

CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING
IN AN ILLINOIS SCHOOL DISTRICT:
BUILDING COLLECTIVE CAPACITY TO IMPROVE ACHIEVEMENT
FOR ALL STUDENTS

BY

KAREN LEE GORDON

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Organization and Leadership
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2018

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Donald G. Hackmann, Chair and Director of Research
Professor Nicholas Burbules
Professor Sarah McCarthy
Dr. Linda Sloat

Abstract

District leaders are challenged by the demand to increase overall student performance. The 2015 reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), continues to require an improvement of instructional effectiveness for all students to close achievement gaps. As our nation's public school enrollments grow more diverse, the persistent academic performance gap for students of low-income levels and special student populations of English language learners and students with disabilities is a continued reality that challenges district leaders in Illinois. District leaders are expected to improve student outcomes through an emphasis on standards-based instruction and assessments that can predict the success of all students. Many Illinois superintendents and district leaders operate independently, without direct state assistance, to initiate efforts or establish partnerships to build district capacity to meet the challenge of improving the achievement of all students. Research in the last decade has focused on the correlation between central office leadership practices and student achievement with special attention to how the superintendent works with the central office administrators in partnership to build the capacity of school leaders and faculty to improve student outcomes.

This case study examined the leadership of one Illinois school district to understand the critical work of an exemplary public school district superintendent and few central office leaders to build district capacity. Using the conceptual framework of leadership for learning, two research questions structured the study: (a) what do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving the organizational learning and academic performance of all students; and (b) what leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity to increase academic performance of all students.

The district selected for the study was based on an enrollment of 1,000-2,500 students. A district of medium size allowed to investigate the broader role of the superintendent with the limited central office leadership team as learning leaders. The findings from the study revealed three key leadership elements identified by the superintendent and central office leaders: (a) a shared focus on learning, (b) effective and collaborative communication, and (c) results-focused accountability. The central office leaders demonstrated leadership actions and behaviors supporting the leadership for learning research. The beliefs and actions of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the two central office leaders were aligned with the five principles of leadership for learning: (a) establishing a focus or vision of the organization on learning; (b) building professional communities that value learning; (c) allocating resources and external partnerships that build the organizational capacity to foster student learning; (d) sharing leadership to develop a collective and common knowledge and competencies across the organization; and (e) creating coherent, connected and aligned systems to support a focus on learning (Knapp, Honig et al., 2014).

The superintendent was the motivating factor and the conductor behind the leadership for learning throughout the district, facilitating a collective vision and direction for the organization with all stakeholders. The learning-focused partnership between executive-level central office administrators and school principals and leaders demonstrate the collective work to improve adult and student learning. Findings from this study can provide guidance to central office leaders in other school districts as they strive to improve student learning and increase the collective leadership to build the capacity of their organization. More specifically, this study provided insight into how central office and school leaders work together to build teaching and assessment literacy and utilize evidence-based decision making to improve the learning of all

students. Communication and professional learning communities was identified as an important practice to support the collective capacity for learning improvement within the organization. The central office leaders created a system of coherence in the organization. The shared work and commitment of the superintendent and central office leaders in this study is an example of a learning- focused organization. Decreasing the disparity in performance between learners is a continued challenge. Leadership for learning principles promote a focus on student learning, professional learning communities, shared leadership, and a coherent and aligned system focused on learning to develop the capacity of the district to improve the achievement of all students.

Acknowledgments

In appreciation to all who made the completion of this dissertation a reality. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Nicholas Burbules, Dr. Donald Hackmann, Dr. Sarah McCarthy, and Dr. Linda Sloat for their time and support. I am especially thankful for my chair, Dr. Donald Hackmann, for his tenacity and continuous guidance and assistance. Dr. Hackmann was invaluable and would not have completed this dissertation without his professionalism and dedication to leadership for learning.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the cooperation and commitment to learning of the superintendent, central office administration, building principals, and assistant principals in the district of this study. To the University of Illinois Educational Organization and Leadership faculty and staff, and to those who assisted in editing and reediting.

Last, and most importantly, I want to recognize the love, encouragement, and patience of my husband, my family, and friends. To those dear to me who I have lost during this journey, they are not forgotten. I dedicate this accomplishment to my loving mother, “Key” who was truly a leader who understood the human spirit; and through her life, other lives have been forever touched.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction..... 1

Chapter 2 Literature Review..... 17

Chapter 3 Methodology 50

Chapter 4 The Case 62

Chapter 5 Findings 80

Chapter 6 Summary, Discussions, Implication, and Recommendations 113

References 142

Appendix A Soliciting District Candidate Nomination 154

Appendix B Soliciting Superintendent Participation..... 155

Appendix C Superintendent Participation Screening Interview..... 156

Appendix D Informed Consent Form 157

Appendix E Interview Protocol for District Superintendent..... 159

Appendix F Interview Protocol for Central Office Administrator 160

Appendix G Individual Interview Protocol for School Administrators..... 161

Appendix H Site Observation Protocol..... 162

Chapter 1

Introduction

A significant challenge for school district leaders is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in public schools. Current educational accountability mandates at the federal and state levels demand an increase in overall student performance to assure high school graduates are adequately prepared for college and careers. Special attention is given to equitable improvement to narrow achievement gaps in reading and mathematics for student population groups related to race and ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and special education needs. The mission of the U.S. Department of Education is to ensure equity and student achievement by providing educational excellence. Since 1965, when the federal Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) was first enacted, several reauthorizations have been implemented to provide financial resources for the delivery of compensatory education and to ensure equal opportunity for all students. The ESEA reauthorization in 2001, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), increased accountability for improving the educational achievement of all students. The 2015 reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), continues these efforts to improve educational opportunities for all students while returning substantial authority to the states. ESSA requires each state to create learning-focused plans that are intended to close achievement gaps and improve instructional effectiveness. ESSA expands each state's role, providing increased flexibility in supporting school districts to improve student growth outcomes. ESSA places an emphasis on standards and assessments that can predict the success of all high school graduates as they transition into postsecondary education and the workplace.

Within the state of Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) is required to implement ESSA through redesigned accountability systems, challenging academic standards, and assessment reforms using multiple measures to monitor student growth and achievement over time. Student growth is becoming integral in new accountability measures for school districts across the country, including Illinois. In accordance with Illinois Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (P.A. 96-861), the mandate for the use of student growth measures to evaluate all public school teachers and principals requires district leaders to utilize new ways to monitor and assess the academic growth of students. Using student growth measures to improve student achievement is complicated not only due to differing district assessment data but also because of the need to build the assessment and technical capacity of district and school leaders to reflect student progress over time. As our nation's public school enrollments grow more diverse, the academic performance gap is a continued reality that challenges district central office leaders. The percentage of English language learners in public schools increased dramatically in 2013-2014, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunches increased from 40% to 50% between 2003 and 2013, and there was no measurable difference between the achievement performance gap for students of low socioeconomic status in 2013 and 2015, suggesting that differences in achievement and postsecondary outcomes between student subgroups still exist (Kena et al., 2016). Disparities between student subgroups continue as evident in course completion, with fewer percentages of Black and Hispanic public school students participating in rigorous courses nationally and a higher percentage of Asian and White students graduating on time compared to their Hispanic and Black peers (Kena et al., 2016). The persistent equity gap in academic performance across racial/ethnic groups, income levels, gender, and student populations is also evident in Illinois.

According to the 2016 annual report from the Illinois State Board of Education, the percentage of Hispanic students increased to 26% in 2015-16 and the percentage of low-income students increased to 50% of public school enrollments in the 2015-16 school year (ISBE, 2017). As higher proportions of students were in poverty, Illinois school districts had an increasing percentage of students who did not meet expected levels of proficiency on state assessments (ISBE, 2012). According to the 2016 Annual Report (ISBE, 2017),

statewide indicators of academic achievement mostly held steady during the 2015-16 school year. However, testing results tell us that two out of every three students are not fully ready to move on to their next learning opportunity, whether that is the next grade level in school, graduation, college, or a career. (p. 4)

All Illinois school districts receive state funding to support a basic level of education within their schools, but most districts do not receive additional assistance for targeted school improvement activities. In 2011, Illinois was awarded \$42.8 million in funding under Race to the Top (RttT), a competitive federal grant program through the U.S. Department of Education designed to encourage and reward states for creating conditions for education innovation and reform to demonstrate substantial gains in student achievement, close achievement gaps, and ensure student readiness for college and careers. However, only 32 of the state's approximately 863 school districts elected to participate in RttT activities (ISBE, 2012). In 2012, a tiered system of support was created by ISBE and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in partnership with the Illinois Center for School Improvement (ICSI, 2017), which was designed to improve student achievement by providing intensive support for districts with low-performing schools. Priority assistance was provided to approximately 30 designated Illinois districts with academic performance scores in the lowest 5% statewide, and focused services were provided to 66 Illinois districts under corrective action to address underperforming student subgroups (ICSI, 2017). Underperforming districts, designated by ISBE as Foundational, do not receive direct assistance

but independently access online resources and professional development provided through the ICSI. Notably, most Illinois districts do not receive technical assistance directly from the ISBE to build district capacity. Many Illinois superintendents and district leaders, operating independently and without state assistance, initiate efforts or establish partnerships with external agencies to assist in building district capacity, including the professional capacity of school principals, to meet the challenge of improving student achievement.

Expectations for equitable educational outcomes for all student subgroups and the differences between racial and ethnic groups, students of low socioeconomic status, English Language learners, and students with disabilities on state assessment measures bring social responsiveness to the forefront of school improvement efforts for district leaders (Copland, 2010; Honig, 2012). External federal and state accountability mandates hold district leaders accountable to improve student outcomes of these historically underrepresented student subgroups. The use of data-driven decision making and continuous district improvement planning processes are promising practices that can increase the performance of low-achieving students (Halverson, 2010). District-level leaders have a responsibility to allocate resources, put data management systems into place, and build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to use data-driven decision making. Central office district leaders are also held accountable to all school and community stakeholders in the investment and allocation of district resources in learning improvement. How district resources are allocated to increase student achievement and to assure that school improvement efforts are equitable and sustainable is a concern for district leadership (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Plecki, Alejano, Knapp, & Lochmiller, 2006).

Quality instructional leadership at both the school and district levels is essential to enhance teaching and learning of all students (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Patten, &

Jantzi, 2010; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Portin et al., 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Key influential administrators at each level within a school system engage in leadership for learning behaviors to support instructional improvement (Knapp et al., 2010). Essential to the continuous school improvement process are such elements as creating and promoting a shared vision of learning, building capacity, monitoring curriculum and instruction, and evaluating the assessment programs to meet the needs of all learners. In recent years, extensive research has focused on leadership behaviors at the school level in promoting student learning gains. Importantly, research in the last decade indicates a correlation between central office leadership practices and student achievement with special attention to how the superintendent works with the central office collaboratively in partnership with school leaders to improve student outcomes (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Building the district's organizational capacity to enhance student learning has become a focus of central office leaders, as they work to develop capacity in individual schools (Honig, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009). A decade of research on leadership for learning demonstrates a collective focus on increased student outcomes of an educational system (Copland & Knapp, 2006; DuFour, 2010; Knapp et. al., 2010; Reeves, 2006).

Embedded within a leadership for learning model, the work of the central office shifts from a bureaucratic, regulatory, and operational focus to a learning partnership to support school improvement measures for student learning (Honig, 2008). Central office leaders who focus solely on the management of structures and processes rather than assuming roles as leaders for learning will face a greater challenge in raising the level of learning for all students (Copland, 2010; Elmore, 2000). District central office leaders, as a collective group that includes the superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, and coordinators, are expected to be strong

instructional leaders responsible for the learning of the organization, supporting the leadership of building principals, and contributing to the improvement of academic outcomes of all students. This study examines learning-focused central office leadership in a district demonstrating gains in student achievement in order to better understand how behaviors, structures, and practices of the central office administration build the capacity of school leaders to improve learning of all students.

Statement of the Problem

In many of the nation's school districts, central office administrators have experienced difficulties improving student achievement given the impediments and challenges of changes in leadership, funding, new state policies, and reforms (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). The problem is that in an era of new standards and assessment reform, the school district superintendent and central office administrative staff is expected to be learning leaders to build capacity throughout the district in the improvement of teaching and learning for all students. The essential responsibility and focus of the district superintendent is to ensure all organizational systems support teaching and learning (Hoyle et al., 2005). A significant portion of Illinois public school districts have an enrollment between 1,000-2,500 students, comprising 237 of the state's 852 districts (ISBE, 2017). In districts of this size, superintendents typically have fewer central office administrators to share the responsibilities and pressures of academic accountability. Therefore, superintendent in medium-sized districts typically are directly involved in designing systems and processes that build the collective expertise and capacity of central office administrators and building principals as learning leaders to ensure that teaching and assessment practices increase students' ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and master essential content areas. However, their roles as learning leaders often compete with

their responsibilities in addressing complex political, legal, financial, and public relations challenges within their districts. (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). The superintendent, working in tandem with central office leaders, is held accountable to ensure a districtwide focus on evidence-based practices for the improvement of student learning and to address persistent achievement gaps in public schools. At the district level, reforms and initiatives designed to increase student growth outcomes challenge central office administrators to lead and build the capacity of school leaders to improve teaching and learning for all students.

Given that ESSA permits states and school districts some flexibility in developing their accountability systems, district leaders will need to incorporate relevant research and learn from other district leaders who have been successful with diverse populations in developing instructional expertise within their own districts. Central office leaders must be able to develop the necessary knowledge and infrastructure for efficient student data and assessment systems to monitor student academic progress and outcomes (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014). With the current economic uncertainty, continuing school funding shortfalls in Illinois, and, demanding reforms for accountability, many district leaders are challenged to provide the necessary resources so that school principals can effectively guide decision making to improve the learning of all students (Honig et al., 2010; Hoyle et al., 2005; Knapp et al., 2010).

What do superintendents and central office leaders who work in medium-sized districts need to effectively build the capacity of school leaders to guide teaching and learning and develop multiple indicators of achievement to promote the academic growth of a population of student diversity similar to state averages in Illinois? There is a need to gain insight from learning-focused leadership of superintendents and central office leaders in an exemplary district

working in collaboration with school-level principals in building the collective capacity demonstrating and improved improve the performance of all students.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the critical work of an exemplary public school district where the superintendent works in collaboration with her/his central office administrative staff and school principals to implement changes driven by educational accountability reforms as demonstrated by an increase in student achievement. In this study, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009) was used to specifically select an exemplary district for this study. As defined by ISBE (2017), an exemplary school or district is one which has no underperforming subgroups, a graduation rate of greater than 67%, and whose performance is in the top percent of school districts statewide. Using the Illinois State Report Card, candidate districts were selected who demonstrate academic indicators of an increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards and/or an increase in student subgroup performance over a 2-year period on state assessments in 2015 and 2016.

The main focus of this study was to understand how central office leaders use leadership for learning to establish capacity within their school districts to improve systems and daily practices to increase the learning outcomes of all learners. Employing the leadership for learning conceptual framework (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Knapp, 2008; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007), this study examined the central office leadership practices in an Illinois school district, noting how superintendents and central office leaders work with building principals to develop a collective capacity for school improvement. Topics explored include the following: effective district leadership practices to ensure standards and assessment literacy to analyze student learning growth, allocation of resources to increase varied assessment systems to

integrate longitudinal quantitative and qualitative assessment data, and establishing equitable data-decision making for continuous district improvement. An outcome of this study was to understand how effective leadership for learning principles and practices provides guidance for central office leadership to support building-level leaders in the improvement of learning outcomes of all students, especially the learning outcomes of low achieving students.

Research Questions

The following research questions were utilized for this study:

1. What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?
2. What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity to increase academic performance of all students?

Conceptual Framework

Learning focused leadership served as the conceptual framework for this study.

Leadership for learning places a continuous focus on learning within policy, organizational, and community contexts (Knapp et al., 2014). Five areas of action in leading for learning that reinforce each other are the following: (a) establishing a focus on student learning, (b) building professional communities that value learning, (c) engaging external resources that foster student learning, (d) sharing leadership integrating system learning across several pathways in an organization, and (e) creating efforts which are coherently connected and aligned to support learning (Knapp, Copland, Ford, Markholt, McLaughlin, Milliken, & Talbert, 2003). A clear focus and priority on learning improvement goals is evident. Leading for learning at the district level requires superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and curriculum coordinators responsible for student learning to (a) model organizational performance, policies, and practices; (b) emphasize professional development; (c) evaluate the effectiveness of principals and building

leaders; (d) monitor curriculum and assessment focused on student achievement; and (e) be accountable to the community for improved learning outcomes (Knapp et al., 2014). District leaders allocate or reallocate limited resources focused on learning to build the capacity of the district. In an era of external accountability and high stakes assessments, leadership for learning is a framework for school improvement, student improvement, and organizational educational reform. Leadership for learning supports a coherent organizational system which focuses on learning improvement guided by the knowledge and skills of central office leadership to develop an organizational capacity for all district stakeholders to improve student achievement for all learners (Knapp, Copland, Ford, et al., 2003).

A central goal of leading equitable learning is providing opportunities and supports for an increasingly diverse student population. One of the district roles in leading for learning is to maintain an equity focus to improve the academic performance of all students (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Therefore, expanding on the leadership for learning framework is an embedded social constructivist perspective of leadership to address the learning of the organization. Addressing educational inequities related to student disparities in performance is a responsibility for leading a focus on learning. Leadership for learning supports the organizational coherence guided by the knowledge and skills of central office leadership to ensure school implementation of new understandings for all district stakeholders to improve student achievement for all learners (Honig, 2012; Knapp et al., 2014).

Overview of the Research Methodology

In this study, the perceptions and actions of a superintendent and district central office leaders working in collaboration with school leaders responsible for improving student learning were reviewed. A qualitative single-site case study design was utilized to form meaning from the

participants studied (Creswell, 2009) and to understand the factors of effective central office leadership working in an exemplary district in expanding the district's capacity to raise student achievement. A chained-referral method (Creswell, 2009) was used to select a district meeting the criteria for the study. The Illinois Regional Offices of Education, Illinois Association of School Administrators, and the Consortium for Educational Change were contacted by email and follow-up phone calls to request nominations of exemplary district leaders throughout the state who had a reputation of demonstrating a strong collective focus on student learning to increase the achievement of all students. Officials at the Illinois Regional Offices of Education, the Illinois Association of School Administrators, and Consortium for Educational Change, and district superintendents contacted suggested potential recommendations of districts with a growing diverse population with a reputation of exemplary learning-focused superintendents and central office leaders demonstrating gains in student performance. The selection criteria included the following: a demonstrated positive increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards over 2 years as demonstrated by state assessments in 2015 and 2016 on the Illinois State Report Card, a student population similar to student demographics in Illinois, and learning-focused district level leaders who support leadership for learning principles.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select an Illinois public school district from the recommendations with a student enrollment between 1,000-2,500 students. A district of medium size allowed me to investigate the broader role of the superintendent and the limited central office leadership team as they engaged as learning leaders. Based on October 2016 student enrollment counts, Illinois public school districts of this size were initially identified.

Only nominated districts which met the criteria of a population between 1,000-2,500 students, having an administrator who had served at least 3 years as the district's superintendent,

and a district that demonstrated an increase in performance on state assessments over a 2-year period were contacted by email determine their interest in participating in the study. A brief telephone screening interview was conducted with eight superintendents who had expressed willingness to participate.

On-site observations and applicable document collection were used to obtain multiple sources of evidence including central office documents of leadership planning, student achievement documents. Other central office and public artifacts supporting school improvement to increase student learning are gathered. Coding the data according to relevant themes allows for an interpretation of this information.

Significance of the Study

A review of the literature has indicated that there has been limited research related to how central office leaders work collaboratively with school leaders to improve student learning (Honig, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008) and to build administrators' capacity as learning leaders in successful school districts (Copland, 2010; Copland & Knapp, 2006). Few studies exist on the practices of central office leaders specifically in small to medium-sized school districts in Illinois. Studies on central office leadership and accountability for student achievement exist in large urban districts (Honig et al., 2010; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Petersen, 1999). Research on smaller school districts is absent in the published peer reviewed literature; therefore, there was a need to study whether findings in larger leadership studies also are applicable to smaller sized districts. Given the majority of public school districts in Illinois are under 2,500 students, it was important to examine central office leadership of a superintendent a few central office administrators in exemplary districts of a size of 1,00-2,500 students. This study is important, as it can add to the scholarly research on the

practices of district central office leaders for the improvement of student learning in smaller effective districts.

Research is needed to examine and support superintendents and central office leaders in their collaborative work with building principals to increase the collective capacity to enact statewide school reforms to improve the academic performance of all students. Questions remain regarding the influence of highly effective central office administrators on school educators' efforts to improve student learning and decrease achievement gaps. In pursuing this question, the particular practices of central office leaders that demonstrate an effect on improving learning and decreasing the disparity between learners need to be continually explored. Findings from this study can provide guidance to leaders in other school districts as they strive to improve student learning and increase the collective leadership capacity of their organization. More specifically, this study provided insight into how central office and school leaders work together to build teaching and assessment literacy for student growth and utilize evidence-based decision making to improve the learning of all student subgroups.

Personal Interest

As the researcher, my professional experience of 35 years as a former elementary and community college teacher for struggling students and as a district central office administrator in Illinois has inspired an interest to examine the practices of central office leadership in an exemplary district to improve student achievement. A major focus of my educational career has been on the improvement of underachieving students. As is the case with educators across the state and nation, I have experienced several changes in state mandates and educational reforms and continue to be challenged as a leader to increase the achievement of all students. Over 20 years as a central office administrator in suburban public school districts, I experienced the

challenges of daily demands and search for effective leadership practices to significantly influence academic performance of all students.

Limitations

In qualitative research some uncontrollable factors may be present (Creswell, 2009); therefore, there are limitations with this study. First, participants in this study were administrators from one suburban elementary school district in Illinois and do not provide a representative sampling of all central office administrators. The characteristics and demographics of the elementary school district selected in this study are limited in its transferability to a district with a more diverse student population and less capital resources. The district demographics in this study reflected a less diverse student enrollment population than the state average. Secondly, the organizational structures, systems, and resources of the district in this study are not representative of all Illinois public school districts. The district in this study had the capital and financial revenue to support current educational and operational expenses. In addition, the limited timeframe of this case study did not provide a longitudinal perspective. An additional limitation of the qualitative inquiry process was the primary use of interviews, which relied on participants' self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of actual practices and processes over an extended period of time. There are many influences on student learning; because this study was not quantitative, it was not intended to identify a direct statistical correlation between the relationship of central office leadership practices and student achievement. Also, given the limited number of participants and the limited geographic location of the research site, the study does not allow generalization to school districts that do not have similar characteristics.

Delimitations

The first delimitation is that this study was delimited to one public school district in the state of Illinois. Secondly, the district student population enrollment of 1,000-2,500 students, given to the majority of Illinois public school districts are under 2,500 students, is a delimitation of a specific site location selected for purposeful sampling. Another delimitation involved selecting a district that demonstrates student academic achievement gains as measured by state overall performance on PARCC assessments only. Lastly, participants' years of experience as educators and professional experiences within the district also was a delimitation.

Definition of Terms

Collective capacity. Actions that lead to an increase in the collective power of a group to improve student achievement, especially by raising the bar and closing the gap for all students. Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching (Fullan, 2010).

Central office leadership. An organized collective unit including the superintendent, assistant/associate superintendents, and administrative central office directors (Rorrer et al., 2008). Central office leaders in this study work closely with building-level administrators, accountable for actions and resources to support district improvement of learning.

Learning organization. Organizations in which in which people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge, 2006). Within an organization, a group of people who are continually enhancing their capabilities to create reciprocal meaning and knowledge essential

to solving problems and work collaboratively to shape the direction, efforts, and results for improved outcomes (Senge, 2012).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One provided an overview of the study including the problem, purpose, and significance of the research on district level leaders to establish a collective view and provide systems of support with school leaders. A leadership for learning conceptual framework was presented. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature related to effective central office leadership to improve student achievement in the following areas: (a) district leadership and student achievement, (b) leadership for learning, (c) building a collaborative capacity for learning, and (d) central office linkages for leadership for learning. Chapter 3 provides the research design, population and site selection process, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 provides the case study description of the district selected for this research. Chapter 5 presents and analyzes the data collected from interviews and focus group with central office leaders and school leaders, repeated site observations, and a review of district documents. Chapter 6 provides a summary and discussion of the results as it relates to the implications and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of research on effective district leadership practices of central office leaders and their relationships to improved student learning. Three relevant strands of literature emerged in this review. First, the relationship of district leadership and student achievement is reviewed with a focus on the role and influence of a district superintendent as the head of the organization and her/his responsibility to expand the capacity of leaders in the district central office and schools. The influence of collective organizational leadership structures and leadership types on the improvement of educational outcomes of student achievement is also examined in the research. Secondly, the literature reveals studies within the last decade described as learning-focused leadership or leadership for learning. Embedded in learning-focused leadership is an emphasis on equitable and coherent focus of a learning organization to improve the learning of all students. Thirdly, this review explores building collective capacity for improved student outcomes, including both central office leaders and building administrators in promoting student learning. The ability to lead change and implement instructional reform within a collaborative and aligned accountability systems of data-informed decision making promotes a collective efficacy to increase student achievement. Finally, the linkages of central office leadership within a learning organization using a learning-focused framework are visually represented as the conceptual framework for the study.

Sources utilized in this review were identified using the following search keyword terms: district leadership, superintendent leadership, central office leadership, leadership for learning, student achievement, school improvement, school reform, and student growth. Databases utilized included EBSCO Host, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertations, and Google Scholar.

District Leadership and Student Achievement

Empirical research on the influence of an effective superintendent and central office leadership on the improvement of student achievement is reviewed in this section. This literature is reviewed on the premise that the difference in student achievement among districts is not just a reflection of student engagement and teachers' classroom practices but also the efforts of the superintendent and central office leaders within the district. According to Louis et al. (2010), "effective leadership at the school and district level is second only to classroom instruction as an influence of student learning" (p. 9). Four decades of research reviewed focus on how leaders influence student achievement and reveal five essential leader practices: (a) establishing and conveying the vision, (b) facilitating high-quality learning experiences for students, (c) building professional capacity, (d) creating a supportive organization for learning, and (e) connecting with external partners (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The majority of research has focused on the principal and at school level, but in recent years research has begun to focus on the role of central office leaders, including the superintendent, in promoting improved student learning throughout the school district.

Previous research has expressed a viewpoint that district central offices are bureaucratic structures that are fragmentized into ineffective division of responsibilities, do nothing to improve student performance. (Hightower & McLaughlin, 2005). Those who support a pessimistic view of central office bureaucracy have contended that bureaucracy leads to ineffective organizational performance (Packard, 1990). Other research indicates that increased central office bureaucracy is a response to poor student performance and increasing environmental demands (Smith & Meier, 1994). This viewpoint considers central office

administrators to be hierarchical implementers of prescribed policies, rules, and procedures, and disconnected from the teaching and learning.

Effective schools research conducted during the 1980s and 1990s focused on classroom practices, school-level factors, and school-level leadership and their relationship to student achievement (Elmore 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Rorrer et al., 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2007). There is an extensive body of research focusing on the role of principals and building leaders on improving student performance (Copland, 2003; Hargreaves 2009; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In a quantitative meta-analysis examining 70 studies over 25 years conducted between 1978 to 2001, 0.25 correlation was demonstrated between school leadership and student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). Marzano et al. (2005) identified 21 key characteristics of effective school leadership, with implementing change noted as the most effective variable in promoting student learning.

After completing their initial study of school-level leadership practices, Marzano and Waters (2009) conducted a second large scale meta-analytic study to determine the influence of district leadership and student achievement. Examining 27 studies published between 1970 and 2005, Waters et al. (2007) reported a 0.24 correlation between district leadership and student academic outcomes, suggesting that effective district leaders can positively increase student achievement. The connection between district leadership and the potential to influence student achievement depends on whether the district goals are related to student achievement and the level of change that is required is implemented by stakeholders (Waters & Marzano, 2007). Marzano and Waters (2009) identified five district level responsibilities which influence student learning: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing goals for achievement and

instruction, (c) creating board alignment with district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction.

Research on district leadership for educational reform suggests central office leaders provide essential contributions and support in leadership for learning (Copland, 2010; Corcoran, et al., 2001; Hightower, Knapp, March, & McLaughlin, 2002; Honig et al., 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008; Swinnerton, 2006). A recent qualitative study investigated the relationship of district improvement efforts of central office administrators in six districts to support teaching and learning in all schools (Honig, Venkateswaran, & McNeil, 2017). This study revealed the hand-on leadership of a superintendent, in collaboration with other central office leaders, builds the capacity to support teaching and learning improvement. This research suggested central office leaders should not rely on external support to build capacity, but instead should use external providers to expose leaders to research-based ideas that allow them to lead and develop capacity within the district.

District leadership refers to the district superintendent as the executive leader who promotes the development of the school system as an interrelated learning organization and works with the school board, central office administrators, and school leaders to develop a collective vision, learning priorities, and establishes the direction and action plan of the district goals (Rorrer et al., 2008). Central office administrative personnel support the work of the superintendent and work with building-level leaders to develop capacity throughout the organization. A noteworthy study on district leadership practices is a 6-year multiple-methods study involving interviews, survey data, and state scores of student achievement in literacy and mathematics conducted in nine states and involving 43 school districts, in which researchers identified state, district, and school leadership practices that improve student learning (Louis et

al., 2010). A key finding was that the powerful influence on student learning depends on the district's leadership in the development of a collective sense of efficacy of school leaders. Building capacity, providing support, and distributing responsibility enhance school leader efficacy by providing a clear sense of direction, opportunities for teamwork and professional communities for districtwide decisions, meaningful job related professional development, and human and financial resources. Findings from this study suggest a district's role is to promote a democratic and collective climate that encourages participation of school leaders, teachers, families, and community members (Louis et al., 2010).

A multi-year mixed-methods study of school leader efficacy and student learning, using a random sampling of 180 schools within 45 districts in 9 states, involved surveys of teachers and principals. Data analysis revealed eight sets of district leadership conditions significantly related to a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in the collective capacity of school leaders to improve student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found the strongest relationship was the district's concern for student achievement and quality of instruction in addition to a compelling vision for the district, opportunities for capacity development, a culture of collaborative work, and management of instructional programming.

Superintendent leadership and learning. Research indicates a positive correlation between the practices of the school district superintendent and improved student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). Previous district level research has focused exclusively on the executive leadership of the superintendent (Bjork, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Mart, 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2007). With increasing accountability for the educational outcome of all students, superintendents play a crucial role in acknowledging deficit thinking and in making subsequent

leadership decisions to move their districts forward toward more positive equity achievement for all students (Rorrer et al., 2008).

It is the leadership behaviors of the superintendent that will influence the actions of the district-wide administrative team. As the appointed leader of the school district, the superintendent must ensure that district goals are aligned and examined regularly to enhance student learning and achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Research on the superintendency reveals the importance of leading the formation of a shared vision and strategic planning, collaborating with school boards and a wider community for democratic governance, communication, curriculum planning and development, instructional management of student achievement data, human resource development, and the promotion of social justice and ethical leadership (Kowalski, 2005; Patterson, Goens, & Reed, 2009; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005; Worner, 2010).

Research on the superintendency has evolved through five decades of changing roles of the superintendent. Beginning with functioning as a teacher-scholar, the role of the superintendent changed to a business manager, followed by a statesman, to a social scientist, and most recently, a communicator (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). An expectation of the current role of the superintendent has shifted from school management to leading and communicating learning outcomes (Petersen, 1999). A study of superintendents, school board members, and school principals in five mid-sized California districts examined the connection between superintendents and improved student achievement in the late 1980s and found instructional leadership characterized by four attributes: (a) articulating a district vision; (b) organizing shared decision-making structures focused on the organizational vision for student improvement; (c) evaluation of personnel and instructional programs by being visible and

providing feedback to leadership; and (d) the ability to be flexible and adaptable, yet having the authority to make tough decisions (Petersen).

The successful contemporary superintendent embraces the responsibility and the opportunity to inform, connect, and showcase the district, students, staff, school board, and community (Worner, 2010). School board relationships, political alignments, and community tensions require a superintendent to use the diplomatic skills of a mediator or a moderator. An excellent superintendent is able to use effective collaborative communication skills to work with others as a cohesive team of educators, administrators, board members, and community members. The two-way flow or reciprocity of ideas and accurate information is essential to school improvement (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The ability to build social relationships and to work collaboratively with a variety of district stakeholders is also essential. Petersen and Fusarelli (2005) referred to the importance of developing social capital, which involves the social networks of connections and trusting relationships within an organization and community that facilitates collaboration and consensus with diverse populations. A superintendent who can connect and relate to each representative group not only expands her/his understanding but also develops connections with the major stakeholders within the community to establish a collective direction for the future (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Kowalski (2005) pointed out the more contemporary emphasis on connections, communication, and community relationship building have taken primacy over the previous managerial emphasis on buildings, bonds, and buses, although all aspects remain as essential functions of the superintendency. Although the leader may experience relatively few problems when the organization is working efficiently, more often there are times of complex situations and deteriorating conditions in which the duty of running a district requires resilience

to thrive and survive (Patterson et al., 2009). A perceptive superintendent successfully addresses the adversity presented in these challenging times; a resilient and courageous leader understands reality and envisions future possibilities (Patterson et al., 2009).

Recent research has redefined leadership from a focus on the effective characteristics of a single individual district leader to a focus on the relationships and connections among central office leaders and schools to build institutional capacity (Honig et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004). Emerging empirical research is beginning to address the collective role of central office leaders, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and coordinators responsible for student learning, to build leadership capacity for systemic improvements in teaching and learning for all students within a leadership for learning framework (Knapp et al., 2010). Copland (2010) noted that the focus of central office administration is to support school improvement reforms that are necessary to address learning. Effective central office leaders must understand and address the needs and contextual challenges of change, implement system improvements, and allocate resources to influence student performance (Honig, 2003). As Fullan (2010) indicated, meaningful gains in student achievement will require not only developing individual leaders but also organizational system reform by all leaders of the system, especially leaders who focus on capacity building and developing other leaders.

District organizational structure and leadership models for learning. This section presents an overview of structural perspectives of organizations and effectiveness in increasing student outcomes. Researchers recognize that interrelationships between district leaders and the school leaders as they work to promote improved building-level practices may be critical to the student achievement gains (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). In an examination of eight studies of the effect of school site-based management, little evidence was found indicating that site-based

management alone improves student achievement (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). A degree of centralized direction and coherence of bureaucratic functions is essential in the organizational structure of a district (Hightower & McLaughlin, 2005). Bolman and Deal's (2008) structural perspective of an organization indicates a superintendent is the strategic apex charged with overall responsibility for the organization who ensures the entire organization functions as a single entity. As organizations become more complex and dynamic, theories of organizations focus less on the individual leader at the top of the organizational hierarchy and more on relationships across the organization and interacting with the environment (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2011). The following components of an organizational framework create the environment for district leaders to make sense of the continually changing interactions and interdependencies: (a) the structure of organizational goals and roles; (b) the human resources perspective on the interdependence between people and the organization; (c) political framework as power, conflict, and the distribution of limited resources; and (d) symbolic perspective focus on problems of traditional ways or meaning of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In addition to understanding the structural context of an organization, empirical research also acknowledges how leadership practices contribute to organizational performance. Different practices to improve student learning are evident (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Leadership within an organization can be conceptualized and promoted through various models, including strategic leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, constructivist leadership, instructional leadership, and learning-leadership or leadership for learning (Williams & Johnson, 2013). Empirical studies provide district leaders with an understanding of the contributions of varying leadership practices on improving student outcomes.

One leadership approach is the strategic leader, who looks beyond current practices to express a clear vision of the future, listens to stakeholders of the organization to evaluate needs, assesses the political climate, anticipates future financial challenges, and responds to or adjusts for changes (Elmore, 2002). Elmore (2002) defined strategic leadership by the practices of the leader. First, the strategic leader has a clear vision of where the organization needs to move and motivates others toward that vision. Second, the leader listens to the members of the organization to assess current practices and where the organization needs to shift. Third, the strategic leader assesses the political and financial influences on the organization.

Similar to the visionary characteristic of strategic leadership, transformational leadership, as described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), focuses on developing a shared capacity to innovate, achieve common desired outcomes, and support the development of changes to teaching and learning practices. Transformational leadership involves reciprocal exchanges among the leader and members of the organization and is not to be confused with transactional leadership, in which one leader initiates the action in exchange for reward or avoidance of punishment (Robinson et al., 2008). Transformational leadership speaks to the moral, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of an organization. An organizational culture consisting of individuals who are willing to change values is reflective of transformational leadership.

Distributed leadership theory emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting a shift from a focus on a single leader's heroic characteristics to shared leadership practices involving both formal and informal leaders. Traditional hierarchical authority relocates and stretches across the organization, stimulating the capacity of a collective process and interaction of others (Elmore, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Distributed leadership requires a collaborative and trusting culture, strong consensus, and

expertise with collaborative approaches to improve teaching and learning (Copland, 2003).

Researchers have cited traditional organizational hierarchies of districts as a barrier to distributed leadership and indicate a distributed structure that lacks district coordination across the organization needs a centralized direction (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2007; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). However, without centralized leadership, practices can involve unorganized initiatives with a lack of directed focus for the organization (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010).

Instructional leadership emerged from the effective schools research during the 1970s and early 1980s, with a central focus on the principal's role to supervise teaching practices. Instructional leadership is characteristic of clear teaching objectives in curriculum and instruction and setting top-down directives for high instructional expectations for all students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). Rorrer et al. (2008) defined an effective instructional leader as one who is able to recognize and understand the various aspects of instructional practices in addition to acknowledging the district vision and goals. However, Knapp, Copland, Ford, et al. (2003) argued, "instructional leadership misses a more inclusive picture of leadership that embraces the joint work at different school and district levels who play a role in guiding and supporting the district work" (p. 14).

Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the relative effect of leadership types on students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. The researchers found the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was three to four times that of transformational leadership. They identified five dimensions of leadership: a) communicate learning goals and expectations; b) allocate resources strategically; c) plan, coordinate, and evaluate teaching and curriculum; d) engage in teacher learning and development; and e) ensure an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson et al.). The number of available studies was a

limitation of the meta-analysis, and their research concluded there is a need for further research on the influence of leadership on student achievement. Findings from the study reveal leadership practices that focus on teaching and learning are more likely to have a positive effect on student outcomes.

A qualitative case study conducted in a medium-sized elementary school district in Southern California linked the school reforms efforts of 10 central office leaders, 5 school principals, and 45 school leadership team members to increased student achievement (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). In this study, the relational linkages between central office leaders and the schools identified the importance of strong instructional leadership, system-wide focus on achievement, consistency of instruction through district guided curriculum, aligned assessments, coherent professional development, and frequent monitoring of data for decision making. The study indicates that the quality of central office leaders held accountable for the improvement of all schools in the district is critical for improvement of student achievement (Elmore, 2000; Honig, 2008).

Recent research refers to learning-centered leadership or leadership for learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Leadership for learning moves beyond a focus only on instruction to include curriculum, instruction, and assessment in promoting improved student learning. Different from instructional leadership, leadership for learning moves away from a single school leader supervising and monitoring the learning and utilizes interaction among stakeholders and collective data decision making centered on various forms of student outcome data (Knapp et al., 2014). The following section of the literature review focuses on the central office and learning-focused leadership.

Leadership for Learning

Leadership for learning maintains a focus on the alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and analysis of student learning data, which contributes to the improvement of learning to the needs of all students (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003). Leadership for learning has been described as a combination of instructional leadership and transformational leadership and as being key in promoting an organization's improvement. Learning-focused leadership also involves actions that are reflective of strategic and distributed leadership. A central theme in the research on district leadership to increase student achievement is a coherent focus and connection of leadership for learning throughout the school system (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). The implications of student learning, professional learning, and system learning are correlated to connections between the actions of the leaders and learning processes or outcomes. According to Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003), "leadership for learning means creating powerful, equitable learning opportunities for students, professionals, and the system, and motivating or compelling participants to take advantage of these opportunities" (p. 12). Leading for learning is described as the ability of leaders to stay constantly focused on the core of schooling: learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment. All the other matters of schooling, such as management, organization, and finance work, support a core structure for improved student learning (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Murphy et al., 2007).

Within a learning-centered leadership framework, previous leader experiences, knowledge and skills acquired personal characteristics, and values and beliefs of the leader impact leadership actions and behavior (Murphy et al., 2007). Leading for learning includes five areas of action by leaders. First, leaders establish the focus or vision of the organization on

learning. Second, leaders build professional communities that value and support a learning work culture. Third, leaders engage other external resources that form relationships or offer expertise to foster the organizational learning. Fourth, leaders share and distribute leadership across levels and individuals in various positions. Fifth and last, leaders create a system of coherence in the organization (Knapp et al., 2014). Each of these areas is further explored in the literature.

Organizational focus on learning. An important focus of leadership for learning is to demonstrate the positive effects of the organization on the achievement of all students. Central office leaders who focus on learning serve as the foundation for the central office's capacity to facilitate educational change through the supervision of building principals (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Successful learning leaders respond proactively, despite accountability reforms, and are able to focus on and respond to the challenges of educating diverse groups of students (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood (2004) identified the following associated components with student achievement: (a) individualized support, (b) shared goals, (c) vision, (d) intellectual stimulation, (e) culture building, (f) rewards, (g) high expectations, and (h) modeling. A more recent framework developed by Leithwood (2012) indicates five practices or activities that enhance student achievement: (a) setting directions, (b) building relationships and developing people, (c) developing the organization to support desired practices, (d) improving the instructional program, and (e) securing the accountability. Leadership challenges exist in improving student achievement, yet, according to Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2004), a collective efficacy of leadership promotes the educational development of each student through a shared vision in collaboration with the school community while continuously using appropriate evidence-based decisions to establish rigorous goals for student achievement.

The focus on processes and systems for the purpose of improved learning for all students regardless of the challenges is evident in a leadership for learning framework (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Murphy et al., 2007; Reeves, 2006). Through an educational lens, according to Murphy et al. (2007), the basis or center for leadership must be learning, teaching, and educational improvement—not organization, politics, or governance. Murphy et al. examined leadership for learning with an emphasis on the effectiveness directed at the principal, yet the research on leadership for learning for principals also supports organizational learning and student learning. Just as principals are expected to be instructional leaders, the superintendent, assistant superintendents, and other central office staff who evaluate building principals are expected to support building principals, developing their capacity as learning leaders.

A coordinated national multi-strand study, called the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement, examined the work of central office learning-focused leadership in three urban districts making positive progress in student learning. Through interviews, observations, and document review within a qualitative multi-case design inquiry, the research was reported separately with detailed findings from each investigation (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, 2010; Knapp et al., 2010). One of the three investigation research teams studied the practices of central office administrators as instructional leaders. Over an 18-month period during 2007 and 2008, repeated visits in school districts located in Atlanta, Georgia; New York City, New York; and Oakland, California were conducted for central office analyses. Two conclusions from the districts studied were: (a) the capacity of the educational system to enhance student learning depends on leadership that focuses on learning improvement of both students and staff, and (b) the sustainability of learning-focused leadership depends on the use of a multi-level system of leadership support (Knapp et al., 2010). A more recent qualitative study (Honig

et al., 2017) explored efforts to change central offices staff to shift their daily work from management to support improved learning for all students in six districts and revealed the participation of the superintendent in leading the learning in joint work was a crucial condition. These insights indicated the importance of central office leadership in developing systems at all levels to support district-wide teaching and learning improvement and restructuring the capacity of the central office to shift its focus from managerial leadership to leadership for learning. This body of research reflected on learning-focused leadership and provided an understanding of how central office personnel work collectively with building-level principals to support a learning improvement vision within their schools.

Learning-focused professional communities. Researchers agree on the important relationship between effective leadership practices and collaborative professional learning communities that use evidenced-based decision making to guide instruction and increase student achievement (DuFour, 2010; Sergiovanni, 1992). The effective central office leader encourages a shared capacity of knowledge, skills, and social interaction throughout the organization to improve the quality of learning of all students (Hargreaves, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Lambert (2003) emphasized,

The key notion in this definition is that leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership. (p. 5)

A leader supports adult learning and, through dialogue and critical inquiry, the active construction of knowledge in an interactive process toward improvement of student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner, 2001). Research on leadership and student learning reveals a

positive relationship of the leader's sense of collective efficacy to student achievement through the formation of cooperative working relationships (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

DuFour's (2010) initial work on professional learning communities shifted formal education from a focus on teaching to student learning on the school level; yet, in later years, DuFour emphasized the vital role of central office in building capacity throughout the district by operating professional learning communities. DuFour's descriptions of six effective schools in three effective districts of varying differences reveal a common shared commitment to clarity of purpose, collaborative culture, collective inquiry, action orientation, continuous improvement, a focus on results, and using those results to deliver a system of interventions and enrichment through a strong professional learning community (PLC) process. As a concluding thought, DuFour stated,

the three superintendents were also very purposeful in the way they monitored and supported the work of principals in their districts. They were committed to providing principals with the training and tools to lead the PLC process . . . developing the capacity of staff to function as a PLC was a priority. (p. 190)

Instead of a culture of separation based on hierarchy or authority, effective executive level leaders allocate resources to bring communities of professionals together to articulate a shared direction, work cooperatively, and share accountability. Bringing the members of the organization together to talk, collectively think, and continuously learn as a group allows all members of the district-wide team, not just an individual leader, to develop and implement a shared vision of the organization focused on learning.

Engaging external resources to foster organizational learning. Effective district leaders turn to community partnerships, state or county governmental agencies, and/or other external organizations outside of the formal school system to build the organizational capacity for district learning improvement efforts (Honig, 2008). In a qualitative case study conducted in

a mid-sized urban school district in California in 1990 and 2000, Honig (2003) examined the role of central office administrators in the implementation of four policies on school-community partnerships through semi-structured interviews, document review, and observations. Findings from the study support the concepts of organizational learning, suggesting collaborative policy implementation requires a desire for change, site readiness, past experiences, sustained interactions, and the designation of boundary spanners or individuals who search and bring new information back to the district.

In another qualitative study, Honig (2008) analyzed data from 264 interviews and 232 hours of observation and focus groups with eight urban district partnerships across the nation and concluded that district engagement in assistance relationships with intermediary organizations can support central office administrators to implement improvement efforts to increase student learning. Honig observed: “The example is one of an intermediary organization—one that trains its efforts on shifting work practices within both central offices and schools and one that serves as a bridge between central offices and schools in the process” (p. 358). According to Honig (2012), a central office administrator relies on her/his knowledge of the schools, policies, organizational systems, social and political ties, and relationships with the school community and outside partnerships to increase the learning of the organization.

A qualitative case study of five central office leaders including the chief academic officer, two elementary directors, and two secondary directors in a midsize urban school district in Washington State examined central office leaders’ capacity to lead district instructional reform through the use of external professional consultants (Swinnerton, 2006). This study found that learning and leading occur simultaneously alongside interactions with other district leaders, staff,

and external consultants. The phrase “learning-while-leading” is used to reflect the changes a district leader experiences while leading reform (Swinnerton, 2006, p. 7).

Leading for learning means making efforts to understand and engage with the local community, professional, and policy environments outside of the district, especially the elements that matter most for learning. Effective central office leaders seek to understand linkages with extended environments such as family and community environments, professional environments, and larger state policy environments to increase opportunities for learning improvement (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003).

Share and distribute leadership for learning. The distributed leadership practices of central office administrators, together with leaders of learning within and outside of the organization, provide the support aimed at improving student learning (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) also support a distributed system of leadership as having the potential to significantly influence student learning. At the central office level, guidance and support are among many individuals, both inside and outside the organization, such as consultants employed by an external support provider who jointly engages in leadership practices to improve learning. According to Spillane (2001), different vantage points as defined by one’s professional role and its related activities are critical to strategic, distributed leadership action. Collective leadership has a significant influence on student learning, in which all district members and other stakeholders across all levels of an organization exercise more voluntary leadership (Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008). Distributed leadership with a focus on learning empowers stakeholders to collectively contribute to an organization’s overall effectiveness. Distributed leadership has successfully implemented and sustained reforms. As Elmore (2000) indicated, a strong improvement plan with well-designed

curricular strategies and a strong leader will not succeed if leadership is limited to a few individuals. In an organization, individuals typically develop expertise or competencies. Within a distributed leadership model, these separate competencies are organized into a collective knowledge and skills set. No one person is responsible for the learning of the organization or the learning of all students. The role of the effective leader is to create a culture of common knowledge and skills that holds individuals accountable for a collective result of positive student outcomes (Elmore).

Copland (2003) reported findings from a longitudinal study of leadership reform in California's San Francisco Bay Area on building and sustaining capacity for school improvement, supporting the importance of a cycle of shared inquiry processes for developing and distributing leadership. Copland suggested "the decisions made regarding the identification of critical problems, and development of solutions for same, should be made collectively and focus on improving the learning of all students" (p. 376). Additional research on educational reform also supports the importance of the construction of collective knowledge not only of students but also of adults within the system to support improved student achievement (Fullan, 2010; Senge, 2006).

Creating coherence. Cohesive coordination across the district enhances human capacity and leadership density, connects the various pieces of the organizational system, and moves the organization toward a collective outcome of improved student achievement (Honig, 2008; Knapp et al., 2010). Research presents a strong emphasis on the role of leaders in sustaining the academic improvement of all students through a focus on an organization's capacity for policy and equity coherence and also aligned curriculum and assessments (Elmore, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Rorrer et al., 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Aligning

instruction and assessment to support increased achievement for all students is a central function within a leadership for learning framework (Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Knapp, Swinnerton, Copland, & Monpas-Huber, 2006). Building a district's human capacity requires aligning the work of the organization through communication, planning, and collaboration (Bjork, 1993).

A narrative synthesis conducted to review empirical studies of a district's role in educational reform reported since 1984 included policy and equity coherence within the four broad themes of the research findings (Rorrer et al., 2008). The four roles of district-level leaders as institutional actors in improving achievement described are as follows: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus.

Embedded within the leadership for learning framework are shared relational and ideological linkages around a common purpose of providing high quality and equitable learning for all students. From a social perspective viewpoint, recognizing the differences and implementing values of fairness and respect for all students is an important foundation for achieving learning effectiveness and quality in an organization. To provide a quality education and equitable learning for a diverse population of students, a social constructivist perspective assists leaders in understanding and changing practices that limit students' opportunities and improve educational practices (Bandura, 1977; Mayer & Tucker, 2010; Morgan, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1992; Theoharis, 2007). Social construction of collaborative leadership and collective efficacy of a learning organization are based upon a social cognitive theoretical framework (Bandura, 1986; Honig, 2008). Within a leadership for learning framework, the

interactions, mutual values, and understandings of all individuals within an organization need to be recognized and supported by central office leaders.

The next section of the literature review presents the role of central office leadership in sustaining the achievement improvement of all students through a focus on an organization's collective capacity for learning, leading change, and building accountability systems for data-driven decisions and allocation of district resources for learning.

Building Collaborative Capacity for Learning

The final portion of the literature reviewed is interested in how central office leadership builds the collective and collaborative capacity of an organization. Crowther et al. (2011) defined capacity building as “the intentional process of mobilizing a school’s resources in order to enhance priority outcomes—and sustain those improvements” (p. 20). The failures of educational reform are blamed mistakenly on individual leader quality or external accountability reforms as opposed to system reform on capacity building among leaders, group work, and systemic strategies (Fullan, 2010). In response to implementing continued reforms, the systematic focus of district leadership is needed to build human capacity for the success of every school in the district (Park & Datnow, 2009).

Building human capacity is a crucial element of central office leadership (Honig, 2009). In a qualitative study of central office administrators in a mid-sized urban school district in California, Honig (2003) examined the role of the central office to support collaborative educational policy implementation. Findings revealed that indicators such as warrant for change, past experiences, sustained interaction with school sites, designated boundary spanners specifically designed to bring back information to the district, and strong social and political ties were key to the learning of the organization (Honig).

In a case study of the implementation of science and math reform in nine urban and suburban Michigan districts, Spillane and Thompson (1997) investigated why some districts made less progress than others. The study included 165 interviews with central office personnel responsible for instruction, principals, lead teachers, other stakeholders active in the reform efforts, and community members. Variances across the districts were evident, as six of the nine district schools lacked the leadership for ambitious reform and failed to align practices with state policy reforms. The study concluded that the variances in the districts' capacity to learn new ideas, such as more challenging math and science curricula, depended on the districts' human capital, social capital, and physical capital to implement new reforms. In other words, the districts' human capacity influenced the response to state policy reforms (Spillane & Thompson).

One of the key reasons districts do not meet the goal of improving student achievement is that organizations lack the human capacity and sufficient support to establish internal learning partnerships between central office leaders and school principals for accountability focused on student outcomes (Elmore, 2002; Honig, 2009). Within a sociocultural and cognitive learning theories framework, Honig (2012) interviewed 162 central office administrators, observed 265 hours of joint work between central office and principal leadership practices, and reviewed over 200 documents between 2012 and 2014 in a mixed methods study in three large urban districts in Atlanta, Georgia; New York, New York; and Oakland, California. According to Honig (2012), central office administrators rely on their knowledge of the schools, policy, and organizational systems, social and political ties with the school community, and outside partnerships to build capacity.

The capability of an organization in achieving organizational goals to influence student learning is dependent on the perceived collective efficacy of key stakeholders rather than the

knowledge and skills of a single district leader (Goddard, 2001). Bandura (1997) noted that a strong sense of one's efficacy and capabilities to execute a course of action exerts great effort and stated, "strong perseverance contributes to performance accomplishments" (p. 8). The district leader needs to understand the variances within an organization and the positive effects of collective efficacy on the functioning of the organization.

Leading change for learning. As stewards of change, central office leaders often must respond to new educational reforms that require knowledge of change theories (Fullan, 2001). As a collective group, the superintendent and central office leaders facilitate district change, recognize the educational systems framework of the interrelationships of individuals working within an organization to improve student learning, and are committed to building the capacity of a learning organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hallinger, 2011). Central office leaders often need to respond to new educational reforms that require knowledge of change theories and processes (Fullan, 2001). Effective district leaders create change that is systematic, ongoing, and sustainable. An instrumental leader is a change agent who addresses what needs to be done within the larger context of the interrelatedness of the people across all schools in the organizational system (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010).

To understand an organization as a social organization adheres to the constructs of an open system theory characteristic of an input-output cyclic energy renewal in which district leaders must continuously adapt to changing factors and pay attention to the interactions and interdependencies between the organization and its environment (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Shafritz et al., 2011). Kotter (2002) views leadership as a change-oriented process of visioning, networking, and relationship-building, giving clarity and direction to organizations, and described an effective guiding team as "the right people . . . individuals with the appropriate skills, leadership

capacity, organizational credibility, and the connections to handle a specific kind of organizational change” (p. 43).

District-level leadership demonstrated prerequisite practices necessary for change in a mixed methods case study exploring elementary district office leaders implementing state mandated Common Core State Standards in New York State. Compared to typical schools confronting the challenges of implementing change, in this study the results of interviews with superintendents and assistant superintendents revealed the importance of proactive and adaptive learning focused leadership to implement change (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Shiller, 2016).

The complexity of school improvement originates from the interaction between the people within an organization and its environment. Effective district leaders focus on bringing new understandings to the organization and creating change that is systematic, ongoing, and sustainable (Senge, 2006). A leader who understands the interdependency of a learning organization can achieve constructive change and build the capacity of the organization to move forward accepting and adapting to new challenges through a collective commitment of a shared vision (Senge, 2012). Leaders, individually and collectively working to bring change or a different order of things suggests an effective superintendent collaborates with district leaders to empower a collective commitment to a shared vision in the organization.

Building accountability systems for learning. In this section, research on district leadership in the use of data and data management systems for improving student learning is examined. At both the school and district levels, leaders have an effect on student achievement through the formation of organizational structures and systems that set high standards for academic achievement (Marzano, 2003; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Given the last decade’s emphasis on accountability, “consistent application of principles of assessment for learning can

give rise to unprecedented gains in student achievement, especially for perennial low achievers” (Stiggins, 2007, p. 1). The ability to analyze student data to predict student growth builds organizational capacity that leads to improved student achievement (Knapp et al., 2010; Supovitz, Foley, & Mishook, 2012). Student data are integral in organizational decision making and developing systems of learning organizations (Earl & Fullan, 2003; Halverson, 2010; MacIver, 2010; Marzano, 2003; Supovitz et al., 2012).

Data-informed leadership. Strong leadership plays a significant role in data-informed decision making that is focused on learning (Halverson et al., 2007, Knapp et al., 2014). A district learning leader must coordinate and align work of the organization through collaboration, monitoring of aligned goals, and instructional efforts to improve instruction with data accessibility, transparency, and accountability (Bjork, 1993; Rorrer et al., 2008). The transparency of district performance and new accountability measures requires a commitment to a rigorous data-driven assessment system for school reform (Copland, 2003; Earl & Fullan, 2003; Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007).

Halverson (2010) suggested that the use of data-driven decision making using multiple accountability measures is most promising in continuous district improvement planning to address the achievement gap and increase the performance of low achieving students. In a 5-year research project examining nine schools recognized for strong data-driven decision making and improved student achievement, four schools illustrated a model for formative feedback systems of interventions, assessments, and actuation or actionable knowledge (Halverson). A practice guide published on the use of student achievement data to support instructional decision making included the following five recommendations: (a) make data part of a continuous instructional improvement, (b) teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals, (c) establish a

clear vision for data use, (d) provide supports that foster a data-driven culture, and (e) develop and maintain a districtwide data system (Hamilton et al., 2009).

Research studies have indicated that central office leaders have vital roles in developing systems of support that align district goals with instruction and assessment, monitor goals for achievement and instruction, and allocate the use of district resources to support student learning in partnership with school principals (Honig, 2012). According to Honig (2012), in districts with a smaller number of central office staff, a superintendent may need to engage in the learning partnership with building principals or assign individuals specifically to provide joint job-embedded data accountability support for principals. A multi-site cross case synthesis study involving 73 semi-structured interviews with cabinet-level employees, district middle managers, data partners, principals, and teacher focus groups was conducted in four districts in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Illinois that were acknowledged as strong users of data. The study revealed that central office played a key role in establishing a data culture and building the infrastructure, training, regular data meeting time needed to support the monitoring of identified leading indicators of data viewed as predictors of outcomes to improve student achievement (Supovitz et al., 2012). In 2009, researchers in another study highlighted the use of data among district leaders who were successful in raising student achievement within high-need, low-performing districts in Maryland, Ohio, and California, and found that supportive and collaborative leadership between district and school personnel, emphasis on leadership capacity building, and consistent use of data to support academic initiatives within tiered interventions were common themes and practices across the three case studies (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). The researchers concluded that, through system or organizational learning, leaders examine the district structures, programs, and resources with the greatest potential to influence

student performance. These studies suggest a learning-focused partnership between executive-level central office staff and school principals and reveal that data-informed leadership practices are similar to teaching practices and suggest further research of similar leadership practices.

Data management systems. One organizational tool needed to improve student learning is a district-wide data management system. Making sense of data requires adequate infrastructure, and central leadership is necessary in the allocation of educational resources and coherent systems to improve student achievement (Knapp et al., 2006). An effective information system for interpreting and using relevant data to improve student learning is essential (Breiter & Light, 2006; Marzano, 2003). Leading collective thinking and action based on data systems in an organization is essential in building a sense of efficacy for learning organizations.

From a systems perspective, an effective accountability system and coordinated assessment feedback systems are necessary in an organization (Halverson, 2010). A 5-year study investigating how school leaders engaged in a formative feedback system using data for changes in educational practices has assisted others in understanding how to organize data systems to improve learning (Halverson, 2010). An important capacity of an organization in an era of high accountability policies is the ability to generate feedback, interpret appropriate assessments, and take action on student performance data. Data are integral in organizational decision making and developing systems of learning organizations (Earl & Fullan, 2003; Halverson, 2010; MacIver, 2010; Marzano, 2003; Supovitz et al., 2012).

An exploratory study supporting the accuracy and accessibility of longitudinal assessment data information systems to improve learning was conducted by Breiter and Light (2006). This study involved interviews of 47 educational leaders, including superintendents, deputy superintendents, coordinators, and directors of research and curriculum, and observations

of meetings and professional development workshops conducted in 15 New York City schools. The research examined how schools exercise effective data-driven decision making through the use of web-based management information systems. The research identified the three types of school information systems: (a) student assessment information, (b) learning management of programs that support and teach students, and (c) administrative and management data for various purposes. Several data systems can be complex and time consuming to retrieve, distribute, analyze, and requires a certain level of knowledge to synthesize for decision making. The study suggests that identified areas of need are focused district planning, supported data conversations about student learning across the district, and professional development. Since data-driven decision making is essential for school improvement, further research on effective instructional decision making and support for the use of data systems is needed (Breiter & Light).

Central office leaders need to consider the substantial financial resources and budget implications required for implementing and maintaining assessment monitoring systems (Honig, 2008). District leaders are ultimately accountable for improved student achievement and responsible for how district finances are allocated to improve school performance and increase student achievement through the fidelity and sustainability of school improvement efforts (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Adequate infrastructure and central leadership are necessary in the allocation of educational resources and coherent systems to improve student achievement. Knowledge of assessment literacy is essential for the district leaders responsible for leading and communicating the changes in educational accountability and resources for data systems and providing technical support (Breiter & Light, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Popham, 2013). State technical assistance supports schools by providing a state information

system, and central office leaders can hire external data program consultants and analysts to support data analysis and reporting of student assessment programs. The elements of an accountability system needing the attention of effective district leadership are: data management, data accessibility, selection of coherent data over time, data quality, and the use of data for the systematic improvement of student learning (Taylor, 2010). Policy changes such as the transition from NCLB to ESSA significantly shift traditional assessment systems to multiple student growth measures and indicators for data driven decision making (Halverson, 2010; Halverson et al., 2007; Linn, 2007; MacIver, 2010).

The review of research on building organizational capacity for student learning reveals that leadership for data-driven decisions can result in improved student learning. Data literacy is a challenge for central office leaders who are publicly responsible for promoting education reform and demonstrating increased student achievement through data-driven decision making (Earl & Fullan, 2003). A limited number of studies explicitly examine effective practices of central office leaders to support a system for data literacy to improve student achievement.

Leadership Linkages for Learning Conceptual Framework

To illustrate the complexity of systematic school improvement, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) emphasized an interrelated and interdependent framework that demonstrates the relationship among a district and its schools to achieve large-scale reform and improvements. The conceptual framework for this study supports a learning-focused leadership (Knapp et al., 2014) connection between the district's central office and schools. The visual representation of leadership for learning for central office leaders in this study, represented in Figure 1, is adapted from a conceptual model by Honig et al. (2010), and it reflects the interdependency of central office leaders within a learning-focused educational organization. As the organizational

effectiveness is often held to an external standard of how well a district is meeting the demands external to the organization, represented along the outer edge of the figure are the role of external federal and state accountability reforms, the external partnerships to foster district capacity, and the context of the district community. Most importantly, note the system linkages in this visualization, which reflect effective connections of central office leadership practices with school leaders centered around a focus on student learning. Next, the conceptual model represents the five dimensions of central office transformation: (a) learning-focused professional learning, (b) steward of change, (c) reorganizing resources to support teaching and learning improvement, (d) partnerships to provide reciprocal assistance for district learning, and (e) use of evidence-based decision making for collaborative vision and goal setting (Honig et al.). Each dimension focuses on learning, and individuals in the organization serve as brokers or boundary spanners to bring new understanding to others to support and advance the learning of the organization (Honig, 2012). The visual representation reflects the connections, communication, and community relationship building of central office leaders. The cyclical and fluid movement of all parts of the figure represents a central focus on learning for all students. Joseph Murphy used a circle metaphor to illustrate school improvement by saying, “the inner circle has to be our most profound understanding of learning and teaching” (Mullen, 2009, p. 183).

The comprehensive study of leadership supports the framework for leadership for learning to understand the practices of central office leaders with school leaders to improve the learning of the district. Figure 1 illustrates the complexity of improving student learning and highlights the focus on leadership learning to build the capacity for continuous and coherent improvements.

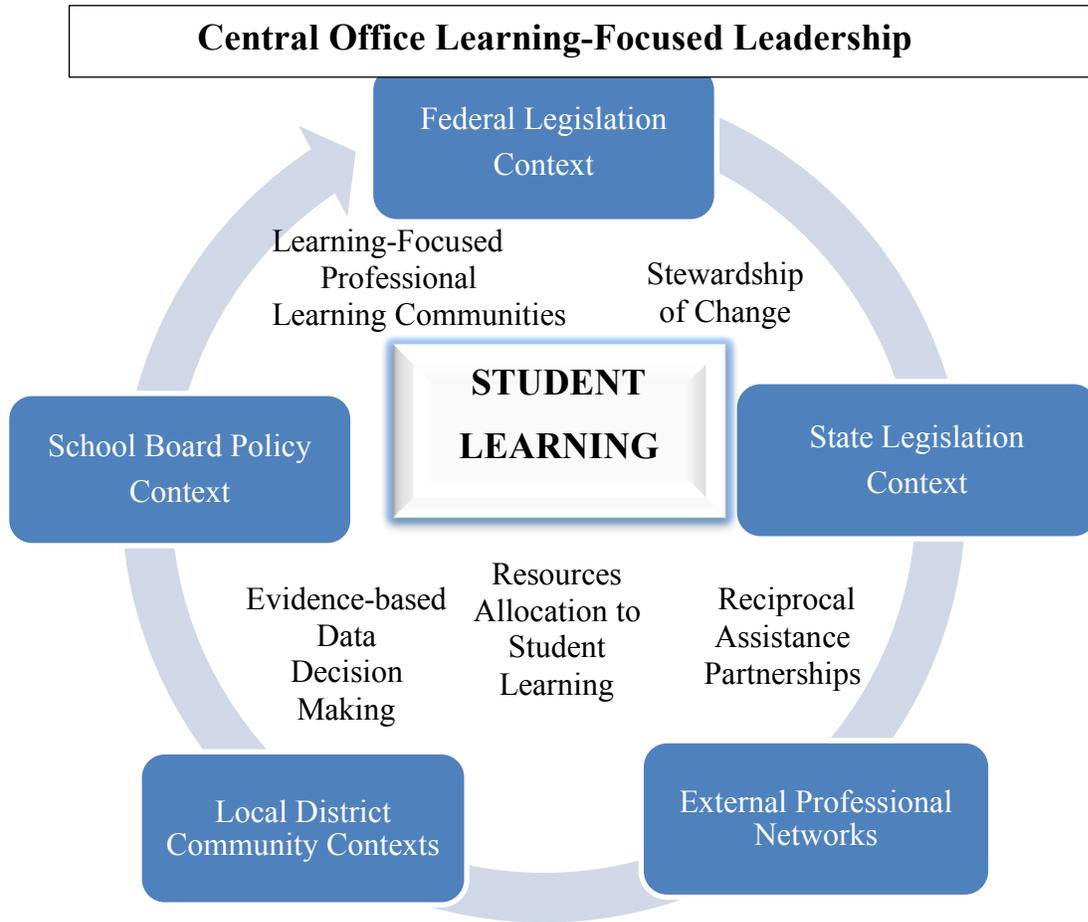


Figure 1. Adapted from the five dimensions of central office transformation by Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, and Newton (2010).

Summary

In this chapter, this review of district leadership practices and student achievement reveals relatively few studies exist on the learning leadership practices of a superintendent working collaboratively with district central office and school leaders to increase the achievement of all students. First, district leadership and the structures of organizational leadership in student achievement were reviewed. The relationship between effective leadership and raising student achievement is primarily documented in the educational literature on the practices of the school principal and superintendents. Second, leadership studies reveal an

increased focus on leadership for learning as an established framework in the literature on organizational leadership and student learning. Embedded within leadership for learning is a collective social perspective of accountability for the academic growth of a diverse student population. Third, supported in the literature is the interrelatedness of an organization to build a collective capacity for data-based decision making, address the challenges of change, and allocate external resources to provide assessment systems and data management systems for central office leadership to improve student learning.

As stated in the past decade of research, there is a continued need for additional research on central office leaders beyond the single role of the superintendent in the implementation of systematic district improvement for student learning (Honig, 2008; Corcoran et al., 2001; Rorrer et al., 2008). Empirical research on the practices of central office leaders who effectively work with school leaders to improve student learning is limited and further exploration is warranted.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study examined the leadership work of central office leaders, including the superintendent, assistant or associate superintendents, central office directors, and coordinators responsible for the organizational systems to improve student learning using a single case study design (Yin, 2008). The research questions addressed in this study explore a district's success in building capacity to improve student learning. Descriptive data of the district size, student population, student achievement performance, and administration expertise is collected. A total of 10 individual interviews were conducted. Interview questions focused on the role of central office leadership on building the district capacity to improve student achievement. The subsections within this chapter describe the research methods selected for this study, including research questions, design of the study, population, sampling procedures, data collection, and procedures for data analysis.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined for this study:

1. What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?
2. What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity to increase academic performance of all students?

Methodology

The research design selected for this study was a single case study methodology. Yin (2008) defined case study as an investigation of a contemporary problem to provide an understanding and suggests gathering multiple points of evidence to triangulate data within a case study. A case study methodology allows for descriptive or explanatory questions intended to

provide a perspective directly of people studied (Yin). The study included the five features of qualitative research: (a) it occurs in naturalistic fashion, in an actual location or setting; (b) it provides descriptive data in the form of words rather than numbers; (c) there is concern with process rather than outcomes or products; (d) it is inductive; and (e) developing meaning and participant perspectives are essential (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This study was aligned with qualitative research as it allows for interpretive reflection from multiple perspectives to develop an understanding of current practices (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The study of central office leadership for learning focused on the processes of interactions among individuals and on developing an understanding about what people do in the world in which they work (Creswell, 2009). Using case study methods, this study was an in-depth look at central office leadership using multiple sources of information, including direct observations of leadership practices, document review, focus group interviews, and one-on one interviews with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and central office administrators responsible for student learning, building principals, and building leadership teams (Stake, 1995). Through the participants' interviews and researcher's observations and document review, qualitative research methods were appropriate to explore and question how one district central office administrative team works to develop the capacity of building leaders, thereby facilitating a district's capacity to raise student achievement through its district.

Site Selection

Purposeful selection is common in qualitative research to focus on the purpose of the research study (Creswell, 2009). This qualitative study employed case study research methods (Creswell, 2009), through purposeful site selection of an exemplary district with a student population of a medium size public school district in Illinois.

The majority of district leadership studies have investigated practices in large urban districts (Honig et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2007), and there is limited research focused on district leadership in smaller, non-urban districts. According to the 2017 Illinois Annual Report, of the total 852 Illinois public districts, 668 districts or 78% had an enrollment of less than 2,500 students in 2016-17 (ISBE, 2017). For the purposes of this study, a public district with a student enrollment of 1,000-2,500 students was considered for site selection. Studying a medium-sized district enabled me to investigate the broader role and responsibilities of the superintendent as a leader of learning with fewer central office positions through which leadership responsibilities can be distributed.

Among the Illinois public districts of this size, the selection criterion focused on an exemplary Illinois districts as demonstrated by student academic achievement gains using publicly available data. The 2015 and 2016 Illinois State Report Cards were reviewed for districts that demonstrate an increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards and/or an increase in student subgroup average achievement over a 2-year period on state assessments in language arts and math. For elementary districts, performance on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) was analyzed. The site selected was not a unit districts, therefore, the percentage of students meeting College Readiness Benchmarks (composite score of 21 or higher on the ACT) and graduation rate was not used to determine student academic gains.

Another criterion in site selection was a review of the district demographics, with the intent to include a district that has student diversity similar to state averages. In 2015-2016 school year, 50% of the Illinois student enrollment qualified as low-income, 11% were Limited English Proficient, and student ethnicity was 49% White, 26% Hispanic, and 19% Black. The

overall racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of the district student enrollments was compared to overall student demographic data in the state of Illinois.

To determine participating district candidates, representatives from the Illinois Regional Offices of Education, the Illinois Association of School Administrators, Consortium for Educational Change, and district superintendents were contacted (Appendix A) to nominate exemplary school districts that have district leaders who have demonstrated effectiveness in student learning and who are actively engaged in building the capacity of school principals. The following criteria were employed:

- An Illinois elementary or unit district student with representative population of 1,000-2,500 students and a subgroup population similar to the Illinois averages.
- The superintendent and central office executive administrators demonstrates strong leadership for learning philosophy and practices.
- The superintendent has served in his/her position with the same district for at least 3 years.
- District leadership facilitates a collective capacity to improve the organizational learning of school leaders to increase the achievement of all students.
- District demonstrates an increase in student achievement in the past 2 years.

As nominations were received, I reviewed each to ensure that they meet the criteria.

Then, each qualifying district superintendent was contacted by email to inform them of their nomination (Appendix B) and to ask if they are willing for their district to be selected as a case study site. A brief telephone interview (Appendix C) was conducted with eight willing superintendents, to verify the district meets the aforementioned selection criteria and allow the superintendent to articulate the district's leadership for learning practices. From the information obtained during the phone interview, the district's central office administrators responsible for building district capacity for the improvement of student achievement was determined. The

superintendent of the district selected was notified that the district has been selected to participate in the study. When the district superintendent accepted, an email seeking her/his signed consent on behalf of the district was delivered. Finally, all participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix D) indicating their voluntary participation in the study.

Ethical Considerations

After obtaining approval from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board to conduct this research, informed consent was obtained from all district participants in advance of their participation in prepared interviews, observations, or focus groups. During the study I protected the confidentiality of each participant. All comments and interview responses of participants were transcribed using pseudonyms. No personally identifiable information of the participants or site was shared in the reporting of the study.

Quality and Rigor of Methods

Creswell (2009) refers to qualitative validity as the efforts the researcher utilizes to ensure the accuracy of the findings. This study used three methods to establish validity. First, data triangulation utilizing two or more sources of information is used to promote validity (Creswell). District documents related to leadership and student achievement, transcription of individual and focus group interviews with district administration, observations of district leadership was gathered and analyzed. Throughout the study, data collection of interview responses of participants, site observations, and related district documents was compared and contrasted for similarities and inconsistencies. A professional assisted in the transcription of the audiorecorded interview responses. Interview transcripts were shared with each participant for member checking, allowing them to expand upon their responses from individual interviews and to make any necessary changes to verify intent of responses. Allowing participants to review

their interview responses to check for accuracy established validity and credibility of the study (Creswell). Third, a review of public documents provided a detailed description of the district demographics, student performance, and study participants, adding to the validity of the research (Creswell).

Reliability and Generalizability

Qualitative reliability refers to the researcher's consistent approach and procedures so other researchers can repeat the study with similar results (Creswell, 2009). To ensure reliability and minimize error or bias, I took great care to remain unbiased during individual and focus group interviews and refrain from leading participants to a desired answer. As a practicing central office administrator, I was aware of my personal bias and reactions to participants' responses or district documentation collected. As Creswell (2009) notes qualitative generalization in a case study research is limited to the description and themes developed in the context of the study site and the replication or generalization is dependent on good documentation of qualitative procedures. The use of data triangulation of interviews, site observation, and document review in addition to member checking and rich description of site and participants supports reliability and generalizing to other studies (Stake, 1995).

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative analysis organizes the data collected within the case study site into abstract units of information (Creswell, 2009). Coding the data into relevant themes allowed for an interpretation of the information. The data was first coded using concepts from the leadership for learning conceptual framework and analyzed continually throughout the study, with new codes added inductively and through constant comparative method as patterns or themes are identified (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews, site observations, and related district documents were

reviewed over a 6- month period from July 2017 through January 2018 to draw conclusions and gain an understanding of district leadership practices to build capacity throughout the district. The information gathered from recorded interviews with each central office and building leader and recorded focus group interviews with both the district and school leadership teams is reviewed using a coding process. All interviews were followed by member checking of the transcribed information through informal conversation to obtain feedback and clarify information. All data is read thoroughly, organized, and prepared for data analysis. Constructing, sorting, and naming themes, reducing the relevant themes, and interpreting the meaning of themes is an ongoing process. (Creswell, 2009)

Coding of the transcribed interviews, site observations, and document review employed a combination of emergent codes and predetermined codes aligned to the five areas of action in leading for learning: (a) establishing a focus on student learning, (b) building professional communities that value learning, (c) engaging external resources that foster student learning, (d) sharing leadership integrating system learning across several pathways in an organization, and (e) creating efforts which are coherently connected and aligned to support learning. In addition, Johnson and Chrispeels' (2010) linkages and dimensions of central office transformation (Honig et al., 2010) was a consideration in coding the data collected. For example, responses, observations, and documents are categorized under structural linkages, relational and communication linkages, ideological linkages, and federal and state policy context. Leadership practices are identified as forming leadership-focused principal partnerships, assisting partnerships, refocusing central office on teaching and learning, using evidence throughout the central office, and facilitating the transformation effort. Because analyzing evidence is a difficult aspect of case study research (Yin, 2008), an external peer reviewer knowledgeable of the

inductive and deductive process of qualitative analysis assisted me to provide an objective analysis of data collection and a final coding of patterns and themes. The interpretation of the final identified themes further enhanced the overall validity of the study.

Data Collection

The data collection for this case study occurred over 6 months between July 2017 and January 2018. Data for this study included semi-structured open-ended interviews and focus group discussions, on-site observations of district and school leadership meetings, and review of central office district documents. The perception of key leadership elements and the practices of the district superintendent and central office leaders to improve student learning were disclosed through an ongoing coding and analysis of the data collection.

First, semi-structured open-ended questions were used during interviews to elicit conversational responses from the superintendent, central office administrative leaders, and school principals, and school leadership teams to gain broader insight of their perceptions related to their efforts to increase the achievement of all students (Merriam, 2009) and is the primary vehicle for data collection in this case study to promote a greater understanding (Yin, 2008). Individual semi-structured interviews ranging from 35 to 55 minutes with an average time of 41 minutes with the superintendent, three central office administrators, three building principals and three assistant principals were conducted. A focus group was held with central office leadership for 45 minutes with questions and discussion focused on the leaders' efforts and priorities to build capacity for improved learning of all students and accountability reforms for continuous district improvement. An interview protocol was used (Appendix E-H) aligned with the conceptual components of leadership for learning (Knapp et al., 2014) and the interrelated and interdependent linkages of a school district (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Verbatim responses

were recorded and transcribed. All 10 participants received a written interview transcript for member checks so that they could expand on their responses and/or correct any errors. Four follow-up individual discussions were held with central office administrators for clarification and additional comments.

Secondly, in addition to interviews, on-site observations of the central office administration and district and school leadership meetings during the study time period were conducted. Approximately 20 hours of observations, ranging from 30 minutes to four hours in length, were conducted. The observations collected evidence of central office administrators' providing leadership for learning activities to support administrators in their efforts to increase student achievement. On-site observations included an initial walkthrough of the three school buildings, two weekly central office cabinet and administrative meetings, two monthly district leadership meetings, three school leadership meetings, three PLC grade-level meetings, and one student support team meeting.

Interviews, direct observations, and document review focused on the two research questions. To address the first question on elements of leadership for learning, focus group and individual interviews, observation data, and review of district documents revealed themes emerged from the data collection evident of key elements identified by superintendent and central office leaders to improve the learning and academic performance of all students. To answer the second research question on activities and practices demonstrating leadership for learning, observations of leadership for learning practices of the superintendent and central office leaders to increase the academic performance of all learners, interviews, and review of district documents were coded and analyzed. Information gathered support how district leaders establish learning-focused partnerships with school leaders and external partnerships to build capacity,

allocate district resources for learning, utilize evidence-based decision making to improve the learning of all students, and serve as change agents within the context of external mandates and community considerations (Honig et al., 2010). Detailed field notes during each of the several on-site observations of administrative council meetings, district and school leadership meetings, and building walkthroughs were maintained throughout the case study research to ensure adequate documentation. An observation protocol (Appendix G) used guided me to collect evidence from multiple sources.

Third, district documents reflecting central office leadership and student achievement documents were collected and reviewed. Fifty-two district documents related to student learning were reviewed for this study, including annual Illinois School Report Cards, 2013-2018 Strategic Plan; District Core Values, Mission and Vision; System Assessment Executive Summary Report; Curriculum and Professional Development Plans; Professional Learning Calendar; State of the District reports; School Improvement Plans; Board of Education reports; district student achievement data; agendas and notes from administrative council, district, and building leadership meetings; and information available on district website. The documents collected were initially reviewed to support the five areas of action in leading for learning, such as the leadership focus on learning, professional learning communities, engaging external resources to foster student learning, and the collective efforts and coherent systems across the organization to monitor the improvement of student achievement. Relevant documents voluntarily provided by district leaders in the implementation of actions to increase student achievement also were reviewed.

The Data Collection and Analysis Matrix (Table 1) lists each research question and the corresponding collection sources and the type of data collection for each research question.

Table 1

Data Collection and Analysis Matrix

Research question(s)	Collection sources	How did I access the data?
What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent • Central office Administrators responsible for student learning • District documents • Illinois School Report Card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central office administrative focus group • Individual interviews with superintendent, central office administrators • Review of district school improvement and related documents, minutes of Board Meetings, Superintendent letters, Central office meeting agendas • District student performance
What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity of building principals and building-level leaders to increase academic performance of all students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent • Central office Administrators responsible for student learning • Building leadership teams • Building principals • District documents • Illinois School Report Card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central office administrative focus group • Individual interviews with superintendent, central office administrators • Review of district school improvement activities and documents, student performance data, professional learning opportunities, allocation of resources to student learning improvement, and related documents • On site observation of leadership activities and collaborative leadership meetings

Summary

This chapter described the case study methodology used to examine the central office leadership for learning in building capacity of a district to improve the achievement of all

students. Supporting the two research questions, the qualitative case study design, the selection of site and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures were presented. The participants of the study are the district superintendent, assistant superintendent, central office administrators responsible for the improvement of learning, the principals and assistant principals. The triangulation of multiple sources of data collection are used in the study to promote validity and reliability. Face-to-face interviews and focus group with the study participants, site observations, and review of documents related to district leadership for student improvement are included the data collection. The interviews are recorded and transcribed, the field notes of site observations are recorded, and related documents are gathered and reviewed. Through an ongoing systematic process of reflection, the data collection is organized and prepared for analysis. The coding of information emerges into themes related to the role of central office leadership in building the capacity for the improvement of learning is further analyzed in Chapter 5. The next chapter provides a description of the case study.

Chapter 4

The Case

Employing a qualitative single-case study methodology, the study investigated effective central office leadership practices in an exemplary district demonstrating gains in student achievement to better understand the behaviors, structures, and practices of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and central office directors in building the capacity of school leaders to improve the learning of all students. This chapter provides the case study description of the district, as well as descriptions of participants in this study. First, I depict the setting of the leadership study and provide information on the site selection and a detailed description of the research site. Secondly, I provide a description of the research participants and their efforts to focus on leadership for learning. To maintain the confidentiality of the study site and participants, pseudonyms were assigned.

Description of Study Site

The study site selected is Directions School District, an elementary district enrolling approximately 2,000 students in grades PK-8 in a suburban community outside the Chicagoland area. The community encompasses approximately 8 square miles and its population was approximately 16,000 according to the 2010 census. The racial and ethnic composition of the community reflects northern and eastern European heritage: a majority are White, with limited numbers of Asian, African-American, Hispanic and Latino/a residents. Most residents of the community are employed in management and professional occupational fields. According to the 2000 Census, educational attainment in this district of bachelor's degree (30%) and graduate or professional degree (11%) is similar to the Illinois statewide average of residents holding a bachelor's degree (26%) and graduate or professional degree (10%).

The Directions School District includes three grade-level centers, each located within a 5-mile radius. During on-site observations, I noted each school building was well-maintained and staff was welcoming. Central Primary School, built in 1970, serves approximately 700 students in early childhood through second grade. West Intermediate School, built in 2003, houses approximately 600 students in grades 3-5. Northern Middle School, built in 1997, contains grades 6-8 and serves approximately 840 students. The central office administration offices are housed within the middle school, accessible through a separate outside entrance.

The district student demographics (Table 2) reflect the limited ethnic diversity of the community in comparison to the state. According to 2016-2017 Illinois District Report Card, the student enrollment majority is White (83%), in comparison to the Illinois state average (49%). The district's enrollment of Black students (1%) is less than the state average (17%), Hispanic students (9%) comprise less of the district enrollment compared to the Illinois average (26%), and Asian student enrollments (5%) are comparable to state averages (5%). Approximately 14% are identified as low income, compared to the nearly 50% Illinois average. According to the 2017 Illinois District Report Card, the percentage of students transferring in or out of the district (3%) is lower than the state average student mobility rate (7%). Limited English proficient, or English learners, proportion (7%) is slightly below the state average (11%). Of the percentage of English Learners, the majority (83%) are non-Spanish speakers, with Polish and Lithuanian the main home languages other than English. A Polish bilingual program is required at both Central Primary and West Intermediate, as each building site has more than 20 students who speak Polish as their primary language. The proportion of students with disabilities (11%) is slightly lower than the 14% state average.

Table 2

Context of the School District

Student demographic data	District	State average
White students	82.6%	48.5%
Black	1.1%	17.0%
Hispanic students	8.5%	25.7%
Asian	5.1%	4.9%
American Indian	0.2%	0.4%
Multi-racial students	2.6%	3.4%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.1%
Low Income	14.0%	50.2%
Limited English Proficient	7.1%	10.7%
IEP	11.4%	13.9%
Homeless	0.6%	2.1%
Mobility	3.0%	6.9%

Note. Adapted from Illinois District Report Card.

The instructional setting, according to the Illinois Interactive Report Card, reflects the student-to-staff ratios and average class size in comparison to the state average. The district's average class size declined from 31 students in 2014 to 20 students in 2017, equivalent to the 2017 Illinois class average of 20 students. According to the 2016-2017 Illinois Report Card, of the 114 full-time certified classroom teachers in this district, 90% are female and 99% are White. The percentage of full-time certified teachers holding a master's degree (64%) is similar to the Illinois average (61%). The student-teacher ratio of 23:1 is greater than the 19:1 Illinois average. The pupil-administrator ratio in 2016-17 was 217:1, compared to the 190:1 state average. At the central office there is a superintendent, an assistant superintendent, a director of student services, and a director of technology. At each of the three buildings, there is a principal and an assistant principal. In total, there are 10 administrators in Directions School District.

Trend data reveal the district consistently spends less than the state average (Table 3). The district's instructional spending per pupil for 2016-17 was slightly less than \$6,000 and operational spending per pupil was \$11,716, which were approximately \$1,000 less than state

averages in each category. The district has maintained a balanced budget the past 5 years and has received an A+ bond rating and 4.0 financial recognition profile score. However, in the past, the district experienced a financial crisis and had eliminated positions such as special teachers, which required the general education teachers to teach art, and also eliminated the entire professional development budget. District records indicate a deficit fund balance prior to 2013, especially greater deficits in 2008 and 2009 during the period of the Great Recession. With careful fiscal management by the business manager, substantial district foundation and outside corporate partnership donations and contributions, and the careful oversight of Dr. Wright in the past 3 years, financial resources have become stabilized, allowing district leaders to reinstate funding for professional development and to provide additional staff time for collaborative professional communities.

Table 3

District Financial Expenditures

Expenditure data	District	State average
Per pupil operating expenditure		
2013	\$9,581	\$12,045
2014	\$10,489	\$12,521
2015	\$10,803	\$12,821
2016	\$11,716	\$12,973
Per pupil instructional expenditure		
2013	\$4,927	\$7,094
2014	\$5,321	\$7,419
2015	\$5,559	\$7,712
2016	\$5,968	\$7,853

Note. Adapted from Illinois District Report Card.

District performance on Illinois state assessments indicates an upward trajectory for grades 3-8 and, as noted in Table 4, exceed state averages. Over the past 3 years the district has outperformed Illinois public school districts averages and demonstrated a higher percentage increase in students meeting or exceeding state standards on the Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) examinations. In 2015 a higher percentage of district students in grades 3-8 met and exceeded state standards (42%) compared to Illinois state averages (33%). In 2016, 48% of Directions students in grades 3-8 met and exceeded state standards on the PARCC compared to Illinois state averages (33%). Also, in the 2017, 48% of Directions students in grades 3-8 met or exceeded state standards on the PARCC, compared to the state average (35%). The percentage of students indicated as ready for the next level are the students who met or exceeded state standards. According to the 2017 Illinois Report Card, the percentage of Directions students in grades 6-8 (46%) and the percentage of Directions students in grades 3-5 (50%) are ready for the next level is higher compared to state averages in grades 6-8 (32%) and in grades 3-8 (35%) are indicated as ready for the next level. Overall performance of Directions students in grades 3-5 on PARCC in the past 3 years demonstrated an increase in the percentage of students who met or exceeded state standards.

Table 4

Partnership for Assessment and College and Careers (PARCC) Composite Meets and Exceeds Performance in Grades 3-8

State of Illinois assessment	District average	State of Illinois average
2014-2015 PARCC		
Overall Performance	42.1%	32.9%
2015-2016 PARCC		
Overall Performance	47.7%	33.4%
2016-2017 PARCC		
Overall Performance	48.2%	34.1%
Ready for the Next Level		

Note. Adapted from Illinois District Report Card.

The PARCC performance levels for student populations of students with disabilities (IEP), English language learners (EL), and low-income students in Directions School District demonstrated a lower performance compared to all Directions students in grades 3-8 who met or exceed state standards. The met or exceeds PARCC composite performance of each these student

groups in grades 3-8 in Directions School District has remained the same between 2015 and 2017. The same percentage (29%) of low-income Directions students in grades 3-8 met the state standards on PARCC in 2015 and 2017 compared to the state averages of 33% in 2015 and 34% in 2017. Similarly, English learners in grades 3-8 demonstrated the same percentage (15%) of meeting state standards on the PARCC in 2015 and in 2017 in Directions School District, compared to the state averages on 9% in 2015 and 11% in 2017. The same percentage (8%) of Directions student with disabilities met state standards on PARCC in grades 3-8 in 2015 and in 2017, similar to the state averages 8% in 2015 and 9% in 2017.

The PARCC performance levels for student groups who did not meet expectations, partially met expectations, and approached expectations are considered not to have met state standards and are not ready for the next level. The percentages for all three performance designations for student populations were analyzed for changes in percentages within the levels of performance over 3 years. For the at-risk population of students who performed well below the state standards, the growth and movement of students from the “did not meet” category to the “approached” state standards category was examined. The populations of students with disabilities (IEP), English language learners (EL), and low-income students in Directions School District demonstrated an overall decrease in the percentage of students at the did not meet performance level over the past 3 years (Table 5).

Between 2015 and 2017, Directions students with disabilities demonstrated a greater overall composite percentage (18%) and overall math percentage (19%) of students moving from the “did not meet” category than English Language learners or low income students. In 2015, Directions students with disabilities in grades 3-5 demonstrated a higher percentage of not meeting state standards (57%) on overall PARCC composite performance compared to Direction

students in grades 3-8 with disabilities not meeting state standards (39%) on PARCC composite performance in 2017. In comparison, the state averages for students with disabilities in grades 3-8 who did not meet the performance level on composite PARCC reflected less of a difference at 43% in 2015 and 41% in 2017.

Over the same 3-year period, the percentage of English learner students and low-income students in Directions School District in grades 3-8 at the did not meet performance level on the composite PARCC demonstrated a minimal percentage change (2% and 3%, respectively) over a 3-year period. However, in math the percentage change (10%) of Directions EL students in grades 3-8 on the composite PARCC performance level of did not meet, was 28% in 2015 and decreased to 18% in 2017. In comparison, low-income students in grades 3-8 in Directions School District demonstrated a smaller decline (4%) in did not meet performance level in math. The state averages for low-income students in grades 3-8 at the did not meet performance level on composite PARCC was higher and demonstrated a minimal difference at 21% in 2015 and 22% in 2017.

Table 5

PARCC Did Not Meet Performance Level by Student Populations

Year	IEP	EL	Low income
PARCC Performance Level Did Not Meet			
2015	57%	27%	16%
2016	41%	24%	14%
2017	39%	25%	13%
ELA PARCC Performance Level Did Not Meet			
2015	58%	36%	14%
2016	49%	25%	16%
2017	50%	22%	16%
Math PARCC Performance Level Did Not Meet			
2015	57%	28%	17%
2016	44%	25%	13%
2017	38%	18%	13%

Note. Adapted from Illinois District Report Card

Achievement gaps denote differences in academic performance between demographic groups. PARCC composite assessment measures for grades 3-8 in 2015, 2016, and 2017 were examined for significant differences between low income and non-low income, black and white, Hispanic and white, male and female, and IEP and non-IEP. On the 2017 PARCC composite assessment score in grades 3-8, the achievement gap between low income students and non-low income students was much less for Directions School District (19%) compared to the state average (27%). The achievement gap of low income and non-low income students in grades 3-8 for the 2017 English Language Arts overall performance in grades 3-8 is considerably lower (19%) for the district compared to the statewide achievement gap (30%). On the 2017 Math overall performance in grades 3-8, the achievement gap of low income and non-low income students in Directions School District is slightly lower (22%) than the state average (29%).

Directions School District demonstrates a higher percentage of performance difference than Illinois state average differences on PARCC in grades 3-8 among the two populations, gender and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). On the 2017 PARCC composite scores in grades 3-8, the difference between male and female students was slightly higher for Directions School District (11%) compared to the state average difference (6%). On the 2015 PARCC composite scores in grades 3-8, the differences between IEP and non-IEP students was higher for Directions School District (37%) compared to the state average difference (29%). In 2017 PARCC composite scores in grades 3-8 was an even greater difference between IEP and non-IEP students for Directions School District (41%) compared to the average state average difference (27%).

Description of Participants

Central office participants in this study were the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Student Services, and Director of Technology. In addition, one Principal and one Assistant Principal were selected for each of the three schools. Thus, a total of 10 administrators, four at the central office level and six at the school level, participated in interviews and focus groups. Table 6 provides the participants' profiles, including pseudonym, gender, and administrative position.

Table 6

Participant Profile

Name	Gender	Position	Appointment location
Dr. Patricia Wright	Female	Superintendent	Central office
Ms. Susan Wilson	Female	Assistant Superintendent	Central office
Ms. Anne Smith	Female	Director of Student Services	Central office
Mr. James Jones	Male	Director of Technology	Central office
Mr. Jack Roberts	Male	Principal	Northern Middle
Ms. Jen O'Sullivan	Female	Assistant Principal	Northern Middle
Ms. Jessica Levine	Female	Principal	West Intermediate
Ms. Kathy Fullan	Female	Assistant Principal	West Intermediate
Ms. Donna Hill	Female	Principal	Central Primary
Ms. Eileen Reed	Female	Assistant Principal	Central Primary

Central office participants. Each central office administrator, with the exception of the Director of Technology had served as school administrators prior to being employed in this district. All four have been central office administrators in this district for 10 years or less, with two serving less than 5 years and one will be starting her first year with the district

Dr. Patricia Wright has a served a total of 22 years in education. She was beginning her fourth year as district Superintendent, having served one prior year as an acting superintendent in another district. Dr. Wright has over 10 years of administrative experience as a middle school principal and assistant principal in another district. She shared:

When I was asked to apply for this job, I was told there had been a lot of crisis and superintendent turnover; I did not realize how much at the time. I think any superintendent's success is doing what you need to do in a district. It was a big risk for me at the time, but I felt it was a good move.

Prior to her move into administration, Patricia was as a middle school language arts teacher for 3 years, and a high school English and speech teacher, with drama and theater responsibilities for 2 years. During those 2 years she completed her principal licensure program and upon graduation she was offered an assistant principal position in a nearby district. Patricia has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Speech Communications/English, Master of Education degree in Educational Administration, and Doctoral degree in Education. As described by the Northern Middle School principal, Jack Roberts:

I don't think I have ever worked with a better superintendent than Dr. Wright. She is organized beyond belief and probably the hardest worker that I have ever met. She never asks you to do something that is not good for kids. If it is good for kids, she is willing to do it. It is nice having someone who knows education in that position and that I can trust her to do the right thing. That is the biggest thing, is that I can trust her to do the right things.

Donna Hills, principal of the Central Primary School also spoke in support of the Dr. Wright:

One of the things being new to the district that I really do appreciate—which is vastly different than the previous district I came from—is Dr. Wright is very open and open to debate at our AC meetings, that you observed. People feel very comfortable about bringing things up we need to discuss. I feel I can go to her and she is going to support me either by guiding or giving me feedback and whatever I go to her with is going to be okay and it is not conditional. It is important to have a strong leader that supports you cause a lot happens as a building principal.

Dr. Wright reflected on her role as a leader:

Being able to be direct when you need to be, know when you can listen, and when to be able give a directive. I think knowing individuals and knowing collective groups of people and being able to bring people together. I think if you can build relationships with people and have good communication you can begin to move people. Being able to make really difficult decisions that are non- emotional, that are professional in nature, but knowing there is a personal piece in what we do; but be able to make hard decisions makes a good leader.

The second central office administrator is Susan Wilson, who began her role as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and Human Resources in July 2017. Susan was hired because of her strong knowledge and expertise in curriculum and instruction and her skills to help other district and school leaders grow as instructional leaders. This position previously included several general non-instructional responsibilities, including personnel administration. The current superintendent, Dr. Wright, restructured the responsibilities of the assistant superintendent to focus on adult and student learning. Specific responsibilities of the former employee in this position unrelated to the improvement of professional staff and student learning were reassigned to other existing personnel, including the Business Manager, Director of Operations, and central office clerical staff. According to Superintendent Wright, “the Assistant Superintendent will be working directly with the principals on unit planning.” When asked what role central office administrators fulfill in promoting the success of principals as they work to improve student learning, building leaders highlighted the work of Ms. Wilson. Jack reported, “the addition of Susan Wilson, the Assistant Superintendent, provides a specific curriculum and instruction direction that we were needing.” Jessica Levine, principal of West Intermediate School, shared her support of Ms. Wilson:

I would love to have the Assistant Superintendent sitting at building meetings with principals. She has a really good background and I think it is what she likes to do it, too. It will be such a positive impact on our district.

She continued, “The assistant superintendent attended Smart Goal training with principals last year, so she was directly involved in the decision making as we were going through it.” Jen O’Sullivan, Northern Middle School assistant principal, described positive changes that have occurred:

The Assistant Superintendent has taken over that position and completely changed her role of as Assistant Superintendent as compared to the former Assistant Superintendent.

We are much more supported in curriculum development and her main focus is curriculum and that is not something that was focused on before. The former Assistant Superintendent did everything and not focused on one major thing.

Previously, Susan spent 6 prior years as Curriculum and Instruction Director in a larger elementary district. Susan was hired by Directions School District in November 2016; during the 8 months prior to her July start date and while continuing to work in her previous school district, Susan attended all board of education meetings, several administrative council meetings, grade-level meetings, professional development sessions, and community events in Directions School District. She also met individually with central office administrators, building principals, and school leaders assigned to leadership or district committees or assigned as grade level facilitators, so that she could become more familiar with the Directions School District. Prior to moving into administration, Susan held both a teaching position and curriculum facilitator role in a smaller district for 3 years. She observed:

I really have an interest of being intentional of what we teach and why we teach to make an impact on students. From my perspective, I think school districts that don't have someone guiding the standards work, you are just deciding on what you think is best or ways you have always done or seen others, not really targeting and tailoring what is going to impact students. That has always been a passion of mine.

Susan holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Education, Master of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction with English as a Second Language endorsement, a Certificate of Advanced Study in Administration and Supervision, and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program.

Anne Smith, the third central office administrator, is Director of Student Services, with responsibilities for special education programs and related staff, at-risk preschool, bilingual and transition programs of instruction for English Language Learners, and the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Anne has worked in this district for 8 years, after previously serving for 7

years as student services administrator in another state. Anne was a social worker for 21 years and gradually took on leadership roles including as special education chairperson. She shared:

There were about six to eight persons in the role of Director of Student Services in about five years. It was a revolving door and could not get anything done. I felt I was called to the position and as a social worker I saw the school district as my client that needed to improve.

Anne shared her philosophical beliefs:

As a previous social worker, I feel what is really important is the piece we are all in it together. It is the collaboration piece that one of us is not nearly as good as a lot of us together; “it takes a village” attitude. I think I am really good with parents and I think parents are key in education. Engaging parents in making sure we are all moving together in one direction is important.

Superintendent Wright indicated the importance of her role to increase achievement of at-risk students:

Anne and I have a lot of conversation because I think we have major achievement gaps in every area in the district and she oversees special education and English language learners. I try to help and coach her and I have said to her, tell me what you need from me.

In interviews about the central office administration’s support for student learning, two assistant principals stated they work closely with the Director of Student Services in regard to special education students and IEP plans and highlighted that she also attends Student Support Team meetings in their buildings.

The fourth central office leader is James Jones, the Director of Technology, who has been employed in this district for 10 years. Prior to his current role, James worked as a network specialist under the supervision of the previous Director of Informational Technology. When that person retired, James was promoted into his current position, which has restructured to include additional responsibilities. Prior to his experience in this district, he worked as a network specialist in the private sector:

I learned on the job. I figured out what needed to be done by talking to people, reaching out to other resources and communicating with everyone what needed to be done. That is how I learned when I became a director.

Dr. Wright described the essential role of James position and his work:

The technology director is so important, and he has no idea how important he is. He was the network guy and was thrown into the technology position combining two positions without any leadership training at all. I tell him he has so much potential and to allow me to sit down and help you lead people.

Two other executive positions at the central office are the Director of Operations and the Business Manager. The Director of Operations is responsible for building maintenance, district transportation, and building operations and staff. The Business Manager, a Certified School Business Official, is responsible for the district's financial operations and reporting. Both participated in the first hour of the central office administrative council meetings with the central office staff and contributed to the district leadership discussions when related to operations or financial supports. However, since not directly responsible for leadership of student learning, they were not included as direct participants in this study.

Building-level participants. The building leaders in Directions School District also demonstrated a focus on learning and indicated through their interviews the efforts of the superintendent and central office administrators to prioritize professional and student learning in the district. At the building level, three principals and three assistant principals for each school participated in the study. The years of experience of the three principals working in this district varied from one principal with no prior years of experience in the district to a principal with more than 20 years in the district and each with educational experience in other districts or school settings prior to assuming their school leader positions in the district. The principals and assistant principals emphasized the focus on learning of adults and students in the district. Jack Roberts, Northern Middle School principal described his beliefs about curriculum: "I think the

curricular work we are doing right now is the most important work. I like creating a culture that is a good learning environment but also emphasis on good curriculum and instructional practices.

“He shared his support for student learning:

My position is multiple purposes. I am the curriculum and instruction leader for the school, so I take it very seriously. In addition, I am the motivator for the school. I want to be the cheer person for the student and staff and get them to want to be here at school.

Jennifer O’Sullivan, Northern Middle School assistant principal, also noted the focus on adult and student learning, “my role is to support teachers in any way I can to support learning and improve student achievement whether it is through strategies or ideas or suggestions for their teaching practices.” Jessica Levine, the principal for West Intermediate School who has the longest service in the district, with 23 years as the building administrator. She was initially hired as the district’s gifted coordinator and observed: “When I was first hired there was no building and grounds person at the district office, so I wore many hats and did all the buses and did all those things related to the building.” Her statement also supports how the central office in Directions School District supported instructional leadership by restructuring non-instructional responsibilities to other district personnel, such as the Director of Operations not directly responsible for student learning. Kathy Fullan, the assistant principal at West Intermediate School, in her role of preparing and analyzing data for the building, she indicated the central office has provided support for the needed increase in professional development, weekly administrative meetings, and the facilitation of district leadership team in the past few years:

We have a substantial presence from the central office. Our Superintendent Dr. Wright has attended at least half of our staff meetings and visits our building completing classroom walkthroughs several times per month. I appreciate the hands-on approach and the first-hand knowledge; it is not second-hand. This prevents miscommunication in what can be very bureaucratic in a school organization.

Donna Hill, Central Primary School principal shared: “I am responsible for increasing student achievement working with the teachers to provide the resources, the supports, the structures, and setting goals for our student achievements, following and developing action plans through cooperation and professional development.” Donna also shared that in her initial few months within the district, the superintendent support was important: “I think it has been challenging to have two new administrators, the assistant superintendent and myself being new.” The Central Primary School assistant principal, Eileen Reed explained the central office guides and sets direction through organizational and building goals and also has provided quite a bit of professional development on SMART goals, professional learning communities and external coaching support for unit and assessment writing.

Building leadership representatives also were included in data collection when meetings were observed. Three district-level leadership team meetings and three school leadership team meetings were observed. The district leadership team (DLT) consisted of approximately 30 participants, representatives of seven grade-level teachers from all three schools, one special area teacher, one parent, five union representatives, six building articulation leaders, one support staff member, and five central office leaders. The building leadership team (BLT) members who serve as building representatives to support school improvement process varied per building from 6-9 members. Certified staff representatives of each grade level, special area teachers, union representatives, student services staff, noncertified supportive staff, a parent, the principal, and assistant principals were members of each building’s BLT.

District Focus on Learning

The efforts of Directions School District reflect a district-wide culture focused on learning. Dr. Patricia Wright, Superintendent of Directions School District, was enthusiastic to

share the commitment, intentional efforts, and changes made under her leadership at the central office and across the district to increase the skills and knowledge of staff to increase students' success. Prior to Dr. Wright, the Directions School District had experienced turnover of several superintendents and financial challenges. Throughout the past 3 years, Dr. Wright has focused on a continuous improvement framework from a System Assessment Review conducted by Consortium for Educational Change.

Several practices initiated by Dr. Wright demonstrated the district's commitment to and focus on learning. First, Dr. Wright specified an increased collective focus on learning among students and professionals with a core value on the improvement of student learning. At the beginning of the school year and throughout the year, each staff member would be asked to reflect on their own values and mission on learning. Dr. Wright facilitated administrative and district leadership meetings and also directed school leadership meetings to align the vision, mission, and goals of the district. Second, within a bargaining unit agreement, starting with the current school year, the district implemented increased collaborative time devoted to grade-level and departmental PLC meetings to focus on increasing student performance. All district leaders completed training in Professional Learning Communities together to bridge central office and school leadership relationships. Third, Susan was hired for the current school year as the new central office leader to support the focused work in curriculum and instruction. The assistant superintendent position was restructured at the central office to help build the district's capacity for instructional leadership. Previous responsibilities of this position, not directly related to the improved learning of staff and students, were reassigned to other personnel. Dr. Wright and the central office administrators of Directions School District demonstrated learning-focused leadership. They were willing to share their leadership beliefs and practices to better understand

how superintendents, assistant superintendents, and Directors of Student Services and Technology build the capacity of school leaders to improve the learning of all students.

Summary

This chapter provided a case study description of the district and participants. The district selected for the study was based on a population of 1,000-2,500 students with a superintendent with at least 3 years of district experience and central office leaders demonstrating leadership for learning principles to promote a focus on student learning. In the past 2 years, this district demonstrated an increase in student achievement and the central office leaders in the study demonstrated a collective will to improve the performance of student learning. An elaboration of the main themes presented in Chapter 5 addresses the analysis the findings and draws conclusions from the data collection to support the two research questions of the study.

Chapter 5

Findings

The purpose of this single case study was to provide insight into the beliefs and practices of the district superintendent and central office administrators to improve teaching and learning and increase student achievement. This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected from the interviews with central office administrators and school leaders, repeated site observations, and review of district documents. The following research questions were explored in this study and guided the focus of the findings in this chapter:

1. What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving and the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?
2. What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity of building principal to increase academic performance of all students?

This chapter presents the major themes related to the research questions as identified from the data collection and analysis. In response to the first research question, the key elements to improve organizational learning and the academic performance of students emerged from the data are presented in three subsections. The first subsection identifies a theme involving a focus on learning through shared vision and goals. The second subsection presents the theme of collaborative communication that promotes a culture for organizational learning. The third subsection describes the theme of performance accountability and expectations through student-centered action planning.

The second research question revealed themes around the activities and practices of district leaders to build organizational capacity to increase student performance. The findings are presented in three subsections. The first subsection addresses strategic planning and alignment of

instructional improvement in curriculum unit development and one-to-one technology. The second subsection describes the collaborative group interactive activities of increasing professional learning through collaborative professional learning communities. The third subsection presents activities and support structures for data accountability and results-oriented attainment of goals.

Question One: What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving and the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?

This question called upon central office leaders to reflect and identify important leadership elements that they believed were essential to improving student learning. Supporting statements in individual interviews, administrator focus group discussion, and a review of district documents and observations identified several key themes. The most evident element is a shared focus on learning. Effective communication and collaboration is identified as a second key element. The third key element identified in the data collection is performance accountability.

The superintendent and executive central office team members identified several leadership priorities to improve student learning. Within a focus group discussion, central office leaders identified the following key elements: shared vision, shared leadership across the district, alignment of a standards-based curriculum, consulting partnerships for professional learning, collaborative data decision making, and a supportive learning environment. During the focus group, each participant was asked to rank the key elements and then to share their top three priorities. Shared vision and goals focused on learning was ranked as the first or second priority by all participants as making a difference in organizational learning and student achievement.

The data supporting a focus on shared vision on learning was collected and described in the following section.

Shared focus on learning. District documentation reviewed designates a focus on student learning. The first core value of Directions School District is excellence in student learning. As stated within many district and online district documents, “We Value: Excellence in student learning that encourages engagement and critical thinking in all aspects of learning.” As listed in the strategic plan and on the district website information, the mission of Directions School District is “to provide students with the academic, social and emotional foundation to lead a productive and fulfilling life.” The vision of Directions School District is, “We strive to be a high performing school district that fosters innovative learning, collaborative communication, and responsive citizenship.” Patricia Wright emphasized her role:

My job as superintendent, I always believe, is to create the space and put structures in place to make it happen . . . if you are really committed to the why . . . of why we exist . . . is for students to achieve. . . . At the end of the day, kids come here to learn.

Patricia described leadership for learning as “being able to have a clear vision and picture of what achievement and growth looks like for every single child and individualizing.” She was observed in weekly administrative meetings with central office and building administrators and district leadership meetings with representatives from each school asserting that the mission is why we exist, the values are what we stand for, and the vision is where we are headed. To ensure her administrators maintained a consistent focus on learning, Dr. Wright was observed beginning the first district leadership meeting of the school year with a clear statement:

We are the keeper of the strategic plan—our vision, mission, and goals—our focus for today. We have done a lot of work but still some disconnect, and we are not having conversations on what some of these things mean. At the end of the last year we brought key stakeholders together. It was awesome. We had conversations around five big areas which is the strategic plan. . . . What are all of the things that is working and what is not working?

Dr. Wright believes:

To me, if you are a strong leader in leadership for learning you are looking at the entire system and that means that your teachers and staff are learning along the way as well and we don't become stagnant and also differentiate for all learners.

With a focus on learning, doing the right work to support the district vision and goals was further supported as Dr. Wright clarified her purpose when she regularly visited the school buildings:

I don't go in to evaluate a teacher; I go in to evaluate the system. I come in and talk a look and walk with the principal. Then I go out in the hallway and ask the principal, "Is this aligned with our goals? Is this where we want to be headed?" I think the true leadership comes from being able to diagnose those particular pieces that are not effective to meeting our goals.

Assistant Superintendent, Susan Wilson, shared the superintendent's perspective on vision:

Vision is most important to lay out the scope of the work that lies ahead and is one of the most important pieces of leadership that guides and steers the staff of the direction where we are going that is clear and concise. Then we look at the skills that are necessary to meet that vision—whether human skills or personal component amongst the staff and administrators. Clearly communicating action steps is another component that helps all stakeholders see their role and meeting the vision and direction.

The Director of Student Services and Director of Technology shared fewer insights in regard to a shared vision. However, both indicated their roles are to support student learning. As noted by James Jones, the Director of Technology, "not focus on the bad, but focus on the good is important." Both appreciated when a leader has a vision and knows how to implement in addition to having the ability to communicate and focus on the right things as a leader.

Within a focus group discussion, central office participants estimated the daily percentage of their time dedicated to learning. Dr. Wright, Susan Wilson, and Anne Smith indicated approximately 75%-85% of their daily practices are focused on learning. James Jones commented that his role is about providing access to learning through the student use of

technology, although he estimated that no more than 10% of his work directly affected student learning. James Jones, who selected shared vision and goals as the number one priority, indicated:

I do not consciously think a shared vision and shared goals is on my mind, even though I know it is the most important, I do not consciously think about that throughout the day. . . . I know our mission and values are listed on our website . . . helps me move forward . . . it is the guiding light for the right thing to do.

Anne Smith indicated all elements are important but believes the overall the focus should be on learning. She shared that her beliefs come from a student services perspective and ranked orderly and supportive environment as a first priority, and ranked vision and goals focused on student learning as the second priority. Susan Wilson, the Assistant Superintendent commented:

A primary function of our role as a leader is the alignment of standards-based instruction driving the focus on student learning which then communicating a shared vision drives what that looks like. . . . To me personally, it always comes back to student learning, and is doing this going to impact the students? It helps us to determine our priorities.

Susan links vision and learning:

I would connect vision to innovative learning. The innovative learning is not about just right now but for the years to come, responsible citizenship connection to the community and world. To me personally, it always comes back to student learning and is doing “this” going to impact students within our district. Is it fluff? It helps us determine our priorities.

Similarly, Anne Smith, the Director of Student Services stated, “I think overall the focus should be on learning. Innovative learning is key and is going to be developing responsible citizens.”

Additionally, the building leaders were asked to describe the roles of central office administrators in supporting a learning-focused partnership to promote the success of principals in their work to improve student learning. Building leaders reported that central office leaders must be able to focus on the right things and set goals for student achievement. When asked about aspects of leadership support from the central office, the principal of West Intermediate,

Jessica Levine stated, “No, I don’t think we could do this work alone ever.” Jack Roberts, the Northern Middle School principal, highlighted the importance of a consistency throughout the district:

I could not do this work without the central office because my focus may not be the same as the other schools. I would be engaging in different work than the primary or intermediate building was engaging in. I have so much to do here in my building; I could not coordinate the work without a centralized office that coordinates the work we are doing.

Donna Hill, the principal of Central Primary agreed with the need to align district practices:

I view my position as principal as someone who needs to embody the district vision, mission, and core values. I think we are the conduit from the district office, especially when it comes to something new from the district office. It is important in developing an understanding and buy-in that we are all one district. So, making sure I have a good understanding of the vision and where the superintendent is taking the district so I can embed that in the building and make it come to life in action.

In my observations of district and school leadership team meetings, I found that several documents now developed and used within the district clearly demonstrated a focus on alignment and focus on learning across all buildings. Examples were the trimester curriculum pacing guides and the development on unit plans in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics during grade-level Professional Learning, as well as district ELA and math steering meetings. It was noted by the superintendent and the assistant superintendent within the administrative meeting that there was a need for vertical articulation of the scope and sequence of learning outcomes from grade to grade and from building to building. The superintendent then asked, “So how are we going to get this work done?” Her questioning led to an open discussion among the administration. After a collaborative discussion, the superintendent’s question, “so what is the action we can document in our notes for today?” demonstrates her ability to facilitate from an area of need to a plan of action. Efforts were being made by central office leaders to provide opportunities for communication and collaboration among the three schools to develop

coherence and alignment of learning. The superintendent and central office leaders demonstrated efforts to build the capacity of Directions School District by operating as a coherent system to improve student learning. To support the alignment, Superintendent Wright shared:

I always felt the central office was completely disconnected from the schools, here in particular; every school operated like their own little school district. I have done everything I can to infiltrate that system over the course of 4 years. To me if you are a strong leader in leadership for learning you are looking at the entire system, and that means that your teachers and staff are learning along the way as well and we don't become stagnant and differentiate for them . . . systems take time and takes communication and you have to just keep cycling back over and over again.

Dr. Wright emphasized the need for interconnectedness in the organization and recognized that all people in the system are learners:

With a lack of system and lack of process, people just do what they do to keep it moving . . . but we at central office have a responsibility to give them a really solid platform to do the work we need them to do.

These comments by Superintendent Wright lead to the next emergent theme on collaborative communication. Overall, shared vision and goals focused on learning was identified as a key element in improving the organizational learning and performance of students by central office leaders and by building principals.

Effective communication. In addition to a shared focus on student learning, another key element that emerged from the data collection was the necessity of communicating the district goals and focus on student learning with staff, parents, and the community. A review of district documents noted that communication was a key element in sharing the district's vision, mission, goals, and expectations for student learning. Communication serves to develop a common understanding and shared ownership of the district's focus on learning. As highlighted in many of the district documents, the vision and goals of student learning is communicated to everyone in the district. The Vision of Directions School District states, "We strive to be a high performing

school district that fosters, innovative learning, collaborative communication, and responsible citizenship.” Communication is also listed under the Goal 4 of the Directions School District Goals and Priorities for 2017-2018: “Build a partnership with families and community through improved consistent, effective, and transparent communication.” In addition, communication is listed in the strategic plan as an objective under the leadership and organizational goal, “to strengthen the district by building on the district’s successes and achievements by continuing to build communication with staff.”

Meaningful dialogue and communication around adult and student learning was valued to develop a common understanding. All central office administrators referred to effective communication channels as essential to build the capacity of the organization. Superintendent Wright commented:

Effective communication, building relationships with people, being a good listener, being able to be direct when you need to be, and know when you need to listen. I think if you can build relationships with people and have good communication, you can begin to move people in that direction.

Anne Smith, Director of Student Services, supported the superintendent’s views on effective communication is to include others in build the capacity of the organization to support student learning: “A good leader has to be a good listener, reflective. I think that in all of people businesses you need to have skills of communication and making sure people feel engaged in the process.”

When I asked building leaders how communication processes work among central office and building principals, several administrators related the importance of honest and open discussions. The Northern Middle School principal, Jack Roberts stated, “they (central office) are definitely someone to bounce an idea off, open to ideas through phone call, emails, or dropping by saying hey what do you think about this. The door is definitely open at central

office.” Donna Hill, the Central Primary School principal, also noted: “having dialogue, to talk about what is going on and being open and honest about the struggles and successes, and having an open relationship with the members at central office is critically important.” She continued:

Having an open relationship with the members at central office so we can be very candid what is going on and being open and honest about the struggles and the success we have in the building. It is hugely important for them to provide that support. Moving forward, if there is something that is not working for the building—and maybe that it is more of a systemic issue of why it is not working—and having those dialogues to talk about those pieces and parts is critically important.

Communication about student performance between central office and building principals was described by Jessica Levin:

The constant conversations we have about student achievement and the open dialogue we have at the table at our administrative council meetings is on the agenda a lot. We need to have more discussions about data and the impact of data up through the grade levels.

Providing a different perspective, Jen O’Sullivan, the Northern Middle School assistant principal, shared her perception that central office communications sometimes were top-down, providing little opportunity for dialogue. As evidence, she mentioned the superintendent’s recent decision not to have assistant principals in attendance at administrative council meetings. Eileen Reed, the Central Primary School assistant principal, and Kathy Fullan, the West Intermediate School assistant principal, also reacted negatively to this decision by Dr. Wright. However, agendas and meeting notes related to efforts to improve student learning are shared with the assistant principals by each principal, who meet regularly with assistant principals to share information from district meetings.

Communication is vital to build the learning capacity of the district. As listed within the System Assessment Report of an external district review completed by the Consortium for Educational Change, an objective under the area of guaranteed and viable curriculum is clarifying and communicating the curriculum. District-wide initiatives and timelines of the work

in the district to improve student learning are communicated to all staff. An emphasis on communication with faculty is evident through the district's use of a Google platform through which central office leaders share district documents, including notes from district and building leadership team meetings and other collaborative team meetings. Although not directly stated, communication is embedded within collaborative relationships and professional dialogues within PLC time.

During the district's annual institute to start the school year, the Superintendent asked the educators why they exist and what do they value; many responded that they valued the district culture promoting a willingness to listen, the professionalism presented during meetings, and opportunities for group dialogue. The weekly PLC time also helps to build the collaborative capacity of the district to improve student learning. The district's emphasis on transparent and collaborative communication maintains a culture for professional learning.

During a leadership meeting, I observed Dr. Wright informing the administrators she had not seen a clear action plan that communicated to parents how the district intended to increase the rigor and complexity of student learning. Susan Wilson, Assistant Superintendent, shared the Superintendent's emphasis on communications with the community: "communicating action steps is another component of leadership, clearly communicated action steps and plans." She emphasized a common understanding of the work to be done among administrators and staff members that generated a shared ownership. Dr. Wright also collaborated individually with each principal and her/his building leadership team in the development of school improvement plans. Each plan communicates the instructional expectations for increased student performance and specific actions to achieve student learning goals. Regular communications emerged through the data collection as a tool to inform and engage parents and the community in the learning process.

A separate goal of the strategic plan, titled Communications, Partnership, and Outreach, included four objectives to improve communications, key messages, and communication standards with stakeholders. In addition, in a district document titled Our Goals and Priorities, the fourth of the five goals is titled Engaged Families and Community. A priority under this goal for the 2017-2018 school year was to build partnerships with families and community through improved consistent, effective, and transparent communication. The importance of communication with all district stakeholders was also evident in my observations of Dr. Wright's meetings with others. During an administrative council meeting, she pointed out that the district's PARCC results, when compared with surrounding high performing school districts, were lower. She asked, "how do we communicate with staff and the community we need to do better?" On several occasions observed, Dr. Wright communicated the expectation of the community is for Directions to be a high performing district. Referencing a recent survey asking parents if they were satisfied with the work of the district, she shared several responses during an administrative council meeting and noted that being candid and honest with parents is crucial. Expressing concerns on behalf of the school board, she gave the following direction during an administrative meeting:

The board does not want us to say everything is great. Our board wants us to say, "Let's celebrate this, but here are the areas we are not great and here is what we are going to do to improve it." They don't want us to communicate a Pollyanna view of what the district is.

Communication about the student learning is evident through documents posted on the district website. School board meeting agendas and board briefs, a report of items discussed, and action items taken can be located on district website under the Board of Education. The Director of Technology, James Jones, indicated his responsibility to share information on the district website and social media:

The ability to communicate is important. A leader has the answer, but also when you don't, have the ability to communicate calmly. When bad things happen know who you have to talk to, have superiors work on it instead of spreading bad things out there. You have to know when and what information is appropriate to communicate.

Other district and school information on student learning is available on the district website including the Superintendent's page and weekly principals' newsletters to parents. District-level communications to community stakeholders is also provided through two social media networks- Twitter and Facebook where leaders share information on student learning.

The use of effective communication supports and reflects a shared, interrelated, and interdependent relationship across all stakeholders to promote a culture of learning to advance the organization. Overall, from the analysis of data collected, communication of the district's efforts to improve student learning among staff and the community is another element identified as a key to develop the culture of a collective organizational capacity. To advance organizational capacity, an emphasis on results is also revealed in the data collection, as described in the next section.

Performance accountability. The third key element identified in the data analysis is performance accountability through results-oriented action planning to improve teaching and learning. Several statements about action planning were evident during interviews, observations, and within district documents. As stated by the Assistant Superintendent, Susan Wilson:

Clearly communicating some action steps is another component of leadership that helps the stakeholders see their role in meeting the vision and the direction of the district. Not just an analysis of where we are now but where we are going and how we are going to get there. I really think when it comes down to breaking apart what are some of the key skills it would be supporting staff with skills set that the need to get there and providing the resources to be able to do that.

The principal of Central Primary, Donna Hill similarly stated the role of an action plan:

I am responsible for increasing student achievement; working with the teachers to provide the resources, the supports, the structures and setting goals for our student

achievements and following and developing action plans with cooperation, collaboration, and professional development.

Several building principals mentioned central office assistance as they developed building-level action plans to support the district goal of increasing the percentage of students performing at the 70th percentile. As Dr. Wright explained:

At the administrative level, we have a district scorecard and we expect the buildings to create building targets that are aligned to the district. The professional learning communities are to create goals to reach that. So, for example, if we say at the beginning of the year we know that 50% of our children were at the 70th percentile, then we may want 70% of our students by year-end to be there. The grade-level teams are expected to ask what is the action plan to put in place to make the percentage go up.

When interviewed as to the aspects of leadership support from the central office to support the achievement of all students, Donna Hill continues to affirm:

I feel like the most important piece is that I am aligned with the district and the rest I can figure out what that means in terms of action and implementation in my building. As long as we are on the same page and we are eye to eye then I can take the rest of it and operationalize it.

The 2013-2018 Strategic Plan for the Directions School District clearly communicates student-centered focus goals for the entire organization. As stated, the goal to improve curricular and extra-curricular programming for students to increase access, participation, and student achievement is supported by the following objective: “review student performance needs and develop action planning to increase expectations for all students for greater student success.” Directions School District has a document listing the key indicators and measures aligned to the district strategic plan to monitor and report district progress. Each school’s leadership teams presented their School Improvement Plans to the Board of Education, which contained action plans to support the five district goals and priorities: (a) student achievement, (b) supporting learning environment, (c) quality staff, (d) engaged families and communities, and (e) resources. Each school improvement plan included identified improvement areas, a supporting goal,

measurable steps, and a 3-year timeline indicating budget needs, assessment methods, and targets. Each school leadership team utilizes the application of the SMART School Improvement Process with focused on the academic needs of students. Teachers and administration work collaboratively to create goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound (SMART). The greatest areas of need are identified using a Zone Analysis chart with multiple measures identified as the indicators for monitoring progress toward the goal. Key indicators and the work for each of the goals are outlined for each building school improvement plan. During administrative meetings I observed that agenda items addressed student learning issues, including a discussion of areas of improvement identified in the System Assessment Executive Summary Report. Based on the system assessment recommendations, discussions and actions to be taken by central office leaders demonstrated a results orientation to adjust teaching practices to improve learning.

Overall, the major element that emerged in this study was the district's priority on establishing a shared vision and goals for learning. Meaningful collaborative communication, promoted through the use of professional learning communities with all stakeholders at the district, school, and classroom levels, emerged as another key element in the improvement of organizational learning. The third leadership element is a results-oriented accountability of student performance measuring the effectiveness of the district goals and professional collaborative actions.

Question 2: What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective

organizational capacity of building principal to increase academic performance of all students?

This question explored the activities and practices of central office leaders in this district to improve student learning. Three themes were identified, and the findings are presented in three subsections. The first subsection describes strategic planning in this district focusing on the central office leadership in promoting curriculum and instruction alignment across the district. The second subsection presents the emergent theme of the practice of collaborative interactive professional learning teams and external partnership activities to build the collective capacity of the district. The third subsection describes the student centered reflective practices of assessing student performance and developing action plans to provide a system of supportive structures for greater student success.

Strategic planning. The 2013-2018 strategic plan was currently being revised through collaborative meetings with key stakeholders, to continue the improvement of student learning to support all learners in this district. In the final year of the 5-year strategic plan, the superintendent facilitated strategic planning sessions to revisit and revise the district mission, core values, and vision with stakeholders including teachers, board members, central office administrators, building administrators, and union representatives. Within the strategic plan, the district goals and objectives are categorized into five areas: organization goals; student-centered focus goals; curriculum, instruction, and technology goals; and communication, partnership goals; and operations goal. The first district goal and priority is to provide excellence in programs and services to improve student growth and achievement. According to Patricia Wright, the strategic plan is what should guide the organization:

In a review of 15 different strategic plans, it is going to be student achievement on the top, but how we get there looks different in every district. We have a great vision statement that people could regurgitate, but people did not understand the importance of the strategic plan. We have not really dug into what that means. So, we have begun to have conversations about if this is our vision and mission, what does this mean to us? If you don't collectively know why we exist in this organization, there is no point of us doing anything else, so we brought it back to take a look at it. We started the school year asking: what is our why? Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our three big initiatives? A collective focus on continuous school improvement is demonstrated through the leadership of Dr. Wright and Susan Wilson, who take the lead to execute the district mission, values, and goals with all district stakeholders. At the opening institute for the 2017-2018 school year, Dr. Wright facilitated and engaged all staff members to list "what is their why?" and "why do they come to work?" The responses were then transcribed as staff value statements, separated into general categories, and distributed back to staff. These statements then were revisited along with the vision and mission at the first district leadership meeting in a small group activity. The superintendent also requested central and building administrators to review and comment at a district administrative council meeting. In addition to facilitating the strategic planning meetings, Dr. Wright led the district administrative meetings with central office and building principals and the district leadership meetings with district stakeholder representatives from each building and the community. The assistant superintendent scheduled and facilitated the curriculum unit planning meetings. Dr. Wright, Susan Wilson, and Anne Smith attended professional learning communities with staff to further the knowledge and skills and support the work of unit development. Susan scheduled the professional development needed for staff on teaching practices to support standards-based teaching and assessment

development. Both met with building principals and conducted walkthroughs to assess instructional needs and support building leaders in the work to support district goals.

The central office leaders of Directions School District, in collaboration with school administrators and teacher leaders, identified and emphasized the following three district priorities for the 2017-2018 school year: (a) curriculum development of units of study, (b) use of professional learning communities, and (c) initiate a one-to-one learning platform. Each is aimed to improve both adult and student learning. The central office leaders builds the district capacity by aligning the initiatives across the three schools, monitoring the effective use of professional learning communities, and supporting professional development to implement the three district priorities. Central office leaders scheduled professional development sessions, identified learning targets around the development of curriculum units, and facilitated collaborative PLC teams to analyze student performance data and set measurable student performance targets. Timeframes and supports were established by central office to provide professional development for initiating one-to-one technology in the district. Each central office leader was involved in the three focus areas of the district to improve teaching and learning.

District-wide weekly administrative meetings involved the Superintendent, the central office administrators, and building principals in regular discussions regarding their progress on the following items: the alignment of unit planning, alignment of tools for presenting and analyzing student performance data, establishing student performance percentage targets, and the alignment of curriculum and instruction. Anne Smith, Director of Student Services reported: “since Susan has been on board, she has focused us on making sure our systems are the same and we have structures in place for unit writing and data analysis.” At a school board meeting, Susan

Wilson the curriculum and professional development plans, including professional learning targets and the calendar of job embedded professional learning for 2017-2018.

Central office leaders collectively support the district-wide common goals and district initiatives for school improvement. All central office leaders work collaboratively with the building-level administrators to maintain an aligned, district-wide focus on student learning, rather than for the building administrators to work independently.

Collaborative learning teams. The second emergent theme of district practices and activities from the data was the emphasis on collaborative work to achieve the district's goal on student learning. In 2014-2015 the district contractually paid for a district-wide system assessment completed by the Consortium for Educational Change (CEC). CEC is an Illinois non-profit, membership-based organization whose mission is to collaborate with teachers, school and district administrators, school board members, and union leaders to improve student learning (ISBE, 2017). A team consisting of a CEC consultant leader, four teachers, and an assistant principal from other Illinois districts. The team reviewed district documents, scheduled a site visit, and held over 300 stakeholder interviews. The 30-page Systems Assessment Executive Summary Report provided feedback of overall strengths and opportunities for improvement was developed and shared with the district and community. The principles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) was used as a lens to identify strengths and opportunities for system improvement in this district. CEC conducted interviews with administrators, faculty, staff, students, and parents and conducted school observations. The report identified strengths and opportunities for system improvement in this district. Three big idea indicators representing best practice and continuous improvement frameworks were suggested: (a) focus on learning, (b) focus on collaboration, and (c) focus on results. The report was communicated to all district

stakeholders and recommendations implemented under the leadership of Dr. Wright. Two major areas for improvement recommended included establishing a collaborative culture and a focus on clear communication, collaboration, and shared-decision making focused on learning. As a result of the report, district leaders restructured school schedules to provide sufficient time for grade-level and departmental PLC collaboration throughout the district. The engagement of staff in PLCs is one of three focused district-wide priorities. Dr. Wright reported the district has put time, effort, and resources behind establishing and effectively implementing PLCs to promote effective teaching practices and monitor the improvement student achievement. Dr. Wright said the previous year the district sent 20 teachers and school leaders to a 3-day professional development training on PLCs so they could develop the capacity to guide effective collaborative team meetings to examine student achievement and engage in problem-solving to improve student performance.

In collaboration with union representatives, a contractual agreement was reached to allocate additional 30 minutes of daily time within each school for professional learning communities. As a result, each school now has regularly scheduled weekly PLC Team meetings. As observed, grade-level teams consisting of 8-10 teachers in grades K-5 meet at the primary and intermediate schools twice weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 7:35-8:35 am for PLC collaboration. At the middle school, PLC teams meet 57 minutes daily during grade-level team planning time. The PLC grade-level teams in PK-5 and departmental teams in Grades 6-8 focus on listening and learning together to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning and to move the school, team, classroom, and student to a higher level of performance. PLC stakeholders include grade-level articulation leaders, grade-level or departmental teachers, special area staff, and principals and assistant principals when available. I observed a fifth-grade

level PLC developing an ELA standards-based unit plan and common assessments. Jessica Levine indicated as the principal it is difficult to attend each grade-level PLC because they meet at the same time, but she often rotates grade levels with the assistant principal.

The Assistant Superintendent is scheduled to attend many PLC meetings at each grade level to provide curriculum support on curriculum learning targets, assisting teachers with developing instructional units that identify desired result, determine assessment evidence, and plan for instructional experiences. Assistant Superintendent Wilson shared:

I have inserted myself 5-6 times over the course of this school year at each grade level and each content PLC meetings as a participant and facilitator to further the curriculum work. . . . We are also incorporating articulation leaders at each of the grade levels to help with the facilitation on unit development with a professional learning community. They were all trained at the PLC workshop held in the summer with Richard DuFour. We are now meeting with them as a district group to talk about how you support your PLC.

Within a focus group discussion, the Assistant Superintendent Wilson ranked the importance of PLCs a third priority in comparison to her first priority, the alignment of standard based curriculum, and her second priority, a focus on student learning monitored by evidence-based decision making. According to Ms. Wilson, PLC is an essential resource, which organizes the faculty in an effective way to support the academic and social development of the child. She commented, “Together staff are learning and building off each other’s skills sets and collaborating around meeting the district needs.”

Anne Smith, the Director of Student Services, also rated PLC as the third priority of leadership tasks:

We moved to PLCs last year across the district. PLCs are student and learning focused, even though sometimes it is more nuts and bolts. Like this morning I was at a PLC meeting where we talked about a compliance issue and writing a deviation to have kids in the right learning setting . . . indirectly it is about learning. . . . Staff being intimately involved in PLC is critical how we implement what we do in terms of teaching and learning.

Anne Smith attends the Early Childhood PLC that has primarily focused on developing blended opportunities for preschool students. She commented:

I also participate in school-level student problem-solving meetings, and my role is to maintain the whole child perspective. Student Support Teams [SST] was here when I got here. I think they have morphed: The PLC is set up differently, but the SST is more special education and student support professionals talking about individual students.

Each of the central office leaders are involved with PLCs throughout the district. However, during an interview, James Jones, the Director of Technology, indicated he had not been asked to attend a PLC. However, James does facilitate biweekly meetings with district technology assistants and also attends the district leadership team meetings. Although he had not attended the PLC training and may not have a formal understanding of the PLC language and practices, he reported that his role is to facilitate collaboration with technology assistants and support district priorities during district leadership meetings.

Building principals unanimously supported Professional Learning Communities, and each acknowledged the district-wide commitment to PLCs. Three of the four principals commented on the impact of sending 20 staff members to a 3-day PLC training. Susan Wilson and Anne Smith from the central office attended with all principals and assistant principals, as well as one building articulation leader, one special education teacher, one social worker, and one psychologist from each school. Donna Hill, Principal of Central Primary School, commented:

The articulation leaders is the point person at each grade level and [they] help lead and guide their team in the implementation of the PLC. . . . They are kind of the conduit-- somewhat of a liaison between myself and the grade-level teams.

West Intermediate School Principal, Jessica Levine, explained the importance of the PLC Institute training on building district capacity:

That is a big group of people that can make a significant change in our district. There is a real structure to PLC and the steps that have to happen in PLC. I think we were not as sophisticated to be doing years ago. The Assistant Superintendent has started to attend some PLCs and the Superintendent attended at the end of last year at all the grade levels. The Assistant Superintendent is going to be instrumental to keep the group going at a district level because she has made the commitment to keep bringing them back together at after school meetings.

Mr. Roberts, the Northern Middle School Principal shared:

I make an emphasis to be in professional learning community meetings by subject area where we are planning our curriculum, our goals, our units, and also common formative and summative assessments. Last week at PLC meeting I asked them, “Show me evidence that the students are mastering essential standards from unit one? . . . How will you know they are learning?” . . . This year the district office and principals have combined to ensure that the professional learning communities in subject areas are maintaining that focus and developing good units that will measure student learning as the priority linked to the standards.

Superintendent Wright facilitates regularly scheduled weekly Administrative Council meetings, District Level Leadership meetings, and individual administrator meetings. Weekly Administrative Council meetings are held on Wednesdays, 8:00-11:00 am. As I observed, the first hour the superintendent meets with the central office cabinet, which includes the assistant superintendent, director of student services, director of technology, director of operations, and the business manager. This portion of the meeting focuses on matters unrelated to student learning, including the coordination and articulation of managerial and operations matters. The director of operations and the business manager are then dismissed and the remaining administrative time includes the building principals and, when appropriate to the agenda, the assistant principals. As I observed during meeting, the principals were expected to create and share their building goals, targets, and monitoring tools. Each discussed how their building goals aligned with the district scorecard and district goals. According to Superintendent Wright, as a result of this focus at administrative meetings, there is greater alignment across the district of teaching practices and assessments and less fragmented efforts of each building developing

separate goals and evaluative measures. Given the focus, support, and resources from central office, there is a greater capacity of school leaders for developing more ambitious school improvement plans that use data to support student learning gains.

In addition, Superintendent Wright indicated she meets individually with the building principals regularly and has asked the building principals to meet as a group, independent of the central office administration, to coordinate and articulate practices and activities across the district. As Donna Hill, Central Primary Principal, indicated when asked to describe what a professional community looks like among central office and principals:

The district itself is still trying to figure it out as an administrative team. I think in order to establish a PLC as an administrative team the focus has to be on learning and have dialogue about the initiatives in the buildings, what we are learning about implementation and talk and disaggregate the data, less about administrivia types of things.

The District Leadership Team, now in its second year, focuses on listening and learning together primarily to the reflective work of the school sites, to continuously improve teaching effectiveness and student learning, and to move the district to a high level of performance. This team has replaced the former district-wide School Improvement Team. Members include seven grade-level teachers selected by their respective building leadership teams, one special area teacher from student support team, one parent, five union representatives selected from the union executive board, six building leaders selected by the superintendent, one support paraprofessional selected by the non-certified union executive board, and five central office leaders. Superintendent Wright explained the importance of have a parent voice on this team:

At our district leadership team, we have a parent representative. She is a former teacher, she is smart, has good ideas, and not afraid to speak up. That is uncomfortable for people sitting around the table, because I think in education we say we have parent representation but really just want them to come and listen. I will always support parent input in decision making for continuous improvement.

The district leadership meetings occur once monthly from 4:00-5:00 pm. As I observed in a meeting I attended, the monthly agenda states the roles and responsibilities of the District Leadership Team: (a) sets clear direction of the strategic plan, the mission, core values, and long-range goals and communicates annual priorities both internally and externally; (b) progress monitors and report on strengths and weaknesses for the district, monitors key data sources to track success and monitor and adjust current goals as needed; (c) empower and supports schools and school leadership teams creating unity by building trust, respect and a student centered culture; and (d) assesses and improves through a shared decision model promoting continuous improvement. Two observations of district improvement team meetings revealed respectful dialogue among engaged participants facilitated by the superintendent and documented through the shared Google agenda and notes. Meetings included reviewing the agenda; highlighting shared celebrations focused on district mission, strategic plan, and goals; and discussion of action plans.

I observed three School Leadership Team meetings noting that they focused on listening and learning together, primarily through the reflective work of the school teams to continuously improve teaching effectiveness and student learning and to move the district and school to a higher level of performance. Participants included grade-level representatives or the articulation leader, special staff, support staff or paraprofessional staff representative, a parent, assistant principal, and principal. At two of the building leadership teams observed, team members worked on shared agreements of building goals and actions based on student performance data.

The district also provided additional collaboration opportunities. Building staff can serve on the K-8 Steering Committee English Language Arts (ELA) and the Math Task Force facilitated by the Assistant Superintendent. A Technology Committee focuses on one-to-one

initiative implementation, and participants include parents, students, certified staff, school principals, Director of Technology, Business Manager, Superintendent, and board members. Under the shared supervision of the Director of Technology, building Principals and the Assistant Superintendent, the district recently reassigned one staff member and one teacher to the role of digital technology integration specialists who provide job embedded professional learning for teachers to utilize and integrate technology in daily instruction and assessment practices. Each building also has a Student Support Team (SST), which includes general and special education teachers, psychologists, reading specialists, the social worker, and assistant principal to problem solve learning and behavioral issues involving individual students. Anne Smith, Director of Student Services, attends and facilitates many SST meetings to ensure a positive learning environment for all students.

Besides internal professional collaboration, the Directions School District leaders work closely with external collaborators. One partnership involves continued consulting services from the Consortium for Educational Change (CEC), which assists the building principals and their faculties with continuous school improvement planning. Directions School District has worked with CEC, focusing on their goal to become a high performing district for student learning. Through these efforts, they have worked on aligning resources within the district, increasing student and staff professional learning time, sharing leadership through representative teams, and establishing ambitious learning targets. CEC worked with the central office administration and building leaders throughout the duration of this study to provide professional learning and to build organization capacity. CEC consultants meet with district leadership teams, school leadership teams, and professional learning community teams. The consultant continues to provide critical feedback, helping district leaders and principals lead high-quality instruction by

providing tools for data analysis, facilitating walkthroughs, and providing leadership coaching. At a 2017-2018 estimated cost of \$34,000, CEC provides consulting and continued coaching on ELA and Math unit development during school improvement and institute days and collaborate throughout the year with grade-level teams. This cost is substantially lower than in previous years, due to the increased internal support of Susan Wilson. Under the direction of Dr. Wright, through a grant-writing process, the Directions School district was one of 31 Illinois districts selected as a 2017 pilot district for the Illinois State Board of Education IL-EMPOWER. According to Illinois State Board of Education (2018), pilot districts will partner with qualified IL-EMPOWER professional learning partners to provide support in one or more of the following three components or “drivers” of system change: (a) governance and management, (b) curriculum and instruction, and (c) climate and culture. Funding from IL-EMPOWER allowed Directions School District to continue to partner with CEC consultants to provide authentic learning in a peer-to-peer learning consultation through a professional learning partnership for reflection and continuous improvement of learning to support all students.

Assistant Superintendent Susan Wilson shared:

CEC provided other educators across the area with an opportunity to analyze our systems and our structures, our focus on learning, and our collaboration. We then had a report that could then drive our work that we were doing. The following year the same process occurred at each of our schools, so we could look at how each of the schools is performing in regard to the district findings. Last year we began to do some coaching with CEC consultants around standards and now on unit development. CEC will continue to work with us. I am working with the principals, providing them the capacity to build and sustain teachers.

According to Susan, building leaders and teachers have expressed some frustrations that when they ask a question, the CEC consultant redirects it back to them. Therefore, teachers feel that their questions are not fully answered by the consultant, partly because this individual is not part

of the day-to-day operations of the organization. Within the focus group, Susan indicated her lowest priority was external partnerships

because I have a strong belief in the support to come from within the organization. Not that external partnerships does not further us or bring in another perspective; I just feel when you have the support from within, you make more of an impact. If you think of a training for half a day as external support; they are here and they are gone. My thought process was when it comes from within, it is sustainable.

Teachers agreed with Susan, stating that they are better teachers because of the feedback on their practices from leaders within the organization.

In previous years there was limited ability to provide staff improvement resources, due to a financial crisis experienced within the district. According to the Dr. Wright, “before I got here, they cut the professional development budget altogether and our teachers received no professional development.” Deep budget cuts resulted in the elimination of professional development, as well as cuts to programs and extracurricular activities. Since 2016-2017 the district has annually allocated \$120,000 for professional development, including external consultants and resources that address the current three district priorities: (a) designing curriculum units of study, (b) professional learning communities, and (c) personalized learning through one-to-one technology.

The district has also partnered with their Regional Office of Education and the University of Illinois county extension office for staff development focused on curriculum standards and inquiry-based units for social studies, science, and fine arts. Other external partnerships support the implementation of one-to-one technology. The Superintendent also highlighted other partnerships, such as CITGO, which provides support for STEM work and the District Foundation partners who have raised \$200,000 in the last 6 years to support the district’s teaching and learning programs. Each central office leader attends learning opportunities specific

to their responsibilities from professional organizations or engages in collaborative networking with other district professionals, which allows them to bring new learning to build district capacity.

Overall, building the professional capacity of the district occurs through professional learning communities at all levels of the organization. The Directions School District has made PLCs one of the district-wide initiatives to support a collaborative culture focused on learning. Frequent and continuous collaborative interaction and dialogue among all levels of the organization to include the central office administration, school leaders, district and school leadership team members, grade-level teams, and community members generates a shared ownership to improve student learning. With CEC assistance the district leaders identified opportunities for system improvement to build the capacity of the organization.

Accountability systems for performance. As a result of the CEC system assessment the district systems and structures were reviewed to build district coherence and alignment of programs and services across all buildings. One area of improvement noted was for the district to focus on results. The district leaders recognize that the district had been working as a system of independent schools rather than one interdependent, aligned district system. Schools were very site-based in their decision making and accountability, which led to significant variances in practices and procedures. Northern Middle School Principal Roberts shared;

In terms of working with our CEC consultant, I feel we are just at an impetus of some things as a district trying to bring our district together under one framework. Up until this year it has been a district of schools instead of a district.

In Directions School District the community expects the district to be a high performing district. Therefore accountability for immediate school improvement and the increase in student achievement is an expectation. As Superintendent Wright explained:

At the administrative level, we have a district scorecard and we expect the buildings to create building targets that are aligned to the district . . . and then the professional learning communities are to create goals and actions to reach that. So, for example, if we say at the beginning of the year we know that 50% of our children were at the 70th percentile, a building principal says, “We want 70% of our student by year end to be at the 70th percentile,” now the grade- level teams are expected to look at the students and ask, “What is the action plan to put in place to make the percentage increase?”

The use of School Improvement Plans is one form of accountability used in Directions School District. Using a district template provided by Dr. Wright, each building leadership team develops an annual School Improvement Plan to support the five district goals and priorities:

(a) Student Achievement, (b) Supportive Learning Environment, (c) Quality Staff, (d) Engaged Families and Community, and (e) Resources. One area for leadership improvement identified in the district system assessment by CEC was to develop an understanding of SMART goals to increase the focus on data analysis. As a result, Dr. Wright contracted with CEC to provide SMART training for all building principals. During the summer of 2017, Susan Wilson and the principals participated in an 8-day SMART Goal training to help the principals learn how to implement this process. Utilizing a SMART School Improvement Process and Planning Cycle document, each principal then worked with their school leadership teams to develop their school improvement plans. In developing the School Improvement Plan, the leadership teams identify improvement areas; a smart goal; strategies and measurable steps within a 3-year timeline; a budget; and assessment methods.

Through training each principal had a shared common knowledge and utilized the same Zones of Analysis template of student performance data to facilitate discussions with their faculty. Zones of Analysis was used to identify areas of student progress and areas of needed improvement. This template included district expectations with percentage targets using local assessment MAP performance in English language arts (ELA) and math. PARCC data over a 3-

year period and percentages of students meeting and exceeding expectations by grade levels in ELA and Math were reviewed and discussed by the building leadership teams and grade-level and departmental PLCs. Measurable indicators and assessment percentage targets for Fall, Winter, and Spring were established. In an effort to increase data analysis capacity and use across the district, each school completes a School SMART Goal Tree template, which includes the school SMART Goal, Indicators, Measures and Targets for Fall, Winter, and Spring. At one building leadership team meeting, I observed all participants accessed a shared Google document to review each building improvement goal area, the strategy to meet the goal, and monitored the progress toward the measurable steps, timelines, budget, and assessment methods to meet the goal. Jessica Levine, the principal of the West Intermediate School further indicated:

There are very few systems in place to monitor student progress. In my role I have developed through our district training with CEC, our Zones of Analysis Chart that I am putting together to develop our greatest area of need. That is one way we all will track data.

According to Northern Middle School Principal Roberts, “We examine our school data, look at how we have done on MAP test as well as the PARCC and the 5Essential data to set up an overall goal and from there we set specific smaller goals.” In Directions School District, data is also utilized in the principal evaluation tool, Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED), a research based evaluation tool that measures a principal’s instructional leadership effectiveness. Mr. Roberts discussed the use of data during the evaluation process with Dr. Wright:

With central office we review data together during our summer retreat. Individually, I meet with the superintendent for evaluation meetings five times throughout the year using VAL-ED. First, informal goal setting, then I bring my data and review strengths and areas of opportunities. We complete a mid-check for student growth data in addition to progress on a professional and an individual goal.

Accountability was also evident through the documentation of progress on district-wide efforts to improve learning at all levels of the organization. According to the district's 2017-2018 Professional Learning Calendar, targets have been outlined to support the Strategic Plan and Core Values in the areas of Curriculum, Technology, and Professional Learning Communities. The agendas, meeting notes, and action items from weekly faculty PLCs, weekly District Administrative Council meetings, monthly District Leadership meetings, and monthly School Leadership meetings are shared electronically and available for central office leaders to review the district alignment of efforts to the district goals and district-wide initiatives. During the 2016-2017 school year, CEC consultants provided training on curriculum standards and invested resources to develop a common understanding of a standards-based approach to unit design and standards-based assessments. Pacing guides and templates provided by Susan Wilson are completed by grade level and departmental PLCs to document the progress on the implementation of unit development in ELA and Math. Unit of Study Commitment updated status reports are used to monitor the progress and stages of grade-level unit planning. Susan designed a school year schedule containing meeting dates and times for grades K-8 teachers for vertical articulation in developing units of study and assessments and analyzing student performance data. Susan also shared a district document which outlines all assessments used in the district, the purpose of each assessment, and the timeline of assessments through the school year. The assessment practices demonstrated the efforts to align and assess the work of the district. Dr. Wright pointed out that Susan's background with curriculum and instruction will be helpful in moving the district forward. Susan noted her own reflection on the continuous school improvement efforts of the district:

CEC will continue to work with us and have some of the same coaches coming back again to provide continuous support. I have inserted myself much more, providing more

from the district level, working with the staff and principals, and providing the capacity to build and sustain teachers. Although we are using outside support to do the work, we are trying to build capacity internally. I think there is a need to do that. I believe you get more personal interaction and sustainability from building capacity from within.

Reflective practices of analysis of student performance, and practices of supported structures and actions in school improvement plans appeared in the data collection to support building organizational capacity to increase student achievement.

Overall, the patterns, themes, and categories observed or collected were coded, to verify and support the themes that emerged from the interviews and observational data. First, a focus on learning through shared vision and purpose was an evident key element identified by central office leaders, observations, and district documents. Three areas of instructional focus of district activities and practices were identified as curriculum unit design, use of professional learning communities, and initiating one-to-one technology. Secondly, genuine and collaborative communication between administration, teachers, parents, and external partnerships to increase organization learning was evident in the data collection. The practices of professional learning communities and team learning within interactive meetings and discussion among district, school, grade level, and external partnerships emerged as a theme in the data collection. Third, performance expectations and accountability was another key area that emerged in the data collected.

Conclusion

This chapter reported the findings of the single case study investigating effective central office leadership practices in an exemplary district demonstrating gains in student achievement to better understand the behaviors, structures, and practices of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and central office directors in building the capacity of school leaders to improve the learning of all students. The research questions addressed in this study explored key elements

identified by central office leaders and the learning activities and practices demonstrated to develop the organizational learning and increase the academic performance of students. Six major themes related to the research questions were presented from the data collection.

For the first research question, three key elements to improve organizational learning and the academic performance of students emerged from the data. The first theme identified is a focus on learning through shared vision and goals. Collaborative communication promoting a culture for organizational learning appeared as a second theme. The third theme identified as a key element is performance accountability through student centered action planning.

The second research question revealed themes around the activities and practices of district leaders to build organizational capacity to increase student performance. The first theme identified is strategic planning and alignment of instructional improvement in curriculum unit development and one-to-one technology. The second theme describes the collaborative group interactive activities of increasing professional learning through collaborative professional learning communities and external partnerships. The third theme presents reflective activities and support structures for data analysis and results-oriented attainment of goals. The discussion, implications, and recommendations drawn from these findings are presented in the final chapter.

Chapter 6

Summary, Discussions, Implication, and Recommendations

This final chapter provides a summary of this research study, which includes an overview of the research methodology and major findings. A discussion of the findings, implications of the study for central office leaders and recommendations for policy and, practice, and further research focused on the superintendent and central office leadership to build the capacity for improved learning are also included in this chapter.

Summary of Research Methodology

The intention of the study was to provide insights into the practices of a learning-centered district superintendent with few central office leaders in a medium-sized public school district in Illinois. Research in the last decade indicates a correlation between central office leadership practices and student achievement with special attention to how the superintendent works with the central office collaboratively in partnership with school leaders to improve student outcomes (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The leadership for learning framework (Knapp et al., 2014) was the conceptual framework applied to this research. This study explored the following research questions:

1. What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving and the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?
2. What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity to increase academic performance of all students?

The research methodology involved a single case study of one elementary Illinois school district superintendent as she worked to maintain a culture focused on student learning throughout the school district. Through purposeful selection (Creswell, 2009), criteria for

nominated districts included: (a) an Illinois district with a student population of medium size, typical to the majority of public school districts in Illinois; (b) an increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards on state assessments over a 2-year period of time; and (c) a superintendent who served the district for at least 3 years demonstrating strong leadership for learning philosophy and practices. Pseudonyms were assigned to the study site and participants.

The Directions School District, located in a suburban community outside the Chicagoland area, was selected for the study based on a student enrollment of 1,000-2,500 students, an increase in overall PARCC performance over 2 years, and a superintendent with at least 3 years of district experience exhibiting leadership for learning principles to promote a focus on student learning. Dr. Patricia Wright, Superintendent of Directions School District, was enthusiastic to share the commitment, intentional efforts, and changes made under her leadership at central office and across the district to enhance the capacity of faculty to increase students' success. Several factors demonstrated leadership for learning principles to support the selection of the district for this study. First, Superintendent Dr. Wright contributed greatly to the organization by sharing her core values on learning and influenced a collective focus on learning among students and professionals. Under her 3-year leadership in this district, the renewed focus on direction across all organizational levels was evident. Central office administrators, principals, teachers, and the community were included as stakeholders to set the district's direction as a learning organization with a shared focus on learning for adults as well as students. Second, within a bargaining unit agreement, the district committed to implement an increased collaborative time devoted to professional learning community meetings at grade or department levels to focus on increasing student performance. All district administrative leaders and teacher leaders completed

joint training in Professional Learning Communities to bridge central office and school leadership relationships. Third, an assistant superintendent position was restructured to focus on adult and student learning and non-instructional responsibilities were reallocated to central office personnel whose appointments were not directly related to student learning. An individual with an extensive knowledge was hired by the current superintendent as the assistant superintendent to support the focused work in aligning standards based curriculum units and instructional practices in the district. Additionally, as one measure of student learning, over the past 4 years the district has demonstrated a higher percentage of the students meeting or exceeding state standards on the PARCC state test compared to the average performance of Illinois students.

Data collection occurred over a 6-month period from July 2017 through January 2018. Approximately 11 hours of interviews were conducted, including 10 individual interviews and focus group interviews of central office administrators and building administrators. Approximately 20 hours of site observations of the central office administrators and building administrators. On-site observations included an initial walkthrough of the three school buildings, two weekly central office cabinet and administrative meetings, two monthly district leadership meetings, three school leadership meetings, three PLC grade-level meetings, and one student support team meeting. In addition, 52 district documents pertaining to district-wide leadership for learning practices were analyzed.

Limitations

The single case study methodology allowed for descriptive data collection of the perceptions and actions of the participants in a naturalistic fashion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). However, several limitations are to be noted. First, this study was restricted to educational leaders from one representative elementary school district and, therefore, did not provide a

representative sampling of all Illinois district leaders. The characteristics and demographics of the school district selected in this study are limited in their transferability to an urban district with a more diverse student population and less capital resources. The district demographics in this study reflected 83% White enrollment, which is a less diverse student enrollment than the state average. The district in this study also has the capital and financial revenue to support current educational and operational expenses. An exemplary school district with similar demographics to the state averages may have been overlooked through the use of purposeful sampling and nominations from representatives of the Illinois Regional Offices of Education and the Consortium for Educational Change for school districts. Given the limited number of participants and the limited geographic location of one research site, the study does not allow generalization and may not be representative of Illinois school districts that do not have similar demographics, organizational structures, systems, and resources.

Secondly, the limited 6-month timeframe for this research did not provide a longitudinal perspective, as observations of practices and processes did not occur over an extended period of time. An additional limitation of the qualitative inquiry process was the use of interviews with a limited number of central office and school leader participants, which relied on participants' self-reported perceptions of their leadership practices. I did not interview board of education members, building faculty and staff, students, parents, or community members; these individuals may have had differing perspectives from those of the school administrators. Finally, there are many influences on student learning. Because this case study did not utilize quantitative analysis, it was not intended to identify a direct statistical correlation between the relationship of central office leadership practices and student achievement.

Findings

The findings emanating from this study identified key elements and central office practices to develop the capacity of the district to improve student learning and are summarized in this section in relation to the two research questions.

Research Question One: What do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district identify as key elements in improving and the organizational learning and academic performance of all students?

Three key elements were identified by the superintendent and central office leaders: (a) a shared focus on learning, (b) effective and collaborative communication, and (c) results-focused accountability. First, the data collection revealed the Superintendent and central office leaders supported a shared focus on learning. As a priority in this district, the superintendent was directly involved in the promotion of a collective common direction. The district focus was not a top down mandate from central office. The superintendent provided the initial purpose, facilitating the collective identification of common beliefs and values to focus the district. Collectively, the superintendent and stakeholders reviewed personal and professional beliefs to propose the vision, mission, and goals of the district. At the beginning of the school year and throughout the year, each faculty and staff member was asked to reflect on their own values and focus on learning. As observed, Dr. Wright facilitated administrative and district leadership meetings and often directed school leaders to focus their leadership to align the work of the district to the vision, mission, and goals of the district.

Second, as indicated by the superintendent and central office administrators, effective communication and meaningful discussions focused on student improvement emerged as a second key element identified. Evidence in the data collection supports and reflects effective and

interdependent communication between central office and schools and between the district and community developed a culture of learning to advance the organization. Interview participants revealed the involvement and focus of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and director of student services at district- and school-level leadership meetings and grade-level or departmental PLC meetings. With the leadership of central office leaders, together with the school leaders and faculty, the district maintained the focus of the organization to improve student outcomes, monitored the alignment to standards-based teaching and assessment, and reviewed student performance data for evidence-based data decision making and action planning. Additionally, numerous documents communicated by central office to the faculty and the community indicated the emphasis on aligning curriculum and assessments for student improvement. The work of leadership meetings and PLC meetings was communicated to all faculty through shared electronic agendas and notes. Also, the transparency of information between district and the community, such as sharing the System Assessment Report completed by CEC and the district dashboard containing student learning data, demonstrates the commitment to communicate the district focus on student learning.

The third element to improve the organizational learning and the learning of all students identified by central office leaders was standards-based accountability. The superintendent promoted a results-focused organization to improve the performance of the district. High expectations were established for the district by the board of education to be a high performing district. The superintendent set the standard to increase the percentage of students performing at the 70th percentile on local and state assessments. The district efforts to develop and align units of study across the grades, establish adult professional learning on developing smart goals, and analyze areas of academic needs were evident in the data collected. The superintendent and

central office leaders facilitated the school improvement process, supporting the development of school improvement plans that included improvement areas, supporting goals, measurable steps, and a 3-year timeline containing the budget needs, assessment methods, and targets. It should be noted, a focus on the gap between overall performance and at-risk student populations was not as evident in the school improvement process of goal setting in this study. A central goal of leading equitable learning is providing opportunities and supports for an increasingly diverse student population and a role in leading for learning is to maintain an equity focus to improve the academic performance of all students (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Overall, a shared focus on learning, the effective communication and collaboration of adult learning, and accountability of student performance were identified as key elements to improve the academic performance of students.

Research Question Two: What leadership for learning activities and practices do the superintendent and central office leaders of an exemplary district demonstrate to develop the collective organizational capacity to increase academic performance of all students?

The leadership for learning practices and activities of central office leaders disclosed during observations of district and school-level leadership teams, open-ended interviews, and a review of district documents were strategic planning, collaborative professional learning, and assessing student performance to develop and implement specific action plans.

Strategic planning activities and practices were demonstrated by focus and direction of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and central office directors with district stakeholders. The District Strategic Planning process, the Systems Assessment Review by CEC, school improvement and action planning, and documents establishing and monitoring targets and timelines for the alignment of unit development and one-to-one learning are evidence of strategic

planning activities to develop a collective organizational capacity to improve student learning. The superintendent and central office identified and emphasized the following three district priorities for the 2017-2018 school year to support goals of the strategic plan: (a) development of standards-based curriculum units of study, (b) use of professional learning communities, and (c) initiate a one-to-one learning platform. The superintendent and central office leaders supported and provided the resources for the building leadership to align school improvement to these three district priorities.

A second practice demonstrated by central office leaders was collaborative communication through established professional learning communities to support the adult learning and increase the skills required to improve student learning. Central office and school leaders learned together to utilize the PLC process to increase collaborative work across the district. PLCs were used to develop and align standards-based units and assessments. PLCs were also used to review student outcomes and utilize evidence-based decision making to alter instructional practices and provide additional instruction to identified students. Additionally, Directions School District continued working with CEC to provide professional learning and guidance through a professional learning partnership for the continuous improvement of learning and building capacity of the organization. At various levels within district leadership, school leadership, and grade-level teams, the focus on listening and learning together to continuously improve teaching effectiveness and student learning was evident. The intention of the collaborative learning through PLCs and use of external partnerships focused on unit development and use of one-to-one learning as a focus of the current school year.

A third practice was the leadership of central office to monitor and evaluate through the use accountability measures used to attain district goals. The identification of needs through

analyzing student performance data on local and state assessments to develop and implement actions that would move the district, school, team, classroom, and student to a higher level of performance was apparent. Through the application of the SMART School Improvement Process in developing school improvement plans, the central office and building leaders worked collaboratively to create SMART goals that were specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound. The greatest areas of student need were identified using a Zone Analysis chart with multiple measures identified as the indicators for monitoring progress toward a goal. With the assistance of central office leadership, key indicators and the work for each of the goals are aligned and outlined for each building school improvement plan. Reflective activities of analysis as stated in action plans support structures for data analysis and results-oriented attainment of goals. Each school supports the district common goals and strategies for school improvement instead of a single focus on the individual work of each school as a separate entity. Activities and actions around student centered performance expectations and accountability in Directions School District supported building organizational capacity to increase student achievement. Again, it should be noted, a focus on at-risk student populations was not as evident in the school improvement process of goal setting in this study. Overall, the three main areas from the findings were: (a) shared focus on learning through strategic planning practices, (b) effective communication through the use of collaborative professional learning communities, and (c) performance accountability through systems of assessments and data driven decision making practices.

Discussion

This study of central office leadership was intended to understand the joint work of a district superintendent with her central office administration to build the capacity of learning-

focused school leaders to improve the learning of all students. A discussion of the findings supports the research on leadership for learning. The central office leaders in this study demonstrated values, beliefs, and leadership actions and behaviors supporting the leadership for learning research (Murphy et al., 2007). The beliefs and actions of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the two central office leaders were aligned with the five principles of leadership for learning: (a) establishing a focus or vision of the organization on learning; (b) building professional communities that value learning; (c) allocating resources and external partnerships that build the organizational capacity to foster student learning; (d) sharing leadership to develop a collective and common knowledge and competencies across the organization; and (e) creating coherent, connected and aligned systems to support a focus on learning (Knapp et al., 2014). The principles observed in the leadership for learning research within larger-sized urban districts were also evident in this case study site of a medium-sized elementary suburban district. The findings from this study supported the leadership for learning framework to understand the practices of central office leaders working with school leaders to improve the learning of the district.

First, as a learning leader, the superintendent led the organization through developing a shared vision and sustained focus on learning. As demonstrated by the superintendent in this study, successful learning leaders respond proactively, despite accountability reforms, and are able to focus on and respond to the challenges of educating groups of students (Leithwood et al., 2004). The elements of leadership demonstrated in this study can be compared similarly to research by who identified the following associated components with student achievement: (a) individualized support, (b) shared goals, (c) vision, (d) intellectual stimulation, (e) culture building, (f) rewards, (g) high expectations, and (h) modeling (Leithwood et al., 2004). Most

recently developed framework (Leithwood, 2012) indicates five practices or activities that enhance student achievement: (a) setting directions, (b) building relationships and developing people, (c) developing the organization to support desired practices, (d) improving the instructional program, and (e) securing accountability. The superintendent was the motivating factor and the conductor behind the leadership in building leadership capacity throughout the district. She facilitated the focus and direction of the district through the reestablishment of a collective vision and direction for the organization with all stakeholders, which was intended to improve the learning of all students. As noted by Rorrer et al. (2008), an effective instructional leader is one who is able to recognize and understand the various aspects of instructional practices in addition to acknowledging the district vision and goals. As the district strategic plan was reviewed to be updated, the superintendent asked all stakeholders to be cognizant of their personal conviction to the “why” that served as the foundation for visionary leadership. Her actions are consistent with previous research indicating the vision of beliefs, values, and practices are vital in building a shared culture of work giving clarity and direction to today’s organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As a leader who understood the interdependency of individuals throughout the learning organization to achieve constructive change, Dr. Wright was able to move forward accepting and adapting to new challenges through a collective commitment of a shared vision (Senge, 2012). Through her actions and words, Dr. Wright supported a district systems approach driven by values and direction rather than a system of individual schools. As research indicates, a leader of an educational systems framework knows the interrelationships of individuals working within an organization to improve student learning and is committed to build the capacity of a learning organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Fullan, 2010; Hallinger, 2011; Senge, 2012). Her approach for a collective, unified district direction and not a district

consisting of separate building directions supports the systems work as stated by Marzano and Waters (2009):

While it is true that schools are unique and must operate in such a way to address their unique needs, it is also true that each school must operate as a functional component of a larger system. It is the larger system—the district—that establishes the common work of schools within the district, and it is that common work that becomes the glue holding the district together. (p. 90)

It was evident that collaborative work throughout the district supported a direction and a district vision on improved learning. The central office leaders provided the necessary supports and resources focused on the three district initiatives of professional learning communities, unit development, and one-to-one technology during the current school year. In this study, the superintendent functioned as a learning-focused leader and the primary person implementing the high expectations, engaging in leadership practices, and monitoring both the central office and building principals to increase student achievement. A strategic-focused district leader such as in this study cannot achieve the full capacity of the organization alone and will need the full collaboration and participation of all central office leaders to build the capacity of the district to increase student achievement. A leadership for learning focus of the superintendent and central office leaders was building the district's organizational capacity to enhance student learning (Honig, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The superintendent and central office leaders initiated collaborative goal setting for achievement and instruction, provided support and resources for adult and student learning, and monitored alignment across the schools.

Secondly, the importance of communication within a professional learning community to improve organizational learning and student achievement was evident through the formation of professional learning communities across the district. Research confirms an important relationship between effective leadership practices and collaborative PLCs, which focus on

increasing student achievement (DuFour, 2010; Sergiovanni, 1992). In this district, collaborative communication and dialogue at all levels, including central office leaders, school leaders, the faculty, and the community, created an environment of interrelationships and interactive meaningful conversations on student learning that helped build organizational capacity. The collaboration actions in this district supports the decade of research on leadership for learning which demonstrates a collective focus on increased student outcomes of an educational system (Copland & Knapp, 2006; DuFour, 2010; Knapp et al., 2010). In this study, central office leaders operated in a reciprocal manner with building administrators rather than to mandate compliance from their subordinates. The actions of the central office are reflected in Honig et al.'s (2010) assertion:

Central offices that intentionally set out to improve teaching and learning as joint work with schools created the basis for ongoing dialogue about where and how efforts are and are not working, and where more support is needed, enabling smarter, more transparent decisions. (p. 117)

Third, central office leaders engaged external resources that offered expertise to foster organizational learning. As effective leaders use community partnerships, state or county governmental agencies, and other external organizations to build the organizational capacity for district learning improvement efforts (Honig, 2008), so did the district in this study. An external partnership with CEC provided a systems analysis reviewing the district's strengths and challenges. This report guided district educators to recognize the need to move from autonomous and independent school behaviors and begin to communicate and operate within interdependent, collaborative PLCs, setting district goals and aligning instruction and expectations toward improved student achievement. Research by Swinnerton (2006) also highlighted effectiveness of reaching beyond the school district to utilize the expertise of external partners and consultants. This study found that the professional development, collaborative team planning and external

coaching from CEC consultants with the internal guidance and more recently, the expertise of the Assistant Superintendent, aligned curriculum unit work to support a focus on learning.

Fourth, the leadership for learning practices of central office leaders in this study reflect the interdependency of central office leaders within a learning-focused educational organization and as they address the complexity of improving student learning (Honig et al., 2010). The central office, building administrators, certified faculty, noncertified staff, and community stakeholders were members of district and school leadership teams. As supported in the research, collective and distributed leadership has a significant influence on student learning, in which district members and other stakeholders across all levels of an organization exercise more voluntary leadership (Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008). The district leadership and building leadership meetings provided opportunities for active input and participation in leading the district. Leaders, individually and collectively work to bring change or a different order of things suggests an effective superintendent collaborates with district leaders to empower a collective commitment to a shared vision in the organization. In traditional organizational arrangements, central office administrators typically are assigned distinct responsibilities, with little overlap in their duties. Restructuring the traditional roles and responsibilities of the central office to a collective, and flattening the organizational hierarchy, provided opportunities for shared leadership for learning with school leaders and linkages with professional and community partnerships to build district capacity.

Lastly, the central office leaders created a system of coherence in the organization, supporting findings by Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), whose research emphasized an interrelated and interdependent framework demonstrating the relationship among a district and its schools to achieve large-scale reform and improvements. Learning-focused leadership

connects the goals and actions of the central office and school leadership (Knapp et al., 2014). Supported by the research, analysis of student data to predict student growth builds organizational capacity that leads to improved student achievement (Knapp et al., 2010; Supovitz et al., 2012). From a systems perspective, an effective accountability system and coordinated assessment feedback systems is necessary in an organization (Halverson, 2010). In this district, a district scorecard indicating student performance on state and local assessment data is used to develop school targets aligned to the district goals. In an effort to increase data analysis and transparency, a School SMART Goal Tree template was used, which included each school's SMART Goals, Indicators, Measures, and Targets for Fall, Winter, and Spring. Utilizing a SMART School Improvement Process and Planning Cycle and Zones of Analysis facilitated a unified framework for discussion and for identifying areas of student progress and areas of needed improvement. These documents support efforts to align and assess the work of the district; this practice is consistent with research noting that aligning instruction and assessment to support increased achievement for all students is a central function of learning leaders (Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Knapp et al., 2006).

This study confirmed that strong leadership plays a significant role in data-informed decision making that is focused on learning (Halverson et al., 2007; Knapp et al., 2014). The ability to analyze student data to predict student growth builds organizational capacity that leads to improved student achievement (Knapp et al., 2010; Supovitz et al., 2012). A district learning leader, as in this study, coordinated and aligned the work of the organization through collaboration, monitoring of aligned goals, and instructional efforts to improve instruction with data accessibility, transparency, and accountability (Bjork, 1993; Rorrer et al., 2008). Aligning instruction and assessment to support increased achievement for all students was emphasized by

the district leaders, which reinforces what researchers indicate is a central function within a leadership for learning framework (Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Knapp et al., 2006). An area for improvement noted by participants in this study was the need for an increased accountability system for data collection and analysis, especially for low achievers and as indicated by research. As research points out, the ability to analyze student data to predict student growth builds organizational capacity that leads to improved student achievement (Knapp et al., 2010; Supovitz et al., 2012).

Implications

The critical findings from the study on a district leadership present implications for policy and practices, which are presented in this section. The three major foci—a focus on learning, a focus on collaboration, and a focus on results—suggest a direction for policy and practices reflecting leadership for learning principles.

Implications for policy. Federal and state policy mandates add to the overwhelming number of responsibilities of a district superintendent and her/his administrative team. One of the implications of policy is the increasing complexity of the role and responsibilities of the superintendent and the competing demands to remain focused as a leader of learning for school improvement. The reauthorization of ESEA, through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), introduces new reforms while continuing to hold school districts accountable for improving the educational achievement of all students. In the state of Illinois, recent school finance legislation has restructured the state’s funding levels for school districts. Multiple external demands are placed on the superintendent, including federal and state accountability reforms, compliance mandates, and school financing reforms. At the local level, superintendents also must

successfully negotiate through issues involving school board policies and governance, personnel, facilities, and community demands.

The forces of a heavy policy environment undergoing continual changes and reforms presents a challenge for superintendents to remain focused on improving achievement of all students. Continual and changing demands compete for the superintendent's time, affecting her/his ability to maintain a consistent focus on leadership for learning. The role of the superintendent as a learning leader is vital with increasing accountability for the educational outcome of all students. As supported in the research, superintendents play a crucial role in acknowledging deficit thinking and in making subsequent leadership decisions to move their districts forward toward more positive equity achievement for all students (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008). A strong leader for learning, as in this study, continually prioritizes actions, reassigns non-instructional responsibilities, and leads continuous school improvement efforts with central office and school leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge. The superintendent is the executive leader of the school district, who promotes the development of the school system as an interrelated learning organization and works with the school board, central office administrators, and school leaders to develop a collective vision, learning priorities, and establishes the direction and action plan of the district goals (Rorrer et al., 2008). Responsibilities non-related to the improvement of adult or student learning were reallocated to Director of Operations, the Business Manager, and central office clerical staff. To successfully cope, learning-focused superintendents as in this study developed leadership capacity throughout the organization, drawing upon their central office administrators, building leaders, and external partnerships as the superintendent creates a shared culture, with everyone throughout the organization responsible for student learning.

The expectations for a superintendent in small-to-medium sized district, a district typical of most Illinois school districts, impacts the broader role and responsibilities of a learning-focused superintendent who has fewer central office positions through which leadership responsibilities can be distributed. Policy considerations are needed to distinguish the different expectations of district superintendents, dependent on district size and the number of additional leaders within the central office who have assigned responsibilities to support the learning of adults and students. Through an educational lens, according to Murphy et al. (2007), the basis or center for leadership must be learning, teaching, and educational improvement—not organization, politics, or governance. Boards of Education in districts with smaller student enrollments with fewer central office administrators should recognize the superintendent’s responsibilities for leadership for learning within performance evaluations. Considerations could be noted on the size of district and the superintendent’s access to shared leadership for learning in the district. The responsibility for superintendents in districts with fewer or no central office leaders have a greater leadership responsibility as a learning-focused leader to support school leaders to increase student learning.

Implications for practice. Ongoing collaborative dialogue appears necessary to provide linkages of communication and alignment across the district levels to support school improvement. Honig et al. (2010) investigated the connection between school district central office leadership and improved teaching and learning. The researchers found that “improving teaching and learning district-wide is a systems problem—a challenge that requires the participation of both central offices and schools in leadership roles to realize such outcomes” (p. 117). Partnerships between central office and building leaders appear to be essential to increase the capacity of the organization. Modeled by the superintendent, opportunities for

discussion and interactions between central office and building leaders at district and school leadership meetings were frequent, ongoing, focused, and transparent. The superintendent and central office leaders need to be a collaborative district leader, a facilitator of change who recognizes the educational systems framework of the interrelationships of individuals working within an organization to improve student learning, and committed to build the capacity of a learning organization (Collins, 2001; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Hallinger, 2011; Senge, 1990).

Within a partnership, forming relationships and building a level of trust to move the district to the next level of performance also appears essential. District leaders are visibly supporting school leaders and are present with the school leadership teams to facilitate the school improvement process in collaboration and are engaged with grade-level and departmental professional learning communities. The learning focused leadership ensures the knowledge and skills of adults needed for school improvements. As needed, the central office provides external yearlong partnerships to provide the professional development necessary to build the capacity for standards-based instruction and evidence-based decisions for changed in instructional practices.

At the district level, learning-focused conversations at the district level, identifying areas in need of school reform and allocation of resources or external supports needed are identified and implemented district-wide. A planned schedule for central office leaders to devote time to this work throughout the school year is essential, rather than simply holding a one-time summer central office retreat. With a strong knowledge base of central office leaders, they then can facilitate a professional learning community with school leaders to implement units of study and learning supports, interpret the data together to evaluate the instructional effectiveness, and connect the data to district improvement decisions and continued school reform cycle to improve

student learning. The lack of effective structures and systems to monitor and support data-based decision making for all students could impact the lack of student growth for at-risk populations. The establishment of a coordinated interdependence of district systems focused on student learning where each central office leader works in a collective capacity to facilitate coordination of data inquiry and decision making across the district leaders. A substantial amount of effort and time is spent establishing and refocusing on the district values, the vision, the mission, and goals to provide direction for the organization. Equally important is ensuring an equal amount of time and effort is placed on establishing and maintaining accountability for all students. To decrease the achievement gap between student populations, an increased critical analysis of performance data of at-risk student populations, such as low-income, English Learners, and students with disabilities, is needed to establish equitable outcomes for all students. A review of all district systems of professional development, curriculum and instruction, technology, student differentiation and support, and financial and building operations collectively impacts student learning.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The recommendations for legislators and policy makers are discussed first followed by the recommendation for practice by educational professionals based with considerations noted based on the context of the community or district circumstances.

Recommendations for policy. These recommendations include: (a) Illinois State Board of Education reporting of district central office measures, (b) increased instructional reviews, (c) increased distribution of human capital to leadership work devoted to instruction and reduction and consolidation of operational duplication across districts.

1. Central office administration indicators and accountability measures should be reported on Illinois Report Card. Currently the District Illinois report Cards, under Educator Measures data, contains an item on principal turnover within each school and reported as district administrator information. There currently is no data indicator reported for the number of administrators at the central office, and the turnover rate of the superintendent or central office administrators. Central office administrators are currently not recognized as public data elements on the District Illinois School Report Card. A challenge in improving student achievement has been linked to changes in leadership; however, turnover rates at the central office level are neither noted nor a consideration for state reporting. The influence of stable leadership at the central office and its influence on building the capacity of school leaders should be examined more deeply. The consistency in central office leadership and the effect on central office turnover is noteworthy for further examination of district effectiveness on student learning. Information on the impact of a superintendent change, but also on the assistant superintendent and other central office directors on school leadership and the capacity of the district for continuous improvement should be information tracked and reported by Illinois District Report Card. Other new accountability measures or performance ratings specific to central office administration to be considered in the future.

2. All public school districts should complete a standardized systems review of teaching and learning practices. Each district complies with numerous school board policy implementations, a wide range of legal and legislation mandates, state and county compliance reviews on governance and managerial compliance, and financial audits. Many required reviews are not proven by research to be directed related to improved student learning. A systems assessment through external and internal accountability of the implementation and monitoring of

an aligned curriculum, formative and summative assessments, differentiated instruction, use of data-based decisions, and allocation of resources focused on improved learning is not required by all districts. A greater emphasis could be placed on external audits or reviews of teaching and learning practices and systems and the relation of district practices on student performance. Many district superintendents and other district leaders may seek such tools and implement them independently. District systems assessment or program evaluation tools are available through independent partnerships with school districts independent of the Illinois State Board of Education. There is less coordination in the assessment of district instructional practices and systems to improve learning than compliance and financial audits. Greater coordination and systems assessments correlated to improved student learning could assist and create more learning-focused leaders.

3. Restructure district resources by increasing allocation to instructional duties and responsibilities and decrease allocation to operational duties and responsibilities. The learning-focused superintendent has many competing non-learning distractors, which diminishes the time and effort on improving the learning capacity of adults and students to achieve improved student performance. Given the attention of district consolidation during increased financial challenges and the increased costs associated with both instructional and operational costs of school districts, policymakers could assess the redistribution of operational responsibilities not directly related to student learning into a consolidated business organization for several small to medium districts in proximity. Policymakers could review options for consolidation of districts that would decrease the duplication of business and operational responsibilities but maintain the level of learning leaders to increase the learning focus of district leaders. Policymakers could reorganize districts to be reallocated to have a consolidation of financial and operational

obligations across several small to medium sized districts under a business office but still maintain a learning-focused superintendent to stay focused on building the capacity for teaching and learning practices and improved student outcomes. Redefining central office leadership roles to focus on the primary responsibility of improved student learning by restructuring and consolidating the financial and operational work to a central business office is a recommendation for the future of improving school leader performance.

Recommendations for practice. To improve the achievement of all students, learning-focused leadership will require central office administrators to build the capacity of the adults to improve student learning. In addition to adhering to the principles on leadership for learning school districts the following are recommendations for practice: (a) utilize a self- assessment of central office practices, (b) allocation of resources to restructure central office responsibilities, and (c) collective focus and increased accountability for equitable outcomes for all student populations.

1. A systems self-assessment tool for district leaders to evaluate their knowledge and to understand their influence on building the capacity of the district is important. Central office administrators should reflect and identify strengths and weaknesses and examine what work at the central office is working to support student learning. Reflecting at how the central office can strengthen the capacity at the school level to impact student performance should be key to the work of central office. An assessment of the support given by central office leaders to school leadership through learning focused partnerships with principals and school leaders should be examines. Each central office leaders should reflect on the percentage of their daily work directly related to improving the performance of students. Each central office leaders could reflect and identify what work does not improve student learning and reflect on the purpose and either

discontinue or reassign if not related to improving the learning of adults or students. The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and directors at the central office can reflect and discuss possible changes in work to support the adult and student learning in the district. Assessing the impact of district practices and job embedded professional development in relation to student performance is needed to build the capacity of the district. Evaluative accountability tools to assess the work and impact of central office leaders on student learning should be used. Evidence of central office strengthening the teaching and learning and overall district system effectiveness should be revealed in improved student performance data.

2. Restructure central office positions and responsibilities to focus on learning.

Illinois school superintendents could consider examining the roles and responsibilities of all central office administrators and increase accountability for school improvement. All central office administrators shift their role and efforts to focus on learning and increase the capacity of building principals and school leaders. Restructuring operational and managerial tasks to existing non-educator personnel within the central office would allow central office leaders to focus on learning. Central office leaders know the importance of the improvement of all students; however, to initiate efforts to rethink their roles requires significant shifts in current practices. In a small-to-medium sized district with a limited number of central office administrators or directors, the superintendent alone cannot build the learning capacity of school leaders. The recruitment and hiring of the knowledgeable leaders, and providing the training for current central office leaders, will ensure the most competent and well-informed leaders operate within the district. A review of alternate ways to improve existing systems to focus all central office leaders on learning is suggested. The central office should work as a collaborative unit, rather than central office leaders being assigned to distinct and separate responsibilities. Collaboration

of central office leaders, through sharing such responsibilities as monitoring and assessing district goals through joint observations, walk-throughs, and evaluation of school leaders as it relates to the improvement of faculty and students, is recommended. District central offices become learning leaders focused on teaching and learning and less hierarchical business managers of prescribed policies, rules, and procedures, disconnected from the improving the achievement of all students.

3. Continuously assess each school's performance data to develop district target goals for all student performance groups such as English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students to decrease the existing achievement gaps. Central office leaders will need to continue and further the work with school leaders analyzing district data, continuously examining the systems and identifying needed supports to increase the academic performance of at-risk populations of students. Special attention is being given to equitable improvement to narrow achievement gaps in reading and mathematics for student subgroups related to race and ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, English language learners, and students with disabilities. To achieve equitable outcomes for all student populations, the central office leadership team needs to examine data and increase concentrated conversations around evidence of strengths and gaps in student performance. Then, collectively the district and school leaders examine the instructional practices and staff capacity that demonstrate improved student learning with student groups. Using an established set of probing questions, longitudinal data should be examined to identify trends in areas of student growth. Triangulation of classroom, district, and state data in major discipline areas across the district is examined frequently through the year. Accountability efforts are a collaborative and joint responsibility. Systems for leadership for learning include all central office leaders and directors to focus on organizational capacity and all

student academic improvement. In reviewing the three foci, a focus on learning, a focus on collaboration, and a focus on accountability, the focus on accountability needs an increased emphasis and time. A sufficient amount of district, school and grade level/department PLC time and effort is to be spent on data-based decision making based on the performance of all student population outcomes to adjust the work of action plans during the school year. The yearly analysis of student outcomes on PARCC and setting school improvement and action plans is evident; however, more time and attention should be devoted to the actions to demonstrate student improvement than on goal setting. The time spent on assessing the outcomes for every student should be considered, as average composite scores may not be a reflection of actual performance of all student populations. Equally important is ensuring measures for ongoing accountability have been addressed and monitored for all student populations. When high stakes accountability measures indicate certain populations of students are not improving to the level of expectations, central office leaders need to provide the supports and accountability systems to build local capacity to implement assessments to monitor student learning. Using statistical data for student improvement and measuring student growth over time becomes increasingly more sophisticated and challenging for educators and school leaders. Essential to an equitable continuous school improvement process is planning and evaluating instructional and assessment programs to meet the needs of all learners and all student subgroups. The district also requires both formative and summative assessment program to identify learning needs and requires organizational systems to be in place to effectively drive data decision making to improve and change instruction for all populations of students. District leaders of learning are responsible to provide accountability systems and build assessment literacy to ensure improved outcomes for all students.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations are presented for further research to provide additional insights into central office leadership for learning. First, much of the leadership for learning research has been restricted to qualitative methods. Additional research could provide a quantitative examination of the relationship of structures and practices of district central office leaders on student achievement. Mixed-methods studies, combining qualitative and quantitative methods with the ability to control for student population variables, also are desirable. Secondly, the expansion of existing empirical research on leadership for learning related to the size of the school district population is an area for further research, with a continuing focus on how school superintendents build capacity both within their central office administration and with building-level administrators to develop a district-wide culture that is focused on student learning. Third, research on the influence on student achievement in districts that invest in building district capacity through sustained professional development, coaching, and consultation from external partnerships could be conducted. Fourth, a meta-analysis of empirical research involving learning-focused central office leaders could be conducted, to more fully isolate effective leadership practices that result in student learning gains.

More insight into practices and restructuring the work of central office leaders in exemplary districts, typical to most school districts in Illinois and across the country is needed. The question remains, what are other small to mid-size districts, typical to most districts in Illinois, doing to transform the practices of central office administrators and what is the effect on student achievement? Given the numerous external school governance, political, and school reform demands on a superintendent, research is needed to investigate how superintendents balance a focus on leadership for learning. Examining the challenges of superintendents in small

districts with few or no central office staff to support the leadership focus on learning is also needed. Research on the effectiveness of the use and involvement of external partnerships to increase the collective capacity of a school organization to enact school reforms to improve the academic performance of all students would further add to the school leadership literature. It would be helpful to extend this study by examining the overall impact of external partnerships, such as with Consortium for Educational Change, on developing district-wide capacity to increase student achievement in this district. Overall, there is a need for increased research focused on central office leadership work to build the capacity of the organization to improve teaching and learning for all students.

Conclusion

In this study, leadership for learning principles were demonstrated by the beliefs and the activities of one school district superintendent and her central office administrators. Through purposeful sampling, the district for this study was selected based on demonstrating strong leadership for learning philosophy and practices. Central office leaders and school leaders were interviewed to describe their leadership for learning elements and practices. First, the leadership for learning principle demonstrated an established and collective focus or vision of the organizational learning. The responsibility of student learning improvement was shared among the superintendent, the central office assistant superintendent, director of student services, building principals, assistant principals, and to a lesser degree, the director of technology. The learning-focused leaders at both the district level and school level kept teaching and learning as the center of the work of the district. Secondly, the findings confirmed the enhancement and support of collaborative professional learning. The central office invested resources of allocation of time, expertise of central office leaders, and professional development. The emphasis on

professional learning communities and leadership teams at both the district and school levels promoted continuous adult learning, increased relationships between schools, and among all levels of faculty and staff resulting in district alignment of the work. Third, the central office leaders engaged other external resources that offered expertise to foster organizational learning. The use of an external consultant from Consortium for Education Change provided the district leaders a framework to initiate the improvement work needed, establish action plans, and provide the needed professional development to build the capacity of the organization to do the work. Fourth, central office leaders distributed leadership across all building administrators, staff, and parents of various positions to support school improvement efforts. The established and continuous district leadership meetings and school leadership meetings demonstrated collaborative decision- making across all levels of district stakeholders. Lastly, the central office leaders created a system of coherence in the organization. Embedded in each of the leadership for learning components, communication was identified as an important practice to support the collective capacity for learning improvement within the organization. The shared work and commitment of the superintendent and central office leaders is an example of a learning- focused organization. Leadership for learning is demonstrated by the collective and interrelated work of the central office leaders with building leaders to build the capacity of faculty and students. Leadership for learning principles promote a focus on student learning, professional learning communities, shared leadership, allocation of external resources, and a coherent and aligned system focused on learning to develop the capacity of the district to improve the achievement of all students.

References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (Ed.). (1997). *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bjork, L. G. (1993). Effective schools—effective superintendents: The emerging instructional leadership role. *Journal of School Leadership*, 3, 246-259.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education.
- Bolman, L., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Breiter, A., & Light, D. (2006). Data for school improvement: Factors for designing effective information systems to support decision-making in schools. *Educational Technology and Society*, 9, 206-217.
- Copland, M. A. (2003). Leadership of inquiry: Building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25, 375-396.
doi:10.3102/01623737025004375
- Copland, M. A. (2010). From operations to teaching and learning. *School Administrator*, 67(11), 11-14.
- Copland, M. A., & Knapp, M. S. (2006). *Connecting leadership with learning: A framework for reflection, planning, and action*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Corcoran, T., Fuhrman, S. H., & Belcher, C. L. (2001). The district role in instructional improvement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 78-84.

- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crowther, F. (2011). *From school improvement to sustained capacity: The parallel leadership pathway*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- DuFour, R. (Ed.) (2010). *Raising the bar and closing the gap: Whatever it takes*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Durand, F. T., Lawson, H. A., Wilcox, K. C., & Schiller, K. S. (2016). The role of district office leaders in the adoption and implementation of the common core state standards in elementary schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52, 45-74.
doi:10.1177/0013161X15615391
- Earl, L., & Fullan, M. (2003). Using data in leadership for learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33, 383-394. doi:10.108003057640320000122023
- Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute. Retrieved from
<http://shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/building.pdf>
- Elmore, R. F. (2002). Hard questions about practice. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 22-25.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. (2010). *All systems go: The change imperative for whole system reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Goddard, R. D. (2001). Collective efficacy: A neglected construction the study of schools and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93, 467-476.

- Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Hoy, A. W. (2004). Collective efficacy beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, and future directions. *Educational Researcher*, 33, 3-13.
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49, 125-142. doi:10.1108/09578231111116699
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership and Management*, 30, 95-110.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1998). Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980-1995. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement*, 9, 157-191.
- Halverson, R. (2010). School formative feedback systems. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 85, 130-146. doi:10.1080/016195610036852570
- Halverson, R., Grigg, J., Prichett, R., & Thomas, C. (2007). The new instructional leadership: Creating data-driven instructional systems in schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 17, 159-193.
- Hamilton, L., Halverson, R., Jackson, S., Mandinach, E., Supovitz, J. & Wayman, J. (2009). *Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>
- Hargreaves, A. (Ed.). (2009). *Extending educational change: International handbook of educational change*. New York, NY: Springer.

- Harris, A. (2007). Distributed leadership: Conceptual confusion and empirical reference. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 10, 1-11.
- Heck, R. H., Larson, T. J., & Marcoulides, G. A. (1990). Principal instructional leadership and school achievement: Validation of a causal model. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 26, 94-125. doi:10.1177/0013161X90026002002
- Hightower, A. M., & McLaughlin, M. W. (2005). *Building and sustaining an infrastructure for learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Hightower, A. M., Knapp, M., March, J., & McLaughlin, M. W. (Eds.). (2002). *School districts and instructional renewal*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hitt, D. H. & Tucker, P. D. (2016). Systematic review of key leader practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework. *Review of Educational Research*, 86, 531-569. doi:10.3102/0034654315614911
- Honing, M. I. (2003). Building policy from practice: District central office administrators' role and capacity for implementing collaborative education policy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39, 292-338. doi:10.1177/0013161X03253414
- Honing, M. I. (2008). District central offices as learning organizations: How sociocultural and organizational learning theories elaborate district central office administrators' participation in teaching and learning improvement efforts. *American Journal of Education*, 114, 627-664. doi:019567442008114040004
- Honing, M. I. (2009). No small thing: School district central office bureaucracies and the implementation of new small autonomous school initiatives. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46, 387-422. doi:10.3102/0002831208329904

- Honing, M. I. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48, 733-774. doi:10.1177/0013161X12443258
- Honing, M. I., Copland, M. A., Lorton, J. A., Rainey, L., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Honing, M. I., & Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School-central office relationships in evidence use: Understanding evidence use as a systems problem. *American Journal of Education*, 118, 199-222. doi:10.1086/663282
- Honig, M. I., Venkateswaran, N., & McNeil, P. (2017). Research use as learning: The case of fundamental change in school district central offices. *American Educational Journal of Education*, 54, 938-971. doi:10.3102/0002831217712466
- Hoyle, J. R., Bjork, L. G., Collier, V., & Glass, T. (2005). *The superintendent as CEO*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Illinois Center for School Improvement. (2017). *Direct services*. Retrieved from <https://www.illinoiscsi.org/districtservices>
- Illinois State Board of Education. (2012). *Illinois race to the top*. Retrieved from <http://www.isbe.net/racetothetop>
- Illinois State Board of Education. (2017). *2016 annual report: Illinois State Board of Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/2016%20Annual%20Report.pdf>
- Illinois State Board of Education. (2018). *IL-EMPOWER*. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/IL-Empower.aspx>

- Johnson, P., & Chrispeels, J. H. (2010). Linking the central office and its schools for reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 738-775. doi:10.1177/0013161X10377346
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Kena, G., Hussar, W., McFarland, J., de Brey, C., Musu-Gillette, L., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., & Dunlop Velez, E. (2016). *The condition of education 2016* (NCES 2016-144). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- Knapp, M. S. (2008). How can organizational and sociocultural learning theories shed light on district instructional reform? *American Journal of Education*, 114, 521-539. doi:10.1086/589313
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., Ford, B., Markholt, A., McLaughlin, M. W., Milliken, M., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). *Leading for learning sourcebook: Concepts and examples*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved from <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/LforLSourcebook-02-03.pdf>
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., Honig, M. I., Plecki, M. L., & Portin, B. S. (2010). Urban renewal. *Journal of Staff Development*, 31(2), 25-29.
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). *Leading for learning: Reflective tools for school and district leaders*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.
- Knapp, M. S., Honig, M. I., Plecki, M. L., Portin, B. S., Copland, M. A. (2014). *Learning-focused leadership in action: Improving instruction in schools and districts*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Knapp, M. S., Swinnerton, J. A., Copland, M. A., & Monpas-Huber, J. (2006). *Data-informed leadership in education*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.
- Kotter, J. P., & Cohen, D. S. (2002). *The heart of change*. Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2005). Evolution of the school superintendent as communicator. *Communication Education, 54*, 101-117. doi:10.1080/03634520500213322
- Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Petersen, G. J., Young, I. P., & Ellerson, N. M. (2011). *The American school superintendent*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformation leadership on student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration, 38*, 112-129.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Jantzi, D. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*, 496-528.
doi:10.1177/0013161X08321501
- Leithwood, K. A., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences learning*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.
- Leithwood, K. A., Patten, S., & Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how school leadership influences student learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 46*, 671-706.
doi:10.1177/0013161X10377347
- Leithwood, K. A., & Wahlstrom, K. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: Introduction. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*, 455-457. doi:10.1177/0013161X08321495

- Linn, R. (2007). Accountability, responsibility and reasonable expectations. *Educational Researcher*, 32, 3-13.
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning. Final report for research to the Wallace Foundation*. Minneapolis, MN: The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, The University of Minnesota. Retrieved from www.cehd.umn.edu/CAREI/
- MacIver, M. A. (2010). Beginning with the end in mind: The school district office leadership role in closing the graduation gap for at-risk students. *Educational Considerations*, 38, 8-16.
- Malen, B., Ogawa, R. T., & Kranz, J. (1990). Site-based management: Unfilled promises. *School Administrator*, 42(2), 3-56.
- Marks, H., & Printy, S. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: An integration of transformational and instructional leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39, 370-397. doi:10.1177/0013161X03253412
- Mart, D. T. (2011). *Perceived district leadership influence upon student achievement* (Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3473062)
- Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Transforming research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press and McREL.

- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Aurora, CO: ASCD and McREL.
- Mayer, A. P., & Tucker, S. K. (2010). Cultivating students of color: Strategies for ensuring high academic achievement in middle and secondary schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 20, 470-490.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mullen, C. A. (2009). Exceptional Scholarship and Democratic Agendas: Interviews with John Goodlad, John Hoyle, Joseph Murphy, and Thomas Sergiovanni. *Interchange*, 40, 165-203.
- Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2007). Leadership for learning: A research-based model and taxonomy of behaviors. *School Leadership and Management*, 27, 179-201.
- Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1988). Characteristics of instructionally effective school districts. *Journal of Educational Research*, 81, 175-181.
- Ogawa, R. T., & Bossert, S. T. (1995). Leadership as an organizational quality. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 31, 224-243. doi:10.1177/0013161X95031002004
- Packard, R. D. (1990). *Building in accountability mechanisms for democracies & bureaucracies: From governmental & educational special interest operations to high-quality performance systems. An added perspective to "What price democracy? Politics, markets and America's schools" by Dr. Terry Moe and Dr. John Chubb*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED327972)

- Park, V., & Datnow, A. (2009). Co-constructing distributed leadership: District and school connections in data-driven decision making. *School Leadership & Management, 29*, 477-494. doi:10.1080/1363243090316254
- Patterson, J. L., Goens, G. A., & Reed, D. E. (2009). *Resilient leadership for turbulent times: A guide to thriving in the face of adversity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Petersen, G. J. (1999). Demonstrated actions of instructional leaders: An examination of five California superintendents. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 7*(18), 1-24.
- Petersen, G. J., & Fusarelli, L. D. (Eds.). (2005). *The politics of leadership: Superintendents and school boards in changing times*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Plecki, M. L., Alejano, C. R., Knapp, M. S., & Lochmiller, C. R. (2006). *Allocating resources and creating incentive to improve teaching and learning*. Retrieved from <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Resources-Oct30.pdf>
- Popham, W. (2013). Can classroom assessments of student growth be credibly used to evaluate teachers? *English Journal, 103*, 34-39.
- Portin, B., Knapp, M., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russel, F. A., & Samuelson, C. (2009). *Leadership or learning improvement in urban schools*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Reeves, D. B. (2006). *The learning leader: How to focus improvement for better results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership styles. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 23*, 635-674. doi:10.1177/0013161X08321509

- Rorrer, A. K., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2008). Districts as institutional actors in educational reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44, 307-358.
doi:10.1177/0013161X08318962
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Senge, P. M. (2012). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). Why we should seek substitutes for leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 49(5), 41-45.
- Shafritz, J. M., Ott, J. S. & Jang, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *Classics of organization theory* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Smith, K., & Meier, K. (1994). Politics, bureaucrats, and schools. *Public Administration Review*, 54, 551-558. doi:10.2307/976675
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributive perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30, 23-28.
doi:10.31020013189X030003023
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36, 3-34.
doi:10.1080/0022027032000106726
- Spillane, J. P., & Thompson, C. L. (1997). Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity: The local education agency's capacity for ambitious instructional reform. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19, 185-203.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Stiggins, R. J. (2007). Assessment through students' eyes. *Educational Leadership*, 64(8), 22-26.
- Supovitz, J., Foley, E., & Mishook, J. (2012). In search of leading indicators in education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 20, 2-22.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v20n19.2012>
- Swinnerton, J. A. (2006). *Learning to lead what you don't know yet know: District leaders engaged in instructional reform* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3231068)
- Taylor, R. T. (2010). *Leading learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43, 221-258.
doi:10.1177/0013161X06293717
- Wagner, T. (2001). Leadership for learning: An action theory of school change. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 43, 378-383.
- Waters, T., & Marzano, R. J. (2007). The primacy of superintendent leadership. *School Administrator*, 64(3), 10-16.
- Williams, H. S., & Johnson, T. (2013). Strategic leadership in schools. *Education*, 133, 350-355.
- Worner, K. T. (2010). *Success in the superintendency: Tips and advice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Yin, R. K. (2008). *Case study research: Designs and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix A

Soliciting District Candidate Nomination

Dear (Insert Name),

I am an administrator in Lisle Community Unit School District 202 and am completing my Doctor of Education degree in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting my dissertation research on learning-focused leadership of central office administrators; my advisor, Dr. Donald Hackmann, is directing my study. I am contacting you to ask for nominations of an exemplary Illinois district to participate in a case study. Below are the criteria to identify potential district candidates:

- The district is either an elementary or unit district, enrolling 1,000-2,500 students, with a subgroup population similar to Illinois state averages.
- The Superintendent and central office administrators demonstrate strong leadership for learning philosophy and practices.
- The Superintendent has served in his/her position in the district for at least three years.
- The district leadership facilitates a collective capacity to improve the organizational learning of school leaders to increase the achievement of all students.
- The district demonstrates an increase in student achievement in the past two years.

Thank you for considering this request, and I hope that you are able to identify one or more Illinois districts that may meet these criteria. Please send your recommendations (include the superintendent name, district, and any other information you wish to share) via email to (klgordo2@illinois.edu) or call (708-528-9108) the name of the school districts you nominate. If you have questions about the study, you may contact me or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Donald Hackmann (dghack@illinois.edu; 217-333-0230). Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Karen Gordon
Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Appendix B

Soliciting Superintendent Participation

Dear [Insert Name of Superintendent],

I am an administrator in Lisle Community Unit School District 202 and am completing my Doctor of Education degree in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting my dissertation research on learning-focused leadership of central office administrators; my advisor, Dr. Donald Hackmann, is directing my study. Your district has been nominated as a potential site for my case study research, because your district has a reputation of strong central office leadership that focuses on student learning and developing the capacity of school principals to serve as learning leaders.

I am contacting you to determine if you, your central office administrators, school principals, and leadership teams would be interested in permitting me to conduct leadership research within your school district. If your district is selected as the case study site, you and selected administrators would be asked to voluntarily participate in interviews. The amount of time necessary for any staff member agreeing to an interview is estimated at 45-60 minutes per interview, although there may be follow-up interviews for some administrators. In addition, site observations of district leadership and a review of public or district document related to leadership activities and practices to increase student learning will be conducted. Data collection will remain confidential and no personally identifiable information will be used in the study.

If you indicate a willingness to participate, I will email you an informed consent form for you to sign and return as an attachment, and we will set up a time for a brief 10-minute telephone screening interview. This interview is designed to ensure the district meets the established criteria for the study. If your district ultimately is selected for the case study site, I will ask for your signed approval as superintendent, on behalf of your district.

Thank you in advance for considering this request. If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact me (klgordo2@illinois.edu; 708-528-9201) or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Donald Hackmann (dghack@illinois.edu; 217-333-0230).

Regards,

Karen Gordon
Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Appendix C

Superintendent Participation Screening Interview

As the superintendent, I am asking you a few questions, given your district has been nominated as a potential site for my case study research because your district has a reputation of strong central office leadership that focuses on student learning.

1. Please describe how this district developed a reputation of strong central office leadership that focuses on student learning.
2. How would you describe leadership for learning?
3. Please describe the leadership practices of the central office administrators to develop the capacity of building leaders?
4. Please describe how district leadership contributed to an increase in student achievement across subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, special education, SES, ELs)

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Central Office Leadership for Learning: Building Collective Capacity to Improve Achievement for All Students INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study examining the learning-focused leadership practices of central office leaders in building a collective capacity with school leaders to improve the achievement of all students. A goal of this study is to understand how leadership for learning principles provides guidance for the superintendent and central office leaders to allocate resources on learning, develop collaborative organizational learning of assessment literacy, analysis of student growth, and data-decision making for the continuous improvement of student achievement. This study is affiliated with the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Karen Gordon, doctoral candidate, and Don Hackmann are conducting the study.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your relationship in any way with your school district or your relationship with the University of Illinois. You may elect to terminate this activity if at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable about the experience. Should you consent, you will participate in one interview, which should last no longer than one hour. Interview questions will focus on the district's practices in promoting student learning and developing the capacity of school administrators to function as learning leaders. You are permitted to skip any interview questions that you prefer not to answer. Interviews will be audiotaped for the purposes of data analysis and will be transcribed, with all identifying information removed to protect confidentiality of the participants. You also may choose to voluntarily provide district documents or other artifacts to assist the researchers in understanding the school district's implementation of school improvement. You will receive a copy of the transcript by email attachment to double-check the information, and you may be contacted by telephone or email for clarification of your interview responses. Should you agree, you also may be contacted for follow-up interview.

Your interview responses will be kept confidential and secure, and the results of the interviews will only be reported in the aggregate. If you are participating in a focus group interview, this format does not provide complete confidentiality because participants will hear their colleagues' responses. Although we cannot guarantee that topics discussed in this focus group will not be shared outside the group, we will take careful precautions to monitor and control the group discussion so responses remain focused on the interview questions. Publication may include the use of quotations from your interview in educational presentations, on websites, in a dissertation, and in professional publications, but pseudonyms will be used for all quotations so your responses cannot be attributed to you. There is no direct benefit to agreeing to participate in this study for participants, but participation in the study involves minimal risk. Through identifying learning-focused behaviors of school leaders, it is intended that the school district and participants will benefit through improvements in school practices, both for the district involved and other school districts.

Observations will be conducted of meetings in schools or within the school district when school leaders and educators are discussing resource supports, assessment practices, and data analysis to support student learning. Field notes will be taken, but these observations will not be audiorecorded. The names of the individuals will not be included in field notes. During observations, participants may request that the Investigator step out of the room for a short time or to end the observation, should they become uncomfortable with the Investigator's presence during sensitive discussions.

In general, we will not tell anyone any information about you. When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. However, laws and university rules might require us to disclose information about you. For example, if required by laws or University Policy, study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you may be seen or copied by the following people or groups: a) The university committee and office that reviews and approves research studies, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office for Protection of Research Subjects; and b) University and state auditors, and Departments of the university responsible for oversight of research. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the University of Illinois Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu. If you have questions about this study, please contact the responsible project investigator, Dr. Donald Hackmann at the University of Illinois (217-333-0230 or dghack@illinois.edu) with Karen Gordon (708-528-9108 or klgordo2@illinois.edu).

I have read and understand this project and indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this research study. I have been given a copy of this consent form for my records.

I agree to be interviewed for this study and to have my interview audiotaped for the purpose of transcription.

Yes / **No** (circle one)

Printed Name: _____ Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

Interview Protocol for District Superintendent

1. Please tell me how long you have been the superintendent. What prior leadership positions have you held, within this district and in others?
2. Please share your understanding of the key elements of leadership for learning to improve the organizational learning and academic performance of all students in your district.
3. Please describe the district-wide vision for the improvement of academic achievement for all students. As superintendent, how have you worked with your board, administrators, faculty, and constituents to develop, implement, and sustain this vision?
4. Please describe your practices and learning activities, as the superintendent, that develop the collective capacity of central office and building- level leaders to increase academic performance of all students?
5. Please describe the strengths of your central office and school leadership which has led to increases in student achievement. As superintendent, how you have personally worked to develop the collective capacity of your administrative team to have the knowledge, skills, and commitment to improve student learning?
6. Please describe how you communicate district efforts to improve student achievement with district administration, the local community and school board?
7. Please describe the both internal and external resources your district has allocated to build district capacity to increase student achievement. In what ways, if any, have you reallocated resources since you have become the superintendent, in support of student learning?
8. How does the district monitor student progress? What practices or tools does the district use to monitor student achievement? In what ways do you examine student learning gains for student subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, special education, SES, ELL).
9. What district changes have been made to support recent changes in federal or state mandates regarding raising the achievement of all students?
10. Please comment on the challenges your district has experienced in supporting student growth. What has your district done to successfully address these challenges?
11. Are there any other aspects of leadership support from the central office to support the achievement of all students you would like to share that I have not asked?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol for Central Office Administrator

1. Please tell me what your position in the district, your responsibilities, and how long you have been working in this position. What prior leadership positions have you held, within this district and in others?
2. Please share your understanding of the key elements of leadership for learning to improve the organizational learning and academic performance of all students in your district.
3. Describe your role and responsibilities in two or three intentional leadership practices as they relate to increasing student achievement in your district.
4. Please describe your practices and learning activities, as a central office administrator that develop the collective capacity of school leaders to increase academic performance of all students?
5. How do the superintendent, the central office administration, and the building principals work collaboratively across the district in increasing student achievement?
6. Describe the allocation of district or external resources/partnerships to support assessment literacy, accountability systems, and data analysis of student growth.
7. Please describe any professional development that the district provides or offers to central office administration and principals to support their knowledge and skills development, as they work to improve student learning in the district?
8. How does the district monitor student progress? What practices or tools does the district use to monitor student achievement? In what ways do you examine student learning gains for student subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, special education, SES, ELL).
9. What district changes have been made to support recent changes in federal or state mandates regarding raising the achievement of all students?
10. Please comment on the challenges your district has experienced in supporting student growth. What has your district done to successfully address these challenges?
11. Are there any other aspects of leadership support from the central office to support the achievement of all students you would like to share that I have not asked?

Appendix G

Individual Interview Protocol for School Administrators

The first set of questions, I will be asking you to describe your leadership role.

1. Please tell me what your position in the district, your responsibilities, and how long you have been working in this position.
2. What prior leadership positions have you held, within this district and in others?
3. Describe your role and responsibilities, as they relate to increasing student achievement in your district.
4. How would you describe your district's leadership practices in support student learning? What role do central office administrators fulfill, in promoting the success of principals as they work to improve student learning?

The next set of questions, asks about central office and principal collaboration.

5. Describe what a professional learning community looks like among central office and principals.
6. Describe the kinds of activities you engage in when working with central office and principals on the improvement of student learning.
7. Describe how ongoing communication works among central office and building principals regarding the improvement of student learning. (e.g., are there regular meetings between central office and principals, is a central office administrator assigned with oversight to one or more principals)

The following questions focus on the district systems to support ongoing continuous improvement practices and activities to improve the achievement of all students.

8. What types of practices or activities do the district central office administrators engage with building principals during the school year to support the improvement of student achievement?
9. What structures are in place to monitor student progress and improve student learning? What practices or tools does the leadership team use to monitor student achievement? In what ways do you examine student learning gains for student subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, special education, SES, ELL).
10. Please describe the allocation of district or external resources to support assessment literacy, data analysis of student growth, and recent changes in federal or state mandates regarding raising the achievement of all students.
11. Please describe the supports and activities the central office has provided to build your leadership capacity to building leadership teams to support teachers, parents, and the community to increase student achievement.

The last questions are closing questions on leadership work to improve student learning.

12. Please describe the supports and activities from central office you have found to be most beneficial your leadership work to improve student achievement and what has been the least beneficial in your leadership work to improve student achievement.
13. Are there any other aspects of leadership support from the central office to support the achievement of all students you would like to share that I have not asked?

