Interviews were conducted from July 5, 2022, thru July 19, 2022. The researcher used Temi, an audio recording data collection software, to record and transcribe each participant’s interview.

Temi is an encrypted, secured, password-protected online software system that offers audio recording and transcription tools such as speech recognition, text and editing, speaker identification, and video-to-speech (Temi, 2022). The data collected included participant demographic information, position held, and school district at which the participant worked. Data collection was used to reference the participants during the data analysis, the presentation of findings, and a summary of the results. Data collection also included numerical identification coding. The numbers were assigned to the participants’ transcripts. To allow for the greatest degree of comfortability and participant participation, each semi-structured interview was approached in a professional, yet

inviting manner that enhanced participant cooperation, participant candidness and self-expression, and in a manner that guided continued focus on discussion of the research topic.

As a positive first impression, each interview, whether in-person, phone call, or video conference, was opened with an inviting welcome and appreciation for participating. If the interview was conducted in person, handshakes were not exchanged due to the COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. Each participant was then reminded that for the purposes of capturing the interview for data analysis, the interview would be audio recorded, there would be notes taken, and they could request to opt-out of the interview at any time. The semi-structured interview began with the research question, followed by the interview questions. When needed, follow-up questions or probes were asked to gain additional details to help fully explain a response to an initial interview question. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. To ensure the validity and reliability of each interview, the researcher informed the participant of a post-interview member check (see the Reliability and Trustworthiness section of Chapter 3). Finally, the researcher expressed gratitude and appreciation for each participant's participation and concluded the interview.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that analysis breaks data apart and begins with putting in place a plan to manage large volumes of collected data and reduce it in meaningful ways. Synthesis is the process by which all analyzed data is pulled together (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Quirkos (2022), an ideal software for conducting qualitative and mixed methods research, was used to help separate and organize the data for analysis

and synthesis. Quirkos allowed the researcher to establish and access her own secured account using her preferred technology device and import her transcribed documents directly into the Quirkos software. Using Quirkos software, the researcher then applied an inductive approach to examine, organize, and code any concepts, themes, and patterns that emerged in the collected data transcript from each interview.

Southampton Education School (2012) explained that an inductive approach is helpful when analyzing semi-structured interviews like those conducted in this study. Southampton Education School (2012) divided the inductive approach into seven stages used in this study. The first stage used by the researcher in the inductive approach included a unit of analysis which allowed her to break up the data by putting each interview sentence onto a new line and then breaking any long sentences into chunks of data analysis. The researcher then used the second stage of the inductive approach to open code the data to describe the meaning of the text accurately and then reduced all the codes to a smaller, more manageable number. The researcher used the third stage to close the code to identify overarching themes to group the open codes. In the fourth stage, the researcher organized the themes into categories to sensitize and help discriminate what themes emerged from the data. During the fifth stage, the researcher repeated the previous four stages, identified any new themes, and then adjusted ideas. During the sixth stage, the researcher constructed a theory by establishing a narrative of the themes, codes, and discussion of interrelationships. In the seventh and final stage, the researcher organized the data into categories and concluded with a summary of the results.

## **Reliability and Trustworthiness**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “In qualitative research, the standards that are most frequently used for good and convincing research are validity (trustworthiness) and reliability” (p. 202). Gibbs (as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018) explained that the meaning of qualitative validity is when “the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, whereas qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and among different projects” (p. 199). Member checks and peer examinations are reliability and trustworthiness strategies often used in qualitative research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) affirmed that the first strategy, member checks, addresses the validity of the participants’ transcribed interview by allowing the participant an opportunity, post-interview, to comment on their findings and adjust as needed. The second strategy, peer examination of the interview questions (described in the Instruments section), was used to ensure the reliability of the interview questions. In addition to peer examinations and member checks, the researcher also conducted a mock interview (described in the Data Collection section) as another method for helping to strengthen the reliability and trustworthiness of the interview process. Two expert panelists (see the Instruments section) were asked to examine the interview questions and provide constructive feedback regarding the questions and interview process. One panelist participated in the mock interview.



## **Researcher's Role**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “the qualitative researcher’s role as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ is one of the most important aspects of a study’s trustworthiness” (p. 46). From the insider/outsider perspective, the researcher brings to the research “the most sensitive, vulnerable, and unpredictable part of a study’s design” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 46). The researcher’s insider/outsider perspective can also introduce bias in the study. The researchers’ biases can stem from their social and cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and assumptions about the research being conducted (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Therefore, it should be noted that the researcher had extensive experience working with equity, access, and other challenges impacting the decision-making processes for distance learning. Prior to data collection for this study, the researcher accepted a district administrator role as an equity partner in an urban inner-city school district in northeast Oklahoma. Before her district administrator role, the researcher was a secondary business education and computer technology teacher in an urban inner-city school district in northeast Kansas. In Kansas, the researcher also held roles as a building leadership team member, a district innovation technology academy lead, and a district equity council member. The researcher holds a bachelor’s degree in business administration in management, a master’s degree in business administration, a license in business education, and was a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at the time of this study.

The researcher had the potential to introduce bias into the study due to her background and experiences. Therefore, the researcher made use of reflexivity in an attempt to avoid interjecting bias into the study. Reflexivity informs the process through

which researchers seek to acknowledge and understand how their own potential biases can impact the research process (Holmes, 2020).

### **Limitations**

Per Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the “limitations of the study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the finding from your research (p. 207). In simpler terms, according to Locke, Spirduso, Silverman, Rossman, and Rallis (as cited in Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019), “Limitations of the study expose the conditions that may weaken the study” (p. 207). Several limitations of this study were identified when Kansas superintendents’ perceptions of the decision-making process of equity and access in relation to distance learning beginning with COVID-19 were captured. The limitations identified in this study are as follows. The researcher could not control which superintendents from Kansas school districts participated, which could limit the diversity in terms of the size and location of the districts that the superintendents represented and could also limit the generalizability of the results. The level of experience and exposure to school decision-making processes may have varied for each superintendent. Each superintendent supervised a different number of staff and students per district, and each district had varying levels of equity and access challenges. For example, not all districts had access to the same level of technology use, and each district experienced different levels of staff turnover, layoffs, and employee attrition. Therefore, not all superintendents had the same level of experience and exposure to their respective district’s decision-making processes.

**Summary**

The qualitative research design methods employed in this study were described in this chapter. The methods included the research design, selection of participants, the setting, sampling procedures, instruments, interview questions, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 contains the descriptive statistics and the results of the qualitative data analysis.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of how the results were developed, how the results were reported, the themes that emerged, and a presentation of the detailed descriptions and themes that convey the multiple perspectives and experiences of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this study was to determine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. To address this purpose, the following were explored: how public-school decisions were made in relation to distance learning beginning with COVID-19; who was involved in the decision-making process; how the needs of all students, parents, and staff were equitably addressed; how access to distance learning was ensured; and what if anything would be done differently given what educational leaders learned. This chapter contains the descriptive statistics for the Kansas superintendents interviewed for this research, followed by the three key findings and a summary of the findings.

#### **Descriptive Statistics**

The researcher preferred Kansas superintendents to be the only participants in the study. By the time seven interviews were conducted, saturation had been reached. However, the researcher continued to conduct interviews to try and capture further data that might show any contrasting information than what was already captured. After analyzing the data, the researcher determined that conducting further interviews was unnecessary as the additional data showed further saturation. There was a disproportionately smaller representation of women interviewed. In Kansas, less than

10% of school district superintendents are women. Ten Kansas superintendents joined the study, eight males and two females. Pseudonyms S1 through S10 were used to identify the participants to protect their identity. The districts that these superintendents served represented a diverse population ranging from approximately 170 to 44,000 students enrolled in Grades PreK-12. The districts were located across Kansas, with two in central Kansas, one in eastern Kansas, one in northeast Kansas, one in northwest Kansas, two in south Kansas, and three in southeast Kansas. The territorial setting of the participant districts were distant rural (territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster), fringe rural (territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster), fringe town (territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area), large city (territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more), large suburb (territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more), remote rural (territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster), or small suburb (territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000) (National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2022). One participant served in each of the following territories: distant rural, fringe rural, fringe town, fringe town/fringe rural, large city, large suburb, remote rural, and small suburb/distant rural. Two participants were from small suburb territories.

The participants had experience as superintendents of PreK-12 public school districts during the spring of 2020 at the start of COVID-19 and thru the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. One participant interviewed was from a district whose population of students was approximately 50% Minority, 50% free and reduced lunch, and 20% special education. Another participant interviewed was from a district whose population of students was approximately 70% Minority, 70% free and reduced lunch, and 16% special education. Eight participants interviewed were from districts with approximately 75% White students who are 40% free and reduced lunch, and 16% special education. Table 2 displays more detailed demographic information for the participants.

**Table 2***Participant and District Demographics (2020-2021)*

Participant	Region	Locale <sup>a</sup>	% Minority	% Low SES	% SPED
S1	NE	Fringe Town	24	37	14
S2	S	Small Suburb/ Distant Rural	24	47	17
S3	C	Fringe Rural	45	54	20
S4	SE	Fringe Town/ Fringe Rural	21	53	18
S5	C	Small Suburb	20	49	15
S6	NW	Distant Rural	24	21	15
S7	E	Remote Rural	21	38	16
S8	SE	Large Suburb	22	33	15
S9	S	Small Suburb	23	40	18
S10	SE	Large City	69	71	16

*Note.* Low SES = free and reduced lunch; SPED = special education; C = central;

E = east; NE = northeast; NW = northwest; S = south; SE = southeast.

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from *Edge Open Data*. by National Center for Education Statistics, 2022

(<https://data-nces.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/nces::locale-current-1/about>).

## The Findings

This section includes a description of the themes that resulted from the qualitative analysis of the responses to each interview question. Three major findings were identified by examining data related to superintendent decision-making processes that impacted student and staff equity and access in relation to distance learning at the start of COVID-

19: factors that influenced the decision-making process, factors that influenced decision-making as it relates to equity and access to distance learning, and factors that impeded superintendent's development of appropriate crisis plans.

The superintendents were interviewed from their respective school district offices via Zoom. The interview questions were related to the following research question: What are Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19? The superintendents were asked six semi-structured interview questions related to the research question. Additionally, follow-up questions were asked to add to or clarify participant responses. The interviews ranged in length from 16.5 to 35 minutes. Direct quotations are included for emphasis and to demonstrate superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. The data from the findings are directly aligned with each of the six interview questions.

***Finding 1: Factors that Influenced the Decision-Making Process***

According to Nitta (2014), decision-making involves an approach and reasoning process through which individuals arrive at a decision. The data analysis from both IQ1 and IQ2 aided in the development of finding one. The first interview question posed to the superintendents was asked to determine how superintendents assessed decision-making in their district and how that process may have changed over time. The second interview question posed to superintendents was asked to determine what factors helped to influence what stakeholders were involved in the decision-making process at each point in time. For both questions, the superintendents had to think back to their decision-making experience at the start of COVID-19 during the spring of 2020 through the fall of



2021 and respond to what factors helped to influence their decision-making process over time.

IQ1 was categorized into two parts as data emerged and for easier analysis. The first part was tell me about how decisions were made in your district regarding distance learning. The second part was if and how the decision-making process changed due to COVID-19 from spring 2020 through fall 2021. Two subthemes resonated from participant responses to the first part of IQ1. The first subtheme was initial decision-making was not under the superintendent's control, and the second subtheme was the superintendent's use of other sources outside of the use of sources and guidelines imposed by KSDE. One subtheme resonated from the second part of IQ1: frequent process changes made over time.

One subtheme resonated from IQ2: stakeholder involvement. However, two additional sub-subthemes emerged from the stakeholder involvement sub-theme. The first sub-subtheme was stakeholders involved at the district level and the second sub-subtheme was stakeholders involved at the building level.

**Initial Decision-Making Was Not Under the Superintendent's Control.** When addressing the first half of IQ1—how decisions were made, the first resounding subtheme that emerged was that initial choices for how decisions were made were not under the superintendent's control. The superintendents explained that at the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, their decision-making processes were based principally on KSDE's COVID-19 guidelines, which served as a template for how district administrators were to address the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdowns within their respective schools. Superintendents reported that district business as usual was brought to an abrupt halt

upon the shutdown. Superintendents said KSDE's pandemic guidelines gave little opportunity for superintendents to have any say and governance on how to conduct everyday school district business. Nine out of 10 superintendents said there was a lack of communication from KSDE and felt that KSDE considered very little for what types of best practices superintendents should employ during the shutdown and throughout the 2020-2021 pandemic school year. The nine superintendents expressed that it was difficult to try and adhere to KSDE's guidelines because they were often time-consuming and overwhelming. For example, S10 expressed that initial decision-making was not under their control because KSDE gave them a document that took them an insurmountable amount of time "to read and to follow explicitly. So, we did not get to just make up our own decisions."

S2 expressed that there was substantial guidance from the state regarding how they wanted schools to address the pandemic. However, S2 expressed that there was no conversation addressing best practices for conducting or meeting the unique needs of school distance learning. S2 said,

From a distance learning standpoint, there was a lot of guidance from the state. I don't remember there being a ton of conversations with them [the state]. I don't remember having any kind of book studies or any kind of focal conversations around best practices.

S8 said they were a part of the Kansas statewide group that helped to develop the COVID-19 transitional and guidance plans for school district shutdowns across the state. S8 expressed that the State COVID-19 transitional guidelines were unclear and confusing to school district administrators. S8 expressed that, in hindsight, the statewide group

should have better communicated how the plans were constructed and explained why certain recommendations were made. S8 said,

I was co-leading the entire state [of Kansas] for the playbook of how we transitioned. In hindsight, I wish we would've done a better job in our district as well as statewide, explaining why we made the recommendations we made because they led to a lot of confusion and because people questioned them or went on their own and modified them (the statewide COVID-19 transitional and guidance plans). So, in hindsight, we probably should have done a better job of explaining why we'd made those decisions or recommendations versus just assuming people would accept them.

However, one superintendent, S4, expressed that KSDE's mandated guidelines were seen as an added benefit because the district did not have to develop its own processes for responding to district needs. S4 said that many choices were taken away from superintendents through KSDE's mandates but that in a crisis, it was an added benefit because all superintendents had to do was react to challenges based on the KSDE requirements that were placed on districts. S4 said,

In the state of Kansas, we were dealing with federal and state laws—things that were directed to us. So, in many ways, choices were taken away from us. In a crisis, sometimes that was a great thing that we didn't make those choices. We just had to react and make that second layer of decision based on some of those [federal and State] requirements that were put on to us.

**Superintendents' Use of Other Sources.** At the beginning of the pandemic shutdown, to help their districts meet KSDE guidelines, the superintendents used other

sources of information or means other than state policies to help guide and support any decisions they made to address issues and concerns that impacted their districts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, each superintendent used similarly aligned shared leadership models, including guidance from teams constructed at the district and building levels. However, some superintendents also incorporated entirely different sources for guidance. S2 and the district team purchased a reference book on distance learning to use as a guide for distance learning best practices. S2 said, “I remember a reference book that we purchased on distance learning sometime in that spring or fall of 2020 with some guidance on best practices for distance learning.” S4 said that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the district was already working on a long-term transitional plan involving the digital and experience age they had planned to implement within three years. However, due to the unexpected onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, S4 said they decided to accelerate and use some of the learning opportunities already written in their three-year plan because the pandemic accelerated the need for some of their ideas. S4 said,

So, we developed a long-range transition plan that we originally thought would take us about three years to implement. When we hit the middle of March 2020, that three-year transition plan was reduced down to about two months. So, with the decision-making process, we had a number of things already in place in terms of our long-range plan. I think that the pandemic definitely accelerated some of the thoughts that we had in terms of digital learning opportunities for our students.

S8 said that their district used both the state plan and federal guidance because of their involvement with the Kansas Statewide COVID-19 transitional guidance plan. S10 also said their district incorporated and deployed plans with guidance from the federal

government because they felt the government set the tone for the things KSDE controlled. S10 said,

Well, the federal government first came out with guidance on how we were supposed to behave and what we were supposed to do, whether it was for transportation, food, distributions, so on and so forth. So, they set the tone for the things that they (federal government) have control over, and all of that information then filtered to the state.

**Frequent Process Changes Made Over Time.** When addressing the second part of IQ1, if and how the decision-making process changed due to COVID-19 from spring 2020 through fall 202, one subtheme emerged—frequent process changes made over time. Responses were largely similar from superintendents who mostly represented heavily White student-populated districts in fringe, remote rural, and small suburb geographic locales. Most superintendent changes to decision-making processes slowly began to emerge in the fall of 2020. S2 expressed that the district’s decision-making processes ultimately changed from largely KSDE guidance to fully utilizing local shared leadership decision-making processes. S2 stated, “I think it probably progressed from that 90% state to zero percent state and a 100% local [decision-making].” S3 and S10 said their districts did not have one particular decision-making option or idea; however, their efforts were to move through several different models and determine the best practice to address and keep their students learning. Specifically, S3 stated,

We did move through several different models. There wasn’t one option or an idea. The administration would say, okay, what about this? And then we again, would go back through that process of, okay, here’s the pros and cons—let’s give

this a try. At one point in time, we had one of our teachers say, “Well, this is only plan 17 for the year.” Part of that was we truly wanted to be responsive to however the process went, and so there was a little bit of application change going on. But ultimately, the decision made was about students and keeping our kids in learning.

S4 was the only participant who said there were few decision-making process changes during spring 2020 through fall 2021 because, after the initial spring 2020 shutdown, the majority of their student population chose to do in-person learning. S5 said its district’s offer for individual student choice learning options guided its decision-making processes after the initial shutdown. S5 said that early on, towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of students in the district expressed that they wanted school to be in-person. So, as time progressed, S5’s district team ultimately decided not to offer multiple options, move students to in-person classes, and utilize remote learning only for students with medical exemptions. Similar to S5, S7 also said the district’s decision-making changed over time and that their processes were guided primarily by the district’s desire to do student in-person learning. S7 said that by August 2020, any student who wanted to participate in remote learning was referred to Green Bush Virtual Academy; otherwise, students were learning in-person. S9 explained that his district’s decision-making processes began changing by the fall of 2021 as they had begun adapting processes that were focused on in-person learning for all students but particularly focused on high school seniors because they were the district’s largest student group making the least amount of effort to complete and turn in class work. S9 stated,

By the fall of 2021, those decision-making processes changed over time as we adapted how we were going to do it. We were mostly in-school. However, we set up remote instruction and, in the beginning, we basically offered [remote learning] to people that were maybe fearful of coming to school. Right at the end, we chose to bring in high school kids because they just weren't getting things done.

**Stakeholder Involvement.** Stakeholder input provides vital collaborative and shared perspectives in decision-making processes that involve school safety, structure, and the development of effective and efficient crisis plans. IQ2—who was involved in the decision-making process at each point in time, was asked to determine what factors helped to influence stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. The data analysis showed superintendents used a variety of different types of stakeholders—some similar and some entirely different in levels and areas of their decision-making processes as it related to addressing districts' distance learning needs and challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two sub-subthemes resonated from the analysis of the responses to IQ2: stakeholders involved at the district level and stakeholders involved at the building level. Superintendents selected stakeholders at both levels, district and building, based on their focused area of expertise that provided guidance in particular organizational situations or who most closely related to any particular student or staff needs identified.

***Stakeholders Involved at the District Level.*** The data analysis of the superintendents' responses showed a reoccurring theme that there were common and unique stakeholders involved in the decision-making processes at the district level.

Stakeholders commonly identified by superintendents to be a part of the district-level decision-making process were leaders from the board of education, leaders from across Kansas, such as KSDE officials, including the commissioner, superintendents from other districts, and officials from state and county health departments. According to the superintendents' responses, these leaders were typically assumed or expected to be a part of district-level teams because they held expertise, knowledge, or leadership authority regarding the COVID-19 guidelines that directly impacted public education.

Additionally, the data analysis showed that superintendents identified stakeholders who were not common across Kansas school districts yet participated in district-level decision-making processes. The data analysis also revealed that location and transportation were the top determining factors influencing the types of unique stakeholders superintendents involved in district-level decision-making. The data analysis showed that eight out of 10 superintendents reported that location or transportation needs made it difficult to meet the needs of students who distance learned and did not have adequate transportation or live within reach of different resources, such as major hospitals, schools, food and meal services, local transportation, and internet service towers. For example, S1, S5, and S7 said their district-level decision-making teams either involved medical personnel, such as a hospital or school nurse or emergency operations staff from either a local nursing home or emergency operations group, to help address COVID-19 medical guidelines and needs because either the district was out of reach, or the students lived out of reach of major hospitals or adequate medical care. For example, S1 said,



We were rural, we were unique, and we were kind of different as far as our approach. Every local hospital and nursing home was represented [on the district-level decision-making team] to meet COVID-related health and safety concerns for distance learners. If someone called and said, “I live 10 miles away, and I don’t have a car,” we all just kind of became couriers and would meet people where they were.

S2 and S6 said students who distance learned faced internet or Wi-Fi challenges because they were out of reach of internet service towers or did not have hotspots. Therefore, S2’s district-level decision-making team involved leaders from local fiber optics companies, and S6’s district-level decision-making team involved stakeholders from an internet company and an educational virtual academy. S2 said that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district was already working with a fiber optics company on a plan to install fiber optics throughout the community. However, according to S2, the pandemic accelerated the fiber optic plan. S2 said,

Before COVID-19, we started a project with a vendor that was installing fiber throughout the community. With COVID hitting all of a sudden, that project was ramped up exponentially, and our number one focus was to monitor those that didn’t have internet [while distance learning]. The district-level team kept communication with that vendor.

S6 stated that the district increased its schools’ Wi-Fi range and partnered with Sprint and Green Bush Virtual Academy in an attempt to help connect students who had challenges connecting to the internet or lacked the resources to do so. S6 said,

Given the fact that we were a small school district and small community with internet challenges, we did have some very specific situations where people would need to drive over to the parking lot of the school and gain access [to the Wi-Fi] while sitting in the parking lot. To get some kind of assistance, we partnered with Sprint, and they gave us hotspots. When it came to decision-making, we brainstormed and took guidance from Green Bush Virtual Academy. According to the data analysis, S4, S8, and S10 involved unique stakeholders in district level decision-making, such as the district's transportation and food service director, the school head cook and clerk to manage input for meal and food service challenges that involved preparing and distributing meals to students who did not live within reach of schools. S4 said,

Decision-makers, it's an interesting label. I prefer the label, problem solvers. If it was a decision or just problem-solving for coming up with solutions for how we can get food to our kids, we involved our transportation director, the director of food services, our head cook, and clerk who oversees the food service process. Because man, I mean, we all were facing an enormous challenge, and everyone was called on to help solve problems. Not just brainstorm the ideas but help with the legwork.

S8 reported that the district-level team involved the transportation director and the food service director to thought-partner in the decision-making process for addressing food and other resource needs. Specifically, S8 said,

All those stakeholders, our transportation department, and our food service director were involved in those discussions. So, we were fortunate enough that we

were able to transition quickly to deliver food and hot spots to homes or areas in our district that lacked transportation. We also prioritized the homeless populations that maybe were not within reach or outside of a typical internet network area.

S3, S4, S9, and S10 expressed that the district-level team indirectly involved parents and community members in decision-making processes as a way to help address any student, family, or community needs impacted by distance learning or challenges caused by the pandemic, whether food, technology, transportation, location, or other resource need. S3 expressly stated,

Our [district level] decision-making process is a shared leadership style. We had involvement from everyone we could get it from. And so, we tried to have that parent and community component to help try and understand what everyone needed from us as a district and to be supportive of our school and community's needs.

***Stakeholders Involved at the Building Level.*** The analysis of superintendent responses for what types of stakeholders were involved in district-level decision-making largely showed few differences in the analysis of superintendent responses for what types of stakeholders were involved in building-level decision-making. The data analysis showed that six out of 10 superintendents were not involved in school building-level decision-making as they only required reports from the school's principal regarding any COVID-19 distance learning needs. Four superintendents, S4, S5, S9, and S10, reported they were involved in building level decision-making. S4, S5, S9, and S10 reported that the building-level decision-making team and processes were designed by the respective

school's principal and that these teams or processes also involved other stakeholders who were involved in or served on the district-level team. The district technology director, transportation director, food service director, state and county health officials, and parents were all identified in the responses of the four superintendents as common stakeholders that were involved in building-level decision-making for the same reasons; they were involved in district level decision-making—for their expertise, knowledge, or leadership authority regarding the COVID-19 guidelines that directly impacted public education.

The data analysis of S4, S5, S9, and S10 responses also showed that in addition to the commonly identified stakeholders just mentioned, five other stakeholders were unique to the building level decision-making team. Unlike the top determining factors identified earlier in district decision-making, the data analysis did not show any recurrent top determining factors influencing the five types of unique stakeholders involved in building level decision-making. Four of the unique stakeholders: custodial personnel, NEA representatives, students, and technology teachers, were only involved in building level decision-making according to the responses from the four superintendents. For example, S4 reported they called those involved in decision-making problem solvers because they would help solve a problem and provide a service to the building staff and students. S4 said,

Technology teachers immediately started to provide unsolicited leadership in terms of support and help for other teachers (across the district) in the process of digitally organizing and providing direct instruction through Canvas (A web-based learning management system. Initially, we called them Boots on the Ground but have since changed that name. They are no longer called Boots on the

Ground. We've changed the name to Instructional Technology Support Team.

They were problem-solving and providing a service to accomplishing a mission in supporting their colleagues.

S10 expressed that building leaders involved students and teachers in decision-making processes in helping identify and implement best practices that impacted student in-person and distance teaching and learning. Specifically, S10 stated,

I'm always asking the kids and the teachers, "Where do we want to go from here?" And it's interesting that teachers and students do not want to exclusively use technology as the only vehicle for instruction. They want it to be used as a tool because they did find value in using technology. They don't want to just go back to paper and pencil. But they do want the opportunity to have a blended kind of approach to learning.

Also, revealed in the responses from S10, the fifth unique stakeholder, church officials, was identified to have been involved in both district-and building-level decision-making. Per S10's responses, church officials helped to provide spaces in churches that served as a support for providing a place of mental rest and fellowship that parents and students identified as a need while students distanced learned during the pandemic. S10 said, "We partnered with churches to be able to open up facilities where kids in our community that wanted to have interactions with one another could do so. Their parents needed that for that mental health piece."

While the results of the data analysis of the responses showed that all the superintendents diligently tried diversifying stakeholder involvement with district and building level decision-making, there were mental health stakeholders who were

noticeably left out. The voice of mental health experts was not mentioned in any interview to have been a part of either the district or building level decision-making team or involved in the decision-making process. These missing mental health stakeholders—school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and special education paraeducators—were identified through the data analysis of S2, S7, S8, S9, and S10 as providing support and services to students but not having been involved in decision-making at any level.

***Finding 2: Factors that Influenced Decision-Making in Relation to Equity and Access to Distance Learning***

A second major finding that emerged from the data analysis was factors that influenced superintendents' decision-making in relation to equity and access to distance learning. The focus of equity and access as it relates to distance learning beginning with the start of COVID-19 was to explore the perceptions of superintendents' decision-making processes, whether superintendent decision-making equitably addressed the needs of all students, parents, and staff, and if and how access to distance learning was ensured in those processes. In education, equity and access distinctly refer to two different philosophies. Equity correlates to the principle of fairness and involves various educational models. Access can be explained as the elimination of any existing or potential barriers inhibiting one's equitable or fair participation in something. For IQ3 and IQ4, the superintendents were asked to think back to their decision-making experience at the start of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021 and respond to how their decisions were made equitably and how the decisions ensured access. The data analysis largely showed that the superintendents referred to equity and access synonymously, and their responses to IQ3 and IQ4 were nearly the same. Two

findings emerged from the superintendents' responses: using surveys helped to identify needs and decision-making addressed factors impacting student equity and access to distance learning.

**Surveys Helped to Identify Needs and Guide Decisions.** The data analysis showed that the superintendents were provided little time and were largely ill-prepared to shutdown schools due to the pandemic. However, the data showed that to ensure students were provided the most equitable experience and accessible learning opportunities possible and to identify and prioritize needs, seven out of 10 superintendents designed and sought input through surveys from district stakeholders—teachers, parents, education boards, and community members. The data analysis underscored that surveys proved to be the most effective method for helping the seven superintendents identify needs and guide decisions in ensuring equity and access existed during distance learning. S1, S2, S3, S5, S7, S9, and S10 acknowledged that they conducted pre-surveys with parents and their communities, which proved effective in helping to identify needs and guide decisions in relation to equity and access to distance learning.

S3 said that at the start of the pandemic, the district had a large number of out-of-district transfers. So, S3's initial challenge was to survey parents and the surrounding community to determine top needs. S3 said,

We have a large quantity of our students come from out-of-district transfers, and we do have a very high poverty rate. One of the initial things that occurred was a survey. In order to try to create that equitability, that [surveys] was one of our main focuses. We sent out a survey to teachers, parents, and the community. We had involvement from everyone we could get it from. We tried to be supportive of

our school and community and to understand what everyone needed from us as a district. After collecting survey data, we talked to the board and district administrators.

S10 stated that the district administered surveys to students and families but, in particular, conducted an excessively large number of surveys with teaching staff. S10 said that the surveys likely stretched teachers to the limit. However, S10 reported the district's aim was to try and obtain as much input from teachers to help the district identify what needs teachers had that would help them feel safe and supported, as well as help to meet student and parent needs whether in the classroom or at home. S10 said,

We had to follow the rules that they set forth for us, whether we wanted to or not. So yes, we have had input from many, many people. We probably put out 50,000 surveys, and teachers were probably tired of filling them out, but we were trying to get input from teachers about masks and what they needed to make them feel safe. So, there were tons of surveys that went out to teachers, so many different times, and families too.

For three other superintendents, S4, S6, and S8, the data analysis showed that due to the small numbers of students and families in the district and community, their districts took different and less designed approaches to identify equity and access distance learning needs. Superintendent responses showed that less-designed approaches proved effective only for S4. S4 said that small numbers allowed the district to divide students and families between teachers, making it easier for students and families to communicate any distance learning needs directly and continuously. Through this communication, S4



said teachers could identify and meet equity and access distance learning challenges that may have emerged. Specifically, S4 said,

They don't want to talk to the superintendent. The most impactful and effective communication happens between that individual teacher and his or her students and their parents. So, a lot of that solicitation of information in making sure that we were in constant contact with every student was done by those individual teachers. We divided up the responsibility [between teachers] of staying in touch with those particular students and their families to make sure that all their equity and access needs were being met, and then they would communicate to us.

The data analysis showed that less-designed approaches for helping to identify needs and guide decisions proved ineffective for S6 and S8. It seems that S6's decision-making team overlooked addressing any equity and access challenges that may have emerged in distance learning. While S6 said the district constructed a COVID-19 resource and contact list which students and parents could access on the district website, this method did not prove effective in helping to guide decisions that could address or identify any equity and access needs students, staff, and parents may have experienced at that time. Essentially, S6 expressed that it was difficult to meet any distance learning needs and that the decision-making team only focused on ensuring equity and access needs were met when teaching and learning were in-person. S6 said,

We attempted to make sure that they were having clear and consistent contact with staff that they were working directly with someone weekly, regularly, and effectively, and if it wasn't effective, then we were bringing them in. For us, when it came to being in-person, we could ensure that they [students] were getting the

access and equity part of education that they needed. That was our way to ensure it [equity and access] was being provided. I know it's not impossible, but it really does make a difference if you are very descriptive with your community on how all of this is working and why you're making those decisions and why you may not necessarily be taking one action over another. At the same time, I think as superintendents, one of the things that we have learned specifically is that we cannot, especially in times like these, that there are no golden calves. So those things that you hold true might be true one month, and then the next, maybe you've found the reason why you shouldn't do that anymore. It is a juggling act, and it's not easy by any means.

Similar to S6, S8 said the district did not directly communicate or identify needs through staff, students, and families but instead used any COVID-19 related data received from county and state of Kansas officials to determine district needs. S8 said they were a member of the Kansas statewide transitional team that gave COVID-19 related guidance statewide. S8 said that they helped to create the playbook for how districts would transition from in-person to distance learning and that they had some bias in how the district team addressed guidance for its district because the district BOE gave S8 explicit autonomy over decisions that were made. S8 said the district could have communicated with community members more effectively. The district's method of only using county and state data may not have been effective in identifying and meeting the needs of equity and access challenges that may have emerged in distance learning. S8 said,

We [the district decision-making team] would meet about every other week and review any data in front of us regarding COVID within the community, the

county, and within the state. And then from there, discuss where to go forward.

The board of education actually provided me the ability to change any format. I had complete autonomy to make decisions. Once again, bias information. I was in the room when the decisions were made, to give that guidance. In hindsight, I wish we would've done a better job in our district as well as statewide explaining why we made the recommendations we made.

**Factors That Impact Student Equity and Access in Distance Learning.** When addressing factors that involve students, the data analyzed showed that superintendents' decision-making largely addressed factors involving attendance, engagement, cultural behaviors, poverty, special and social-emotional needs, technology, and Wi-Fi and internet. The data showed that each factor was a challenge, oftentimes one impacting the other. While these factors were areas of concern long before the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents indicated that they became areas of even greater focus during the pandemic and presently continue to be.

***Attendance, Engagement, and Cultural Behaviors.*** The data analysis showed that all superintendents emphasized student attendance, engagement, and cultural behaviors were extreme challenges to address. The superintendents reported that student attendance was poor, engagement was nearly impossible, and some cultural behaviors advertently and inadvertently affected attendance and engagement. For example, S1 talked about attendance and engagement. S1 acknowledged that his district did not have great attendance and that when students moved to online learning, they might technically have been logged into their classes. However, mentally students were either distracted or not present entirely. S1 also acknowledged that for some students, it was not about

distraction or lack of engagement—it was about students not having enough bandwidth at home to either run their Wi-Fi properly or log in entirely simply because there may have been too many people logged on at one time. Superintendents reported that many homes had multiple students who distance learned and adults who may have worked from home, logged into the hotspots or home internet that their bandwidth could not handle.

Superintendents reported that the lack of bandwidth caused students to be disconnected from classes, which then caused problems for students regularly accessing and attending classes. S2 and S7 discussed cultural behaviors that impacted student attendance and engagement. S2 reported that his district addressed challenges with families who never had internet in their homes prior to the pandemic shutdown, which caused families to feel overwhelmed and, at times, lost for what to do or how to help their students. S2 stated,

How do you help a family that's never had it [internet] and all of a sudden, you've got Chromebooks at the house, you've got internet, you're just overwhelmed with all the structure, and you have to figure out. Family support would probably be the key thing. Just the family piece and learning how to use technology, just all the behaviors that take the culture in your house. How do you set that up? How do you organize that? That's probably one thing that we didn't teach—how to set that structure up.

S7 reported that they had families in his district that did not believe in having internet in their homes; therefore, those families' students did not attend virtual classes. S7 said his district did not want to violate any family's religious beliefs. Hence, district leaders held conversations with the leaders of the families who did not believe in having internet in their homes to discuss other ways to provide distance learning to their students.

S8 said that his district drastically truncated students' normal day schedules because his team realized that the expectation of how much time students spent online and attended classes largely depended on whom the teacher was, not necessarily the length of time listed on class schedules. S8 said some teachers would log on and mark any student logged in as present, tell them to check their Google classroom, and then say, "I'll see you tomorrow," whereas other teachers would hold students until the last possible second. S9 said his district had a tough time figuring out how to get kids to show up. S9 said his district had severe behavioral issues prompting his decision-making team to place tough expectations on parents for what they would have to do with their students to help them show up for their classes while distance learning. However, S9 said that concerns from parents of students' distance learning quickly began emerging. S9 stated,

Most parents were like, I can't get my kid to do anything. I'm bringing them back to school. A hundred percent of parents in that situation wanted their kid at school because that's where they could get the best services.

**Poverty.** The data analyzed showed that about half of superintendents reported that their decision-making directly involved decisions that impacted students living in high poverty. The data showed that superintendents identified large inequities impacting students from high-poverty families living in large cities and rural areas. These superintendents reported that they struggled to help students in high poverty the most because they were the largest student group that lacked access to reliable and stable internet services and bilingual services for students whose first language was not English. S2 reported that their English language learners living in high poverty and those without internet services "were definitely our stakeholder groups that were the most impacted."

S2 said, “We did the best we could to close those gaps. However, not having a bilingual person in the house is huge, and that was not super easy for us.” S2 said that their students received hotspots but that struggles were not always about access to the technology. Sometimes it was about how to communicate with bilingual families to ensure their needs were met. S3, S4, and S7 said that learning from home was not the best decision for students and families living in high poverty. S7 said the decision for students to learn from home was extremely adverse for people in general. S10 reported that while her decision-making team worked to meet the needs of all of their students, the team also explicitly focused on meeting the needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged Black, Hispanic, and other historically marginalized student groups.

S10 stated that they partnered with churches to open up facilities where kids in the community who wanted to interact with one another could do so. Their parents needed that for that mental health piece. For Hispanic families, they used City parks and recreation centers where their kids could go and have the same experience. They had tutoring services for kids at the Urban League. For equity purposes, they had lots of support from the community.

***Special Needs and Social-Emotional Needs.*** The data analysis showed that eight superintendents reported that their decision-making or lack of decision-making largely failed to address students with special needs and students experiencing social-emotional problems. Due to the constant changes and challenges experienced throughout the pandemic, these students were inadvertently overlooked. Only 2 out of 10 superintendents reported that they addressed challenges with students who had special needs or were in special education. S7 and S10 reported that they had students with very

special health and education needs that they wanted to address with sensitivity. Both S7 and S10 stated that they took these students' situations into account, made accommodations for them, and eventually brought them on campus because they could not work remotely or their parents could not help them work remotely.

Social-emotional needs were another area largely overlooked by the superintendents. Like students with special needs, only 2 out of 10 superintendents addressed the social-emotional needs of students and staff. Only S3 and S10 reported that they prioritized meeting the social-emotional needs of their school's students. Both superintendents indicated that they were strategic in selecting the appropriate teachers to address groups of students identified as some of their biggest struggling learners. S3 said their team moved through multiple models to find what worked best for their students. S3 stated that they worked hard to ensure that all students had access to a select group of teachers that could address students' mental health by setting up specific schedules and class periods. S3 said her team was very responsive to teachers, staff, and parents about any concerns or challenges.

S10 worked to meet the social-emotional needs of students by employing certified teachers in churches and recreational centers to support students who utilized those spaces to distance learn and needed to interact with adults. S10 also said that their district had children who were mentally struggling at home with their parents. So, according to S10, their team also established a place where kids could go and talk to a certified counselor, face to face or on the phone, to get some help and talk to somebody if needed.

***1:1 Technology.*** The data analyzed revealed that the superintendents acknowledged great challenges that emerged when working to find ways that ensured

equity and access existed for all students as it relates to students having access to and possessing their own laptop devices. In particular, the majority of superintendents cited that they worked diligently to provide all students with 1:1 technology (each student possessing their own laptop and Wi-Fi hotspots) so they could distance learn. Some superintendents said that in spring 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, they did not have enough laptops to facilitate 1:1 distance learning. To combat laptop challenges, some districts required students to share with a sibling that may have previously been assigned a school laptop. Superintendents found this shared technique added to the students' already layered problematic technology issues. For example, S4 reported that his district did not have class when they shut down because one of their major challenges was acquiring the tools students needed to distance learn. S4 stated,

We were 1:1 with the iPads at the high school level. However, during the spring of 2020, the predominance of our middle [school] and grammar [school] experiences were paper packets and then invites to synchronously log in to some different videos.

S6 stated that they also did not have enough devices to implement 1:1 with students. So, according to S6,

What we asked parents to do, if they already had a device at home that their child was able to use, to please let us know so that we could take a spare device and give it to one of the students who did not already have access to a device in their home.

S7 reported that his district did not have 1:1 at their elementary level. So, they did paper packets for their elementary students during distance learning. S10 stated,



Some parents could buy those materials [laptops] that their kids needed; the ones who could not, we made sure that we were able to get it to those kids whether we delivered them to their homes or they drove to pick it up.

***Wi-Fi and The internet.*** The data analyzed showed that superintendents not only experienced laptop device shortages but additionally experienced shortages in the availability of Wi-Fi hotspots. Due to the hotspot shortages, some superintendents either opted to ensure their buildings were internet live, that their buildings were open, or not distance learn entirely. S5 reported that if a parent or student had difficulty logging into class, they ensured the buildings were still internet live. S5 stated that if a student did not have internet access at home, they could come into the building or be around the school to access the Wi-Fi. S5 also expressed that his district did its best; however, technology use was such a great challenge for teachers, students, and parents that his district eventually opted to only offer the remote learning option to students and staff if they were out sick or had a medical exemption. S5 also acknowledged a learning curve with parents and students, as many lacked the knowledge to use Wi-Fi. S5 stated,

We were using the Google Hangouts for remote learning. A teacher would be teaching a class as well as having a Google hangout taking place. If a parent or a student was having difficulty getting on to the [class] session, we would take care of that through the office so the teacher could go ahead and continue. The secretary or the administrator in the building would then try to handle some of those technical issues.

S6 stated that their student Wi-Fi challenges were so extreme that their district eventually partnered with the local public library because it had some mobile hotspot

devices available. S6 stated that to learn how to use different types of technology, his district started holding daily staff meetings using technology. S6 said that their technology teachers acted as an ongoing resource for staff and eventually reduced them to weekly. S7 stated, “There was a lot of hand-holding.” Moreover, their district was amazed to learn which people did not know how to log on to the Wi-Fi or use Zoom. S10 stated that their district had a good trial plan for addressing their Wi-Fi and technology-use challenges. S10 said their decision-making team moved through different technology training for teachers. However, S10 was very candid about not knowing whether she was able to meet the needs of the teaching staff. S10 stated,

I don’t know if it met the needs of everybody. I don’t know if we really had the right supports for people who didn’t really know how to use the technology. I always worried about the teacher that I had in my mind that couldn’t even turn the computer on, let alone to try to get screens and teach from it and all that.

***Finding 3: Factors that Impeded Development of Appropriate Crisis Plans***

Finding three correlates to both interview questions IQ5—given what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently regarding distance learning and IQ6—is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding the decision-making process related to distance learning. Two factors emerged from the analysis of IQ5 and IQ6. When answering IQ5, all superintendent responses showed that they resoundingly wished for more time and information to crisis plan to meet district pandemic distance learning needs. When answering IQ6, the superintendents reiterated responses given in IQ5.

Finding three data analysis showed that all superintendents largely perceived that they did not have enough time or information to crisis plan. The superintendents perceived that lack of time and information impeded school districts' ability to develop appropriate crisis plans to help address and meet distance learning challenges that would properly prepare staff, students, and families to distance learn at home during the COVID-19 shutdown. Superintendents said that, in hindsight, had additional time been given by KSDE to prepare a crisis plan, they would have addressed meeting equity and access challenges and problems that emerged in distance learning differently. For example, in hindsight, S1 said that they "guessed" when addressing distance learning needs because there was "no universal platform... the science was kind of spotted at best" and because "there was little knowledge and no crisis plan model given to districts regarding how to address distance learning during a crisis." Additionally, S1 shared,

We were all just trying to figure out a whole new way of schooling, and we had roughly three days to a week. Maybe you have to go through it to learn. I guess the next time we will all know more. I'm hoping this [research] will build the knowledge gap. Next time we have something like this, we will be a bit wiser because we can see what we want.

S2 said, due to lack of time, "we didn't do a good job of defining the problem, finding a structure for it, and information to guide it." S4 said additional time and information would have allowed the district to "set up a plan" that would allow people to better "understand or know [how] the chain of authority [works]." S4 said that sometimes, in a crisis, those in authority may make fast decisions that change often,

which individuals might not understand, but that “people are gonna have to move forward with it (the decisions that were made).”

S5, S6, S7, and S8 each expressed that additional time and information would have allowed districts to have done a better job of meeting with local school communities to identify needs and to hold discussions to explain why some decisions were made in districts. S9 said more time and data would have allowed the district team time to “establish a more concrete schedule because it just felt like kids sort of did what kids do and...they just weren’t getting up.” S10 said that in reflection, as time progressed during the pandemic shutdown, the district became increasingly more aware that people needed more time to prepare. Unfortunately, due to KSDE directives, the district could not provide more time. S10 also expressed that many equity and access challenges emerged in distance learning and that there was no suitable plan to address those challenges; therefore, the district could not meet the needs of people, particularly those who struggled the most.

S3 emphasized the need to use historical pandemic data to help prepare for the next distance learning crisis. Specifically, S3 explained that,

Teachers were not prepared—people weren’t prepared. They were given different directions and told, ‘just make it through this.’ You can go all the way back to the Spanish Flu Epidemic—I mean, there’s a number of times where public education has been impacted by a virus. And it is not going to be the last time that we are impacted by a virus or a natural disaster. And so, using historical information for creating plans for distance learning crisis-type situations needs to be part of our preparations and our preparedness planning.

While all superintendents discussed challenges for why they could not meet district equity and access distance learning needs due to lack of time and information to crisis plan, it should be noted that S3 was the only participant to have mentioned previous pandemics as examples from which decision-makers could learn.

### **Summary**

A summary of the findings from the participating superintendents indicated that initial decision-making was not under the superintendent's control. Superintendents largely used KSDE and other sources as guides to help meet KSDE's mandated guidelines. Superintendents moved through constant decision-making process changes over time. Various stakeholder groups involved at the district and building levels helped to share in superintendents' decision-making. Factors that influenced decision-making in relation to equity and access in distance learning were largely identified as surveys, attendance, engagement, cultural behaviors, poverty, special needs, social emotional needs, 1:1 technology, and Wi-Fi and internet. Lastly, the findings showed that there were factors that impeded the superintendent's ability to develop appropriate crisis plans that could address equity and access challenges that emerged in distance learning during the pandemic. Chapter 5 contains a study summary, findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Interpretation and Recommendations**

This qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was conducted to examine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. Chapter 5 is comprised of three principal sections. The first section involves the study summary, which includes an overview of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, a review of the methodology, and major findings. The second section entails the findings of the study related to the literature. The last section, the conclusions, comprises the implications for action, recommendations for future research, and the concluding remarks.

#### **Study Summary**

In times of crisis, the job of a school superintendent is to swiftly respond and employ decisions that are well thought out and considered to be in the best interest of all stakeholders—students, staff, parents, and community supporters. As shown throughout this study, researchers have only begun to investigate whether well-planned decision-making processes were deployed when assessing whether equity and access in relation to distance learning beginning with COVID-19 existed in public schools. The literature speaks of the historical perspectives of business leaders' and educational leaders' decision-making during crises in relation to equity and access to distance learning, identifying and analyzing their successes and failures and emergent opportunities to do crisis distance learning better. For this study, the researcher analyzed the results of 10 Kansas superintendents' descriptions of decision-making they employed to meet the

equity and access needs of stakeholders during distance learning at the start of COVID-19. The following is an overview of the problem, the purpose statement and research questions, a review of the methodology, and the major findings, which inform the researcher's conclusions and possible opportunities for further research.

### ***Overview of the Problem***

Many PK-12 school administrators and their boards spent considerable consultation time with federal and state executives regarding the unintended and unprecedented disruptions caused by the national emergency COVID-19 spring 2020 school shutdown (Kaden, 2020; Hanna, 2020). By March 17, 2020, the governor of Kansas required all superintendents of PK-12 schools to shut down and make plans for how students and teachers would immediately begin to distance learn (Hanna, 2020). The governor's shutdown gave district administrators little time to prepare for how their students and staff would transition from traditional to widespread distance learning, which created several challenges and caused a paradigm shift in ways yet to be determined. The lack of preparation also pushed superintendents to deploy ill-prepared district-wide distance learning plans and thrust staff, students, and their parents into learning how to self-navigate throughout the distance learning shutdown (Kaden, 2020), which caused inequitable and inaccessible experiences across public school systems. School districts need to know that their decision-making processes unavoidably impact students' and staff's equity and access to distance learning. Additionally, school districts need to know what problems exist in distance learning, identify how their decisions can impact equity and access, and develop their own uniquely constructed decision-making

plans that work to ensure equity and access exists in distance learning during times of crisis.

### ***Purpose Statement and Research Question***

The focus of this study was to explore how decisions were made, who was involved in the decision-making, how the needs of all students, parents, and staff were equitably addressed, how access to distance learning was ensured, and what, if anything, would be done differently—not now—but given what we know now. The purpose of this study was to determine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. It is the researcher's hope that the results of this study could provide district superintendents and other education administrators with a better understanding of the implications the decision-making processes have on the school community and work to make any adjustments necessary to ensure equity and access exist in all future decision-making relative to distance learning in schools.

### ***Review of the Methodology***

A qualitative research design with a phenomenological inquiry was used for this study. A qualitative research design involves the plan, the overall approach regarding the many ways the researcher conducts and bridges the context of the study, development of the purpose, research questions, data collection, methods, and methods of data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A phenomenological inquiry involves both a philosophy and a method, the purpose of which is to explore the meaning of lived experiences and commonalities of individual research participants and reduce their experiences with a phenomenon to a universal essence or common description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).



This process required the researcher in the current study to withhold interjecting personal experiences and give sole attention to participants' experiences. Qualitative interviews are composed of predetermined comprehensive questions that are used to capture perceptions and can be semi-structured to facilitate a more focused exploration of a specific topic using an interview guide (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This process allows the researcher to ask questions that lead to an inductive approach to analyze, open code, and identify and organize themes that emerge from the collected interview data (Southampton Education School, 2012). Upon approval for the study, Kansas superintendents serving in PreK-12 local school districts from spring 2019 thru fall 2021 were sent emails and invited to participate in the study. Ten superintendents agreed to participate in the study. A semi-structured interview that included six questions was conducted with each participant.

The interviews occurred online with Zoom video conference software. Interviews were scheduled during July of 2022. Each interview was recorded and scheduled for 60 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using Temi, an online software system. Each transcript was assigned a number (ex., S1, S2, etc.) to preserve anonymity. Upon completion of each interview, member checking of the transcript was completed by each superintendent. Following the transcription and member checking, the data analysis collected from the interviews was reviewed for common themes.

### ***Major Findings***

Three major findings emerged from this study's research: factors that influenced the decision-making process, factors that influenced decision-making in relation to equity and access to distance learning, and factors that impeded the development of appropriate

crisis plans. When addressing the first finding—factors that influenced the decision-making process, four major factors were found to have emerged from the data. Data from the first finding, factors that influenced the decision-making process, showed superintendents largely said that KSDE’s pandemic mandates and lack of communication were the top two contributing factors that led to initial decision-making not being under their control. Respondents expressed that KSDE’s mandates and lack of communication caused little opportunity for them to have any voice in conducting everyday school affairs and hindered opportunities to help identify types of best practices that could be employed during the shutdown and throughout the 2020-2021 school year. To help meet KSDE’s directives, superintendents reported that they turned to a variety of other sources and resources such as shared leadership models (including education, business, and community stakeholders), reference books, impending transitional plans, and federal government guidance.

Factor three of the first finding, frequent process changes made over time, was identified by superintendents as contributing to decision-making processes ultimately changing from largely KSDE guidance to fully utilizing local shared leadership decision-making processes. The data showed that as superintendents moved from KSDE’s guidance, they had no particular decision-making ideas or plans to continue guiding them through the COVID-19 distance learning. To address this problem, the data showed that most superintendents developed shared-leadership teams at the district and building levels involving a variety of expert stakeholders—factor four. As revealed in the superintendents’ responses, involving stakeholders at the district and building levels

ultimately helped to move through several different decision-making processes and models to identify and address student and staff distance learning needs.

One major factor, surveys, was identified in the second major finding. Surveys were identified as a major factor influencing superintendents' decision-making when searching for ways to meet needs and guide decisions that impacted equity and access in distance learning. Superintendents designed and sought input through surveys from teachers, parents, education boards, and community members. Superintendents said that surveys captured information that helped to identify efforts to provide the most equitable and accessible learning experiences and opportunities, as well as identify and prioritize needs during the shutdown. As distance learning progressed through the pandemic shutdown, superintendents described a variety of extreme challenges that began to emerge in relation to equity and access, such as attendance, engagement, cultural behaviors, poverty, special and social-emotional needs, technology, and Wi-Fi and internet.

When addressing finding three, superintendents said that lack of time and information were major factors that led to districts being largely ill-prepared to shut down schools due to the pandemic. Superintendents described time and information as the factors impeding the district's ability to develop appropriate crisis plans to address pandemic distance learning needs. Superintendents reported that lack of time and information led to inadequate planning and essentially left districts to guess about the distance learning decisions. Superintendents flatly stated in hindsight that they wished to have had more time and information to help develop crisis plans that could adequately prepare staff, students, and families. Superintendents communicated that districts did a

poor job of properly defining distance learning, identifying appropriate structures to address distance learning problems, and appropriately communicating decisions made with families and communities.

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

The literature from this research showed widespread studies had been conducted regarding decision-making in business organizations and education. However, few phenomena were found regarding decision-making related to equity and access to distance learning within the context of COVID-19. This study was designed to explore more of these phenomena. One overarching research question was developed to ensure fidelity to the purpose of this study, “What are Kansas superintendents’ perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19?”

In this section, the results of the current study are compared with the results of the previous research presented in Chapter 2. According to the literature of Schonfeld and Newgass (2003) and Sokol et al. (2021), historically, school leaders have been trained and prepared to implement immediate responses to a public health crisis. The previous research showed that when it comes to responding to public health crises, the decisions and recommendations made by school leaders are of utmost importance, as the outcomes of those decisions can profoundly impact the academic, health, and well-being of all students and staff (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2003; Sokol et al., 2021). The findings of the current study showed that the decisions that were made by Kansas public school superintendents in relation to equity and access to distance learning, beginning with the COVID-19 crisis in spring 2020 throughout fall 2021 did, overwhelmingly impact the

academic, health, and well-being of district stakeholders, which is in agreement with the findings of Schonfeld and Newgass (2003) and Sokol et al. (2021).

The COVID-19 crisis created unprecedented and unique public health situations that required different responses to teaching and student learning that school leaders had not implemented or yet invented (Goudeau et al., 2021). While the current findings showed that superintendents were held accountable for the decisions that were made in their districts during distance learning, the findings also showed that initial decision-making was not under the superintendent's control because, in a top-down fashion, superintendents were required to abide by KSDE guidelines for which only one participant had a part in developing. These current findings support Brocato (1990), who said that top-down management is hierarchical and bureaucratic and leads to complexities such as lack of voice from teachers and other non-administrative staff, leading to anxiety, confusion, and mistrust. The findings showed that these complexities were replicated in the experiences of superintendents. The KSDE guidelines were overwhelming and difficult for superintendents to follow, lacked input from majority superintendents, and hindered opportunities to help identify types of best practices that could be employed to address the everyday affairs of school districts at the start of the shutdown and throughout the 2020-2021 school year. KSDE's top-down approach also led to a trickledown effect of communication problems from KSDE to superintendents, from superintendents to building leaders, and from building leaders to staff, students, parents, and community supporters.

As time progressed throughout distance learning during the pandemic, superintendents ultimately began changing from largely KSDE guidance to fully utilizing

local shared leadership decision-making. A body of previous research emphasized that shared decision-making is not only an essential leadership skill focused on and used by organizational leaders but also a remedy for decentralizing hierarchical decisions and empowering non-educational leaders with greater ownership that can help improve innovation (Aiken, 2021; Barton, 1994; Brocato, 1990; Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007; Kulp, 2011; Torley, 2011). The current study is in alignment with the previous body of research as it showed that districts developed shared decision-making teams at the district and building levels that included experts who could help address and meet a variety of district distance learning needs such as technology, internet, transportation, meal, and health needs. The current study showed that the experts who shared in one or both the district and building level decision-making were teachers, parents, students, transportation, technology, food service, local business leaders, community leaders, and health officials.

The current research showed that superintendents designed and used surveys as the primary tool for helping to capture the challenges mentioned above and for helping to identify needs that could provide the most equitable and accessible learning experiences and opportunities for students, teachers, parents, education boards, and community members. The survey results provided evidence that district stakeholders experienced a variety of extreme distance learning challenges in relation to equity and access, such as attendance, engagement, cultural behaviors, poverty, special education, social-emotional, technology, and Wi-Fi and internet. The use of surveys was beneficial to superintendents and is also in alignment with the previous research. As supported in the previous research from Dorn et al. (2021), surveys were administered to parents during the 2020-2021 school year and helped to identify inequitable concerns that impacted students. Previous

research from KSU (2020) and Keegan (2020) also showed that surveys provided district administrators with opportunities to gain immediate and necessary feedback for the benefit of reflection and appropriate planning to meet district needs for the 2020-2021 school year.

Previous research from The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2007) indicated that when addressing crises, schools could be faced with inadequate information, insufficient time, and insufficient resources. Additionally, a body of previous research indicated that educational leaders play the most vital roles in developing and executing well-organized crisis response plans (Cole, 2016; Green, 2006; Greenbaum et al., 1986). The present research, in alignment with the previous research, also showed that the immediate transition from traditional to widespread distance learning allowed for little time to prepare, caused ripple effects, and created extreme challenges for education leaders, teachers, students, and parents alike (Kaden, 2020). While the current research showed that superintendents were required to use KSDE guidelines to address district distance learning needs, the research also revealed that the guidelines were not entirely effective enough to address district distance learning needs adequately. Superintendents underscored a need to develop effective and efficient crisis response plans; due to lack of time and information, appropriate plans were not developed, and many needs of districts went largely unaddressed.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative study was designed to examine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making process in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19. Specifically, to identify, explore, and collect data

regarding superintendents' processes for how decisions were made, how distance learning environments were made inclusive, how inclusive decisions were made for all students, how things were done differently to provide students more inclusive learning environments, what the benefits of distance learning were, and what the challenges of distance learning were examined. Included in this section are the implications for actions, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

### ***Implications for Action***

Through the results of this study, the researcher desired to provide district superintendents and other education administrators with a better understanding of the impact of their decision-making process of their distance learning in schools and make any adjustments necessary to ensure equity and access exist in all future decision-making. The results of this study revealed that superintendents perceived that the decisions made in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19 were extremely complicated, deeply involved, and largely ineffective at meeting district needs. The findings showed that each district had its own culture, history, and methods of meeting needs; however, these unique characteristics were not considered in KSDE's COVID-19 distance learning guidelines. The findings provided evidence that lack of time, communication, and information and cookie-cutter guidelines from KSDE principally prompted the trickled-down complexities and ineffective methods experienced by superintendents. This study's findings provided evidence that action is needed to address superintendents' crisis distance learning challenges.

To begin, superintendents are urged to make efforts to establish a crisis shared-leadership alliance with KSDE to improve the lines of communication and dissemination



of crisis information. Superintendents should also continue to develop and perfect crisis shared-leadership teams at the district and building levels while working with KSDE. State, district, and building-level shared-leadership teams can help superintendents prioritize time, strategize crises preparedness processes, thought-partner through critical concepts and components of good crisis response practices, and develop effective and efficient plans.

In addition to a crisis shared leadership alliance with KSDE, superintendents are urged to develop community-based partnerships with local companies such as health care, food bank, transportation, internet, cable, and school software developers. Superintendents not only stressed that students and families needed resources such as medical care, meals, transportation, Wi-Fi, mobile hotspots, and laptops but that they were also in need of access and the wherewithal to be able to use such resources while distance learning during the pandemic. Community-based partnerships can help meet those needs by considering upgrading healthcare, food and grocery, public transportation, and information technology infrastructure in PreK-12 communities that lack such economic development.

Next, in addition to establishing shared-leadership alliances and community-based partnerships, superintendents might focus efforts on analyzing and incorporating historical and current crisis data. Superintendents emphasized, outside of KSDE's guidelines, even with district and building-level teams, that districts had no idea how to address the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning needs. Superintendents overwhelmingly emphasized the need to use other resources to try and help meet distance learning needs. Previous and current crisis information can help superintendents and their

teams identify types of crises that have already occurred and crises that will inevitably reoccur, response experiences, mitigations, and recovery methods. The use of historical crisis and disaster data can further help superintendents develop effective and efficient crisis response practices and plans.

Lastly, superintendents are encouraged to use surveys to gather post-pandemic crisis distance learning data in 2023. Superintendents are encouraged to consider conducting post-pandemic crisis surveys with teaching staff, students, and parents to verify outcomes of equity and access distance learning needs. Superintendents should also consider conducting post pandemic surveys with non-teaching staff and community members that may have been impacted by the needs of school districts when shut down due to COVID-19. For example, the findings revealed, to help address a variety of distance learning needs, that the skills and expertise of non-teaching staff such as front office, custodial, transportation, cafeteria, psychologist, social workers, information technologists, and community supporters such as cable companies, churches, and community centers were leveraged by superintendents. Conducting post-pandemic distance learning surveys with non-teaching stakeholders can provide superintendents with necessary and relevant information to identify non-teaching staff and community supporter needs such as skills development, department training, and resources. Superintendents can use all survey data to illustrate to state departments and school boards the types of training and resources needed to prepare and respond to crises adequately.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

The following recommendations are included as additional possibilities for future research. This study revealed that there are other questions yet to ask. Researchers could build upon the results of this study to determine whether the experiences of Kansas PreK-12 public school superintendents are the same or similar for Kansas school building principals. Researchers could also conduct a similar study with Kansas education administrators of private and parochial schools and analyze the results to determine whether the experiences are the same or different from Kansas PreK-12 public school superintendents.

The results of the current study revealed systemic inequities existed that gave rise to performance gaps that plagued the public education system long before the COVID-19 distance learning shutdown. However, this study was limited to Kansas PreK-12 school districts, which led to a small sample size, an overrepresentation of male superintendents, and an overrepresentation of majority White student-populated school districts. A more comprehensive study of Kansas school districts with a larger sample size, including more female superintendents and greater numbers of minority students—to include Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian student populations would be more representative of Kansas PreK-12 school districts. Additionally, a more extensive participant pool could identify areas across the country with crisis plans that demonstrate highly effective equity and access distance learning methods that correlate to encouraging student and staff experience or the reverse—ineffective crisis distance learning plans and adverse student and staff experiences.

Also recommended is that researchers perhaps add a quantitative component to future research and conduct a mixed methods study to allow for survey data to inform more centered interview questions. A mixed methods study could also be used to quantify how the choices of education decision-makers impact people on the receiving end of the decisions made. Applying results from post-pandemic surveys of not only students, staff, and parents but also non-teaching staff and community stakeholders to a quantitative piece could further help to gain a comprehensive insight into the impacts of crisis distance learning experiences on every school stakeholder. Furthermore, a quantitative method using post-pandemic results can aid in work to discover new innovative ways decision-makers can respond to crises—both to prevent future breakdowns in communication and information and to ensure equity and access exists in every decision made and for every district stakeholder.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

When it comes to responding to public health crises, the decisions and recommendations made by school leaders are of utmost importance as the outcomes of those decisions can profoundly impact the academic learning, health, and wellbeing of all students and staff, parents, and community supporters (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2003; Sokol et al., 2021). The pandemic underscored just how important the decisions made by superintendents are to ensuring school districts continue to thrive in emergency crises. School districts heavily rely on superintendents to effectively guide them through emergency crises such as distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendents must be well-informed, agile, and proactive in emergent crises to lead successfully and ensure proper protocols are employed to meet all stakeholder needs.

However, even the best superintendents cannot effectively manage school districts through crises without being knowledgeable, without the help of expert stakeholders, impacted stakeholders, and appropriate and useful resources to help. It is important that state education departments, such as KSDE, be more inclusive of inviting superintendents who represent a wide arrange of districts into shared decision-making teams to establish comprehensive shared voices, clear lines of communication, and open spaces to thought-partner on the development of best and most comprehensive crisis response plans. Public schools have experienced a variety of crises dating back more than 100 years. The historical and current results of this study demonstrate that an emergency crisis could inevitably occur again. To try and prevent, as much as possible, any dearth of communication, information, and inequitable and inaccessible educational experiences, it is imperative that state education departments and local school districts use historical and current crisis data and prepare for the next disaster now.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A: Email Request for Expert Examiner**

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral candidate at Baker University, and I am conducting research for my dissertation. My research topic is Kansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Decision-making Process in Relation to Equity and Access to Distance Learning Beginning with COVID-19. I am in the process of gathering feedback related to the interview questions I plan to ask superintendents in Kansas school districts. As an education administrator your input will be extremely helpful in gaining a better idea of whether I have an appropriate collection of questions for my audience--education superintendents.

I would appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to read my questions and provide feedback on changes such as improvements, relevancy, audience appropriateness, and any other areas you think I may need to address. I ask that you evaluate the interview questions in the following areas:

- Are the questions appropriate for school superintendents?
- Are the questions understandable, too wordy, or complicated?
- Do the questions appropriately address the topic?

Attached are the interview questions for your review. I am requesting a response time of three days for your feedback. Please contact me at [alishiasbush@stu.bakeru.edu](mailto:alishiasbush@stu.bakeru.edu) if you have any questions or concerns. Your input is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,  
Alishia Bush  
Ed. D Doctoral Candidate  
Baker University

**Appendix B: Interview Questions for Expert Examiner Review**

**Interview Questions:**

IQ1. Tell me about how decisions were made in your district regarding distance learning and if and how the decision-making process changed due to COVID-19 from spring 2020 through Fall 2021.

IQ2. Who was involved in the decision-making process at each point in time?

IQ3. How did the decisions that were made equitably address the needs of all students, parents, and staff?

IQ4. How did the decisions that were made ensure access to distance learning for all students, parents, and staff?

IQ5. Given what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently regarding distance learning?

IQ6. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me regarding the decision-making process related to distance learning?



**Appendix C: Baker University Institutional Review Board Approval**



*Baker University Institutional Review Board*

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Dear Alishia Bush and Susan Rogers,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [npoell@bakeru.edu](mailto:npoell@bakeru.edu) or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,

Nathan Poell, MLS  
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee  
Sara Crump, PhD  
Nick Harris, MS  
Christa Hughes, PhD  
Susan Rogers, PhD

**Appendix D: Email Request for Participant Interview**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Greetings Dear Superintendent \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Alishia Bush, and I am a doctoral candidate at Baker University. You are in receipt of this email request as an invitation for your participation in a study that I am conducting to complete my EdD program at Baker University. The title of my research study is Kansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Decision-making Process in Relation to Equity and Access to Distance Learning Beginning with COVID-19. This study will be conducted to identify, explore, and collect data regarding superintendents' processes for how decisions were made, how distance learning environments were made inclusive, how inclusive decisions were made for all students, how things were done differently to provide students more inclusive learning environments, what the benefits of distance learning were, and what the challenges of distance learning were.

Your participation in this study will involve one semi-structured interview which consists of predetermined questions (one research question, six interview questions). These questions will help to determine the results of the above-mentioned data to be collected. Once the data is analyzed, I will organize and report all findings and results.

The time limit to complete the interview is approximately 30-60 minutes. Your selection of one of the listed interview's dates, times, and locations as well as completion of the attached consent form will indicate your consent to participate in the study.

Your participation is completely voluntary, your name will be kept confidential, and all responses will be anonymous. No participant can be identified in my reports or publications. Additionally, you have the right to opt out and/or refuse to respond to questions that make you feel uneasy. Superintendent participation in this interview is extremely important for the completion of my research and the requirements for my Ed.D.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, if you choose to complete an interview, your participation will possibly provide a baseline from which specific recommendations can be made for improving the needs of your school district. Should you have any questions about this request for interview, please contact me via phone at 913-717-9567 or via email at [AlishiaSBush@Stu.BakerU.edu](mailto:AlishiaSBush@Stu.BakerU.edu). In advance, thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Alishia Bush  
Ed. D. Doctoral Candidate  
Baker University, Graduate School of Education

**Appendix E: Interview Consent Form**

### Informed Consent

Please read this consent form carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions prior to you signing this form.

Research title: Kansas Superintendents' Perceptions of the Decision-making Process in Relation to Equity and Access to Distance Learning Beginning with COVID-19

Purpose of the study: To determine Kansas superintendents' perceptions of the decision-making processes in relation to equity and access to distance learning beginning with COVID-19.

Potential risks of participating: None

Potential benefits of participating: This study's research could possibly provide a baseline from which specific recommendations can be made for improving the needs of your school district.

Compensation: None

Confidentiality: Our interview will be audio recorded. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. No personally identifiable information will be used as your information will be assigned a coded number. The list connecting your name to the coded number will be stored on a locked thumb drive and secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any questions I ask you.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have any questions about the study: Alishia S. Bush at AlishiaSBush@Stu.BakerU.edu, 913-717-9567 or Dr. Susan Rogers, Associate Professor, Baker University (srogers@bakeru.edu or 785-230-2801).

Agreement: I have read the consent procedures described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the consent procedures, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_