A SUPERINTENDENT’S ROLE IN CREATING COMMUNITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The context of leadership in the public school has become increasingly complex with the pressures of high stakes testing and accountability, changing student demographics, and financial challenges. Stakeholders must work together to develop effective strategies to increase student academic performance. Successful superintendents must optimize learning by fostering relationships across the district to validate the contributions of all constituents. This demands that leaders change from the traditional bureaucracy to a model of collaboration, redefining organizations as communities. To do this, they must listen, create spaces for dialogue, and encourage risk-taking.

The literature on community seeks to provide models for schools to adopt in an effort to build relationships that significantly impact teaching and learning. Those relationships occur internally within a school and school district as well as externally with the wider community. This study explores first the internal community that results from the professional learning community model. Secondly, it examines the external community in the form of school-community relationships and partnerships. The community research embraces the notion of schools operating in the larger, more comprehensive community that includes additional resources to support the needs of children and adolescents. Finally, the study focuses on the critical need for acknowledging and, moreover, building a community of difference where diversity is valued and voices are heard.

The motivation for the study was to develop an understanding of the complexity of the task of a superintendent, who was new to a district, as he attempted to develop a strong sense of district community. There were two main research questions; they are as follows:

1. How does the superintendent work with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community?
2. How does the district leadership team respond to the superintendent’s efforts?

The study utilized a qualitative case study methodology. Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a superintendent, in his first year in a new district, the assistant superintendent, three district directors, and four principals. Data were also collected from meeting observations and document analyses. Through this work, the study aimed to create a useful framework that might support a superintendent intent on building community.

Findings included four emergent themes about the behaviors of the superintendent. To do this work, the superintendent must be visible, must communicate with all stakeholders, must be collaborative, allowing opportunities for dialogue, must invite others to have a voice in decision-making, and must understand the change process as they guide the district through cultural change.

The study’s results can be used by university educational leadership programs to better prepare superintendents for the complexities of the current leadership landscape. Although it is important to be informed about the historical foundation of education and its implication on current practice, programs also need to include an equal emphasis on practical experience that highlights instructional leadership, managerial skills, human resources, and community-building skills. Key recommendations for superintendents planning to do this work include an intentional reflection on their personal values and beliefs to provide an anchor during challenging times. In addition, superintendents may use this study to synthesize strategies to create community across their districts in order to move forward to improve student achievement.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Personal Statement

My motivation for this inquiry has arisen from personal experience. Until 2008, I was a building principal at a large middle school in a district of 12,500 students, over 800 teachers, and twenty school buildings. During my tenure in that district, I found it very difficult to connect with other principals and staffs, even if the effort was to share instructional strategies or resources. Reaching out to others in a collaborative spirit came somewhat naturally to me, and I was confused when my efforts were thwarted. I determined that part of the reason for lack of engagement was a sense of competition; i.e. our athletic teams compete so why shouldn’t our academic groups? There appeared to be no thought about student needs, but rather an emphasis on existing culture.

After receiving my superintendent’s endorsement, I decided to move to a smaller district in a different role, anticipating that authentic collaboration would be a goal that could be realized. My current district involves 1,260 students, four principals, and six buildings. Shortly after my arrival as superintendent, I realized that a similar culture of isolation and competition exists in this district. The principals rarely shared ideas, never brought staffs together, and did not engage in regular dialogue about educational issues.

These experiences have led me to believe that leadership that builds community is challenging; in addition, I realize that cultural practices that foster the buffering of teachers and their practices are common and, at times, expected, as a principal protects teachers from public criticism. There is significant discussion among leaders about “buy-in,” but the talk is not
followed by action directed toward valuing diverse ideas and opinions. Thus, the bureaucratic approach to administration seems to remain strong.

I continue to believe that it is important to develop a district community that values what each member contributes and that fosters relationship-building. If learning emerges from relationship (Buber, 1923; Palmer, 1998; Shields, 2004), and dialogue is a vehicle for understanding diverse ideas, perspectives, and cultures, then leaders must lead in ways that create community.

**Problem Statement**

How does the framing of school community impact educational leadership? What leadership qualities are implicit in this job description? Is there a job description? What is the work of an educational leader? Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that schools are moral communities, much like families, and, as such, require moral connection, which is at the core of building community. He sees a critical link between what happens to teachers and what happens to students. For example, “Inquiring classrooms are not likely to flourish in schools where inquiry among teachers is discouraged” (p. 2). He argues that school organizational patterns must recognize individual differences among teachers; encourage teachers to reflect on their own practices; prioritize dialogue among teachers; provide for collaboration; and emphasize caring communities (Sergiovanni, 1994). Leaders must generate natural contexts for people to take responsibility by working with and through others, i.e., by developing internal networks.

A superintendent holds the top leadership position in a school district. This leader is expected to demonstrate fiscal responsibility by creating and maintaining a district budget, identify and prioritize facility needs and explore avenues to satisfy them, establish effective communication networks with all stakeholders, actively participate in the wider community,
remain informed with respect to policies and explore avenues to effectively implement them throughout the district, and respond appropriately to the demands of seven board members, most of whose knowledge about the challenges of school emerges from their days as students or perhaps being parents.

Amidst the political dance that occurs in an organization, superintendents face the daunting task of ensuring the best possible education for America’s youth. They ponder questions regarding curriculum, instructional practices, professional development, and staff evaluation plans. They ultimately must traverse the terrain of confrontation resulting from unpopular decisions and take a stance in the best interests of children. Throughout, superintendents must be guided by strong principles and a clear purpose so that they can use their skills to improve schools and maintain a vision of excellence for all students.

However, it is principals who directly lead the schools, hopefully developing a culture that is consistent with district expectations and student and staff needs. If a superintendent does not have a relationship with principals, how does he/she influence district improvement, ensuring that student needs are being addressed and that equity and excellence are maintained? Therein lay the problem. Although the superintendent is responsible for ensuring an excellent education for all of the district students, there are few successful models to support the relational, community-building leader.

Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest that the fundamental problem faced by educational leaders is that they do not practice effective dialogue – dialogue that involves understanding, empathy, relationship, and “listening with the ears and with the heart.” Good educational leaders are aware of their relationships with those that surround them and practice real dialogue with students, colleagues, parents and administrators. The authors believe that dialogue empowers
educational communities to focus on healthy relationships and deeper understanding and to be more inclusive and democratic. Leaders must ensure that all members in the community learn to speak together with moral voices, where each perspective is valued and no one truth is universal (Shields & Edwards, 2005).

Leadership is a complex endeavor when one moves out of the technical/rational comfort zone because it is a comfort zone realized by a sense of accomplishment felt at the completion of managerial tasks. Some of the structures can, and need to be maintained. Predictability is not all negative; there are some necessary routines. To get to the real meaning of school, however, a leader must return to the fundamental questions. What are the moral purposes of schooling? What is our responsibility to our students? Who am I and what do I stand for? How can I ethically use the power of leadership to build relationships that encourage people toward a democratic and socially just community?

Lambert and King (n.d.) suggest that true leadership enables participants in a community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling. Leadership is about learning together. It involves many people, including teachers, administrators, parents, students, community members, and district personnel, who believe in core values that focus on democracy and equity, who understand learning, and who act out of a clear sense of self and others (Lambert & King, n.d.). Lambert (2000) suggests that learning is collective and enhanced by inquiry, dialogue, reflection, and action. So leadership must be adaptive; leaders must listen to stakeholders to develop a vision about the shared purpose of schooling.

Glickman (1998) explains that school leaders “...challenge the school community to examine and explain what is meant by the word ‘democracy’ and how it applies to schools and education” (p. 4). He suggests that leaders be explicit in requiring teachers to submit examples of
instructional methods that they believe are democratic and offer opportunities for public dialogue about the examples. Atlee (2003) postulates that a good leader organizes a “partnership of thought and action” that cultivates each member’s contribution for collective understanding and success. Shields (2004) argues that a leader must facilitate moral dialogue. Barber (1992) suggests that “we need each other and cannot survive alone…our identity is forged through a dialectical relationship with others” (p. 12). Dewey (1939) believed that democracy is “…allied with humanism, with faith in the potentialities of human nature…” (p. 172). Grumet (1997) suggests that “our relationships to the world are rooted in our relationships to the people who care for us” (p. 115). Relationships are fundamental to curriculum and to pedagogy and to socially just communities that construct meaning. It is important to work toward this goal, according to Shields (2004), through acknowledging a wide range of lived experiences, thus engaging a community of difference. This author believes that this validation should not be an artificial inclusion, but rather openness to creating a space where these types of conversations can occur naturally, so that children feel a sense of belonging (Shields, 2004).

I would argue, in agreement with Sergiovanni (1998), that teachers need to experience this type of community in order to create it for their students. Reading about something and intellectually understanding and agreeing with it is sometimes not translated into practice, particularly if the status quo is far different. DuFour (1998) suggests that “the alteration of beliefs, expectations, and habits that have gone unexamined for years is a complex, messy, and challenging task” (p. 33).

No change, it seems, occurs without discomfort. A community of difference moves away from the security that arises from being with others who think alike. It is important to note that this is an artificial security. We are individuals by virtue of being human. We need to learn to
quell the perceived threat that difference sometimes presents and move to the wonder of the potential learning that will emerge from reflective dialogue with all stakeholders. Conventional schools have been organized in ways that allow young people little say in what and how they learn or in shaping the rules that govern their behavior. Instead, their position is typically at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their voices are missing (Kelly & Brandes, 2008).

Leaders must listen, create spaces for dialogue, and encourage risk-taking. They need to model the search for knowledge and the willingness to learn. They must continue to study patterns of interaction in the school community, reflect on the potential for exclusionary practices, and work to change them. Palmer (1998) suggests that “community is a bi-product of commitment and struggle” (p. 18).

Educational leaders have a unique opportunity, and moreover a responsibility, to be change agents. They must weather the discomfort of dissonance and continue to “engage in explicit conversations about the diversity of their student bodies and the relationship of social justice to conceptions of academic excellence and school success...[then] they are leading with moral purpose” (Shields, 2004, p. 14).

**Gap in the Literature**

There is extensive research on educational leadership: the essential qualities of leaders, the skills and abilities necessary for successful leadership, the organizational development that has led to the development of leadership competencies, the frames of leadership, and the need for dedicated leaders, to name a few. As the literature embraced the concept of schools as communities, it also offered revised leadership expectations that involve focusing on stakeholders and building relationships.
However, most of the literature that combined the two, i.e., leadership and community building, focused on the principal as leader. There has been very limited study of the superintendent as the ultimate community-builder, and even less on the building of community in a district, rather than a school.

As a new superintendent leading a district with six buildings that, at the time of this study, operate as silos, I was driven to discover a way to develop a sense of district community where participants feel valued and work together to develop a district vision. My belief is that a district community will share a broader view of student needs and will create a stronger network of communication to enable stakeholders to interact on behalf of children.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the complexity of the task of a superintendent, who was new to a district, as he attempted to develop a strong sense of district community. Using a reputational case study, I explored the beliefs regarding community that guide the work of a superintendent, as well as the methods he/she uses to create opportunities for dialogue as an essential tool for meeting the goal of district community.

There were two research questions:

1. How does the superintendent work with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community?

2. How does the district leadership team respond to the superintendent’s efforts?

Overview of the Literature

Our existence as leaders, moreover as human beings, is entwined with our relationships. The connections of community are visible at the core of reality, according to Parker Palmer (1998). Palmer cites scientists who claim that the “atom is no longer seen as an independent and isolated entity, but, as a set of relationships reaching out to other things” (p. xiv). He argues that
knowing is a profoundly communal act, suggesting that “nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature. In order to know something, we depend on the consensus of the community in which we are rooted” (p. xv). Palmer also asserts that knowing goes beyond the relations of the knower; it includes “a community of interaction between the knower and the known” (p. xv). Pedagogically, Palmer claims that real learning “does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject” (p.xvi). Shields (2004) maintains,

> We are born out of and live in relationships. Because we live in interdependence with others, we need to communicate; and, living in community, we are fundamentally predisposed to better our human conditions – to transform it in line with our ideological predispositions (p. 9).

Dialogue is a tool in relationships that enables participants to understand each others’ ideas, perspectives, and cultures, often different from one’s own. Shields (2004) states, “Learning occurs when we come into contact with others, approach them with absolute regard, and develop deeper understanding and new interpretations of the world” (p. 12). The purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn about academics, about themselves, about each other, and about the world. If learning is our focus, and learning is optimized with relationships, then it is reasonable to expect that schools would work toward fostering relationships in community; but a definition of community is sometimes nebulous.

Often we hear people refer to their “community.” They may be referring to their town, their city, their church, or even their workplace. Those places typically share some commonalities, the most salient of which is that the members feel a sense of belonging. Often they have camaraderie with each other, they engage in dialogue at a variety of levels, they share stories, and they adhere to common beliefs and/or laws. It is natural, when we look at groups of people and identify these characteristics, to emphasize commonalities. “Sameness” can offer a
sense of identity and security to most. But a problem may arise when we ignore the complexity of our humanness; when we fail to acknowledge difference. What other groups are successful with collaborative practices? To how many “communities” do people belong? In recent decades, writers (Fullan, 2001; Furman, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996; Shields, 2004) have identified the need for community in schools and for particular experiences to define the essence of community in this setting.

**Schools: Organizations or Communities?**

Schooling experiences all too often have been fostered by a bureaucratic, rule-oriented, standardized approach to education. This kind of organization falls short of being a community as it is embraced in this paper. Insiders usually share some commonalities, or at least common goals, and some feel a sense of belonging at a school, but outsiders may feel ostracized and isolated. Researchers have articulated a difference between school as an organization and school as a community and have delineated a process to move from a bureaucracy to a community.

Schools are communities, i.e., places where there are groups of people who have something in common, often expressed in a shared vision (Fullan, 2001; Senge, 1995; Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Smith, 1994). They are also places where these groups learn; thus, it follows that schools should be learning communities. These learning communities are inhabited by young people and adults who are ideally also members of additional communities and who have a sense (though not necessarily the same sense) about how communities should work. In order to make these learning communities successful for all, we must define what they are and what they can be.

Senge (1990) identified the necessary processes to transform an organization into a learning community. He suggested that we carry assumptions, images, and stories in our heads,
which he terms “mental models,” that clarify our internal pictures of how the world works. These mental models impact how we act and what we see; they lay the groundwork for practices that create a school culture. For example, it is common to understand a district hierarchy in terms of a bureaucracy with increasing control and power as one nears the top. The assumption that accompanies this organizational model implies top-down decision-making; at least our mental model, created through observation, conveys this belief. This can be problematic. When we move from direct observation, internalizing it as concrete data, to generalizing about a person, group, or practice, our subsequent belief is often erroneous. Unfortunately, it sometimes becomes axiomatic, as in the case of school as hierarchy. Senge called this process a “leap of abstraction” (p. 193).

Too often teachers’ mental models of school include paper/pencil assessments, students responding when summoned, quiet classrooms, and a pedagogy that springs from a file drawer. Some administrators’ mental models include a prioritizing of managerial tasks and the establishment of themselves as “the one in charge and the chief decision-maker.” And unfortunately, for some students, mental models of school comprise a place of oppression where conformity is enforced, learning is standardized, and voices are silenced. Herein lay the challenge. This approach to schooling is narrow, inflexible, and exclusionary. If educators are committed to providing students with a school experience that includes not only essential academic skills and knowledge, but also the experience and understanding of what it means to live in a democratic society, the organization of school must be transformed into a democratic community.

Change, often a seemingly insurmountable task, becomes necessary. Fullan (2001) suggests points of reference to help in developing an on-going process of understanding change.
One is transforming the culture of an organization and changing the way things are done. He calls this “reculturing,” appropriate when attempting to transform “the way things have always been done” (p. 10). He suggests that new modes of operation need to align with moral purpose and stresses the importance of understanding those who resist change. Fullan (2001) believes that the leader should not dictate the path for all to follow, but instead should foster the conditions necessary for change in accordance with shared values.

Senge, et.al. (1994), too, suggested that change in an organization must be addressed at a systems level. He states that people, however different, tend to produce similar results when placed in a similar system. Thus a systems perspective “looks to underlying structures which shape individual actions and create conditions where types of events become likely” (p. 175). One of the challenges presented by learning communities is that humans are part of the system that needs changing. Change then demands something other than manipulation of objects; rather it requires collaboration and collective decision- making. Senge argues that redefining organizations as communities means “…seeing organizations as centers of meaning and larger purpose to which people can commit themselves as free citizens in a democratic society” (p. 507). Superintendents who want to create district community in an existing bureaucracy must “reculture” or “redefine” their organization.

**Various meanings of community.** The literature on professional learning communities suggests that teachers who feel supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice are more committed and effective than those who do not receive such confirmation. This support emerges in teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles, all of which increase teacher efficacy in meeting the needs of students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Repeatedly, attention is given to five attributes: supportive and shared leadership, collective
Leaders in professional learning communities have moved beyond the “omnicompetence” perspective from which staff formerly viewed them and into collegial relationships with teachers, where everyone is playing on the same team toward the same goal, which is a school that continues to improve to meet the needs of its students. Leaders can lead, only if they are given permission to do so. Sergiovanni explains that “the sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas (1994b, p. 214).” McNeil and Maclin (2005) suggest that the shaping and establishment of such a culture is a “negotiated product of the shared sentiments of school participants” (p. 1). Thus, a high order of alignment comes from shared values, beliefs, and purposes across stakeholders.

Louis and Kruse (1995) state that the learning community is demonstrated by people from multiple constituencies, at all levels, collaboratively and continually working together in what they label as collective inquiry. Inquiry involves collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on data (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995). Participants in these conversations learn to apply new ideas to problem solving, and subsequently create new conditions for students. Key in this process are shared values and vision. A core characteristic of the vision, maintain Louis and Kruse (1995), is a focus on student learning in which each student’s potential achievement is carefully considered. Educators must ask what they believe in and then establish a climate where the alignment of values and beliefs are embedded (McNeil & Maclin, 2005). These shared values lead to norms, which the staff supports and which bind them together. Additionally, people in a learning community are willing to accept feedback and to work toward improvement. There is respect and trust among colleagues who are highly interactive.
Therein lies the semblance of a professional learning community – or so says the literature. Certainly these attributes add clarity to the composite of community. However, many questions emerge. What does this community believe? What are its non-negotiables? Shields (2004) asks, Who is marginalized and who is privileged in this community? Whose voices are heard? Who holds the power? Who is advantaged and disadvantaged? These questions must be asked regarding the adults, but moreover those with whom the adults are entrusted – the children. We move, then, from a definition, somewhat sterile, of a professional learning community, to the core of what it means for a school to be a community.

Furman and Shields (2003) argue:

Democratic community is an ideal, a moral purpose toward which educators strive, which is never fully realized; thus, democratic community is not a ‘thing’ or specific structure to be reified, defined, reduced, observed, and replicated. Rather, it may be understood more usefully as a process, or a way of ‘ethical living’ a diverse society (p. 6).

These researchers describe the concept of deep democracy as a practice that includes a respect for the worth of individuals and their cultural practices; open inquiry and critique; recognition of interdependence in working for the common good; and the importance of collective choices and actions in the interest of the common good.

Thus, deep democracy in schools is not a teacher-developed lesson plan. Rather it is an approach to schooling that models democratic participation of the kind that students should experience as they prepare for adult citizenry (Greene, 1985). It is a community building process that “hears all voices and roles, including our collective experiences of … subtle feelings and tendencies. It is a principle that makes space for the speakable, the barely speakable and the unspeakable” (Mindell, 2002).

Reform movements stemming from the 1983 Nation at Risk report have continued to seek models for creating and sustaining educational change toward a goal of improving student
learning. A recurrent theme in the resulting literature is the shift from school districts as hierarchical institutions with top-down mandates to schools as communities that value stakeholders’ voices (Sergiovanni, 1993). This paradigm shift involves changing roles, taking risks, and trusting those who have held positions of authority, all of which are challenging to embrace. The difficulty in the movement to community increases with the size of the district. Levels of positions, which hold various complex tasks and are often touted as levels of authority, are sometimes necessary to maintain the work demanded of a large organization. However, a disconnect has developed in understanding the potential of integration among all levels and the determination that the most important work happens between teachers and students.

The literature on community seeks to provide models for schools to adopt in an effort to build relationships that significantly impact teaching and learning. Those relationships occur internally within a school and a school district, as well as externally with the wider community. This study explored first the internal community that results from the professional learning community model. This model, often referred to as PLC, was described in the work of DuFour and Eaker in 1998. These researchers reported that the professional learning community breaks down isolation and provides a structure for staff to develop collaborative support in teams and to shift the focus from teaching to what and how students learn.

Secondly, the study examined the external community in the form of school-community relationships and partnerships. The community research embraced the notion of schools operating in the larger, more comprehensive community that includes additional resources to support the needs of children and adolescents. Although the research in this area dates back more than a century, current interest revolves around building social capital and creating school-
Community partnerships with businesses, colleges, and other agencies that share the goal of improving society through equity and excellence in education.

Finally, the study focused on the critical need for acknowledging, and moreover building, a community of difference where diversity is valued and voices are heard. Those researchers who have delved more deeply into the creating and sustaining of communities in schools have uncovered a missing link: that of having a substantive idea without regard for those involved (Furman, 1998; Shields, 2004; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Shields & Seltzer, 1997). That is, the building of community cannot be successful for any educative purposes unless leaders and participants understand, respect, and learn from the inherent diversity within the group. We can no longer determine a set of values for a group of people that assumes homogeneity of any kind. Conversely, we must be united in our quest to develop educational communities around the importance of teaching and learning, hearing all voices and creating vision from them. Rather than deciding on what a community is and how it should operate, and then sharing it with participants, leaders must find a method of creating an environment where participants create the community. The work of Shields and Edwards (2005) resonates with me in regard to the use of dialogue. There is no substitute for listening with one’s heart to those involved in the educational process. I believe that good educators are dedicated to meeting the needs of their students; in order to maximize avenues toward this goal, all ideas must be heard and valued. Thus, I pose dialogic leadership as the lens through which this study will be viewed.
Methodology

This study was situated in a mid-west state and focused on one superintendent who was selected on the basis of his reputation for wanting to build district community. This superintendent had just recent taken up his role as leader of a district of multiple buildings.

I gathered qualitative data through individual interviews with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, directors, and principals; through analysis of documents related to relationship and community-building; through observations of meetings with stakeholders; and through analyses of relevant artifacts. Greater specifics regarding methodology will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Assumptions

I made several assumptions while conducting this study. The first assumption was that community-building in schools and school districts is to support the goal of continuous improvement in teaching and learning, which would lead to a better informed citizenry. Although the goal of community by nature fosters a sense of belonging that supports success, it is not a goal in and of itself. A second assumption was that some form of community-building in schools has become normative, as schools seek ways to improve, whether the motivation is intrinsic or caused by legislation. A third assumption was that there is a significant number of superintendents who share the belief that district community is important for overall improvement, and that some of them have been successful in district community-building. A final assumption was that when districts have established a sense of community, there is greater sharing of ideas and resources that enables students to succeed.

I did not, however, assume that the superintendent featured in this study was a leader who embodied exemplary practices in building community, but rather looked to include the potential
problems that accompany the work of a superintendent that set an explicit goal of building community.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations narrow the scope of a study (Creswell, 2003). This study was confined to one superintendent, along with his assistant superintendent, directors, and principals in a case study design. It was limited by the use of semi-structured interviews and data collection from these participants only. Consequently, it did not include responses from other members of the school community. The time frame was also a delimitation because the study focused on only the superintendent’s first eight months.

**Significance of Study**

Leadership preparation programs sometimes dismiss the practical side of prospective jobs; much of the leadership research, often theoretical, focuses on the building leader; and leadership expectations at the superintendent’s level emphasize the managerial tasks essential to running a district. Thus, the superintendent who is focused on instructional leadership and on implementing a vision of excellence and equity, however that is framed by stakeholders, must forge ahead with little support. It is my hope that this study will provide a few of those road signs for superintendents, new or veteran, who seek to engage diverse members of their school communities in honest discourse as a foundation for growth.

Along with offering a strategy for district leaders, this study will also add to the body of research on superintendents who have successfully embraced the diversity in their districts by engaging stakeholders in dialogue and enabling them to build an educational community for all participants. It seeks to prod others to examine the isolation of stakeholders in multiple buildings
who need to understand what they commonly believe about teaching and learning in order to strengthen opportunities for their students.
Repeated waves of school reform have left educators feeling disconnected and ineffective. New teachers struggle with prioritizing mandates; veteran teachers work at avoiding the accountability that accompanies multiple initiatives, and administrators experience uncertainties related to leadership that makes a sustainable difference in their schools and districts. Hierarchical structures serve to distance faculty from administration and students from teachers. According to Palmer (1998), although connectedness is at the heart of good teaching, educators and students alike are fearful of failing, of having their ignorance exposed, thereby eroding a sense of self, of being drawn into issues for which they are unprepared, and of being exposed and vulnerable. Palmer (1998) suggests that we “collaborate with the structures of separation” (p. 37) to protect us against our deepest fears of encountering situations we cannot control. With state and federal mandates, little control is left at the local level.

The superintendent’s job includes the complexities of the local context, the challenges of speaking to the demands of seven, sometimes disparate, school board members, the demands of unions, the intricacies of the budget, and the overall management, politics, and educational leadership expected from one in this position. The superintendent is faced with the challenge of developing a quality school system that creates opportunities for success for all students in order to improve the district as a whole in the complicated environment of standards-based reform. The superintendent must develop opportunities for collaboration within the aforementioned “structures of separation.” He/she must craft dense webs, rather than simple chains, of communication. Current literature refers to this communication building amidst collaborative practices as “developing community.” Research is rife with various community-building
approaches; however most studies focus on the school as the unit of practice, and they report on principals and teachers working toward a community target.

There is scant information on the role of the superintendent in the process of community building. Yet, for a district to maintain strength, to introduce successful practices, and to build a culture of continuous improvement, the sense of community must be district-wide, and the superintendent must play a significant role in the process. However complex the job is, the most important leadership responsibility is the commitment that all children within a school district will receive the best possible education. One way for the superintendent to build a culture that supports this goal is by building community inclusive of all involved in the district. This effort demands a culture of relationship-building and trust, an understanding of the need to build capacity for change, and a knowledge of the local context. The interests and practices of public schooling are entwined with those of government, business, community groups, and social agencies. All must be involved in the district community; and yet, the task is compounded in that there are multiple meanings and conceptions of community, each one vying for acceptance in the research literature.

For that reason, I began this literature review with a critical examination of three dominant theoretical approaches: professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Senge, 1990), school-community relations (Epstein, 2005; Honig, 2003; Kahn, O’Brien, Brown, & Quinn, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Sanders, 2001), and communities of difference (Furman, 1998; Shields, 1999, 2004; Shields & Edwards, 2005). For each, I described the components that characterized the community, explained its strengths, and explored some challenges. Finally, I described possible steps taken
by the superintendent to develop a community that respectfully invited all to work toward a shared vision. En route let us look at some myths associated with community.

**Myths associated with communities.** Palmer (1998) suggests that the first myth involves viewing community as “a creature comfort, which can be added to a life full of other luxuries” (p. 18). Instead, it is a byproduct of commitment and struggle. He states that many see community as utopia, when instead it always involves a “collision of egos” (p. 19). Finally, Palmer explains that a community is not an extension of our own egos. Rather, in a real community, we do not choose our companions but instead they are persons who are given to us by grace, often who upset our view of ourselves and of the world.

Another myth may encompass the idea that a sense of belonging to a community is achieved through identification with people who are “like us” (Furman & Staratt, 2002). Instead, we need to think about a democratic community that emphasizes the idea of a “community of difference.” From a relatively sterile concept of a learning community can emerge a democratic community, where members may participate and have a voice in decisions and policies that affect them (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Furman and Starratt (2002) suggest that there is a moral component in a community of difference that includes value in coming together in the interest of the common good, value for open inquiry, respect for individuals and celebration of differences, and responsibility that acknowledges the interdependence of all in achieving the common good.

The school – the community of difference – must be based in the context of deep democracy, which keeps it from being reified into a single set of norms to which every member must subscribe. Wilson and Lowery (2003) explain that deep democracy describes an open and dynamic system “springing from the diverse points of engagement where individuals and
community come together” (p. 50). They suggest that it is based on public conversation, where one begins to listen to and know the “other.” In schools, democratic education should be based on dialogue and mutual interaction between teacher and student, where both become active partners in learning (Shields, 2008).

**Professional Learning Communities**

The professional learning community model, often referred to as PLC, was popularized in the work of DuFour and Eaker in 1998. This type of community focuses on student learning, reflective dialogue about deep-seated values and beliefs, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis, 2006). The PLC model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught, but to ensure that they learn (DuFour, 2004). It demands that all professional staff come together in dialogue to work toward this goal, and attempts to dislodge the “one teacher, one classroom” approach to teaching and learning. DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest that there are three questions at the heart of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Educators need to ask what it is that students need to learn, how they will know if students are learning, and what they will do if students do not learn. A PLC’s focus on collaboration begins with a team’s purpose, a time for reflection, rotation of responsibilities, the development of a concrete method of tracking data, and the creation of an atmosphere for risk taking. The collegial support and collaboration among teachers as representative of a professional community is linked to organizational culture (Louis, 2006), which is shaped by the group’s thinking, perceiving, and behavior. It does not necessarily incorporate issues of democracy.
**Shared values and vision.** In a professional learning community, teachers and administrators share a vision focused on student learning and a commitment to improvement (Reichstetter, 2006). The vision is used as a context for decision-making about instructional practice and collaborative learning efforts. The vision statement results in a collective responsibility for an unwavering focus on student learning (Leo & Cowen, 2001). Senge, et.al (1994) calls shared vision “a vehicle for building shared meaning” (p. 298). He maintains that every organization has a purpose that expresses its reason for existence that includes a collective sense of what is important and why. For schools, that purpose is to provide equitable opportunities for students to learn and achieve. Senge (1994) states that building shared vision involves designing ongoing processes that allow people at every level of the organization to “speak from the heart about what matters to them” (p. 299). Change happens when community members have an opportunity to actively consider which vision and purpose have real meaning for them.

**Collaborative culture.** Professional learning communities are based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Teachers benefit from the resources that each brings to the PLC. Collaboration provides a mechanism for sharing responsibility for student learning and a means to work together toward a common purpose (Reichstetter, 2006; Stoll, McMahon, Bolam, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood, & Hawkeye, 2006). Collaboration has been found in successful schools and is missing in unsuccessful schools (Little, 1982). However, in a school where collaboration has not been the norm, staff members may have to reinvent their models of appropriate human relationships as they change organizational structures (Senge, 1994).
A community of difference focuses on ensuring all voices are heard; i.e., it goes farther than a simple structure of collaboration. Thus, a collaborative approach in a community of difference engages all learners and therefore has potential to ensure greater success.

**Examining outcomes.** PLC’s promote results-oriented thinking that is focused on continuous improvement and student learning (Reichstetter, 2006). The focus goes beyond a team getting together to look at data. In PLC’s, teachers help motivate teachers to see what is happening as a result of analyzing and discussing student work samples, attendance records, and achievement data and to determine what they need to do collectively (DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Louis, 2006).

**Supportive and shared leadership.** Administrators are committed to sharing decision-making with teachers and providing opportunities for them to serve as leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Leadership is shared and distributed among formal and informal leaders. The purposes and goals of a PLC grow from among the participants, based on their values, beliefs, and individual and shared experiences (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Teacher leadership capacity sustains PLC’s. Sharing power and authority with teachers through decision-making and shared leadership increases leadership capacity and builds a belief in the school’s collective ability to affect student teaching (Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Olivier & Hipp, 2006).

**Shared personal practice.** A major focus of PLC’s is on professional learning in which teachers work and learn together as they continually evaluate the effectiveness of their practices and the needs of students and each other. Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about professional practice and helping teachers build on one another’s expertise (McREL, 2003).
Through continuous inquiry and reflective dialogue, teachers discover solutions and address student needs (Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Stoll, et al., 2006).

**Strengths.** The influence of teacher workplace factors on teacher quality indicates that teachers who feel supported in their ongoing learning and classroom practice are more committed and effective than those who do not (Rosenholtz, 1989). Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a strong sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviors and that a strong sense of efficacy encouraged teachers to stay in the profession. Rosenholtz’s findings were confirmed by McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) who suggested that when experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning, the result was a knowledge about teaching that could be more widely shared. Thus, the opportunities for collaboration offered by a professional learning community have the potential to positively affect student learning. The work of Senge (1990), Galagan (1994) and others emphasizes the importance of nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual staff person and of supporting the collective engagement of staff in such activities as shared vision development, problem identification, learning, and problem resolution. Teachers who engage in school-wide collegial activities and in joint professional efforts that have children’s learning as their purpose can implement powerful programs and practices. In schools characterized by professional learning communities, the staff works together and changes classroom pedagogy. As a result, they engage students in high intellectual learning tasks, and students achieve greater academic gains (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995).

When teachers can talk publicly with each other about their work on behalf of students, their sense of isolation is reduced and they are mobilized to commit themselves to making major changes in how they participate in the school (Hord, 1997). Darling-Hammond (1993) observed
that the schools that initiated school improvement efforts by looking into teaching and learning, and discussing how their practices were effective for students, showed academic results more quickly than schools that did not. She insisted that teachers need to have opportunities to share what they know, to consult with peers about problems of teaching and learning, and to observe peers teaching, all of which deepen teachers’ professional understanding. To do this, PLC’s engage individuals in collective work and bring them into contact with other people and possibilities. These settings provide opportunities for teachers to reflect critically on their practice, thus creating new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Wood, 1995).

The most essential factor in a successful school is that of connection; the most successful learning occurs when teachers not only teach effectively in their own classrooms but also find solutions together (Boyer, 1995). In PLC schools, teachers operate as team members, with shared goals and time routinely designated for professional collaboration. Under these conditions, “teachers are more likely to be consistently well-informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students” (Hord, 1997, p. 30).

**Critiques.** The major critiques and challenges to the concept of professional learning communities arose from the limited nature of the community and its focus on process not content. The PLC focus excludes parents and students, as well as the wider community. These three questions are worthy ones: What are students learning? How do we know they are learning? What will we do if they are not learning? However, answers to these questions are ambiguous, and in some schools revert to unsuccessful practices. For example, teachers may elect to increase the number of worksheets to ensure that students “learn;” or they may use outdated assessments; or they may not have had discussion about viable curriculum. In addition,
“what students should learn” often emerges from test score data, thus narrowing student learning to standardized test expectations.

Although professional learning communities were embraced as a vehicle for school improvement, they can only be as effective as the schools in which they are embedded. Teachers need to buy into this approach that encourages them to move away from a privatized approach to teaching toward a more collaborative approach. Schools and districts with underlying trust issues or with a history of ineffective initiatives may need to build trust and create support before attempting to build a professional learning community (Tarnoczi, 2006).

The characteristics of a professional learning community require teachers to embrace a particular attitude or disposition, but without teaching them how to do so. Changing teacher behavior is one of the few ways that school administrators can influence the educational system. Often the primary control mechanisms are embedded in rigid structures and procedures (Tarnoczi, 2006). In her reflections on the implementation of professional learning communities, Skytt (2003) concludes,

> that the power in this new model is not the structural and procedural changes that can be implemented in the school, but in the cultural and professional changes that teachers and administrators experience as they take back the education process (p. 1).

By focusing on notions of culture and professionalism, Skytt’s assessment suggested that professional learning communities exercise control of teachers by shaping the way teachers think about school and themselves. However, more energy may need to be spent on developing conversation about the PLC questions and inviting professionals to share thoughts and formulate implementation of instructional methods.

It is possible that an organization defined by a single shared purpose devalues and marginalizes unique experiences of individuals in the organization. DuFour and Eaker (1998)
appear to extend that devaluation when they recommend that “all those who violate the vision and values must be confronted. In an ideal world, every member of the staff would be willing to challenge a colleague who was acting in a way contrary to collective commitments” (p. 112). This environment does not foster dialogue for fear of being ostracized. When dialogue ceases, groups are not forced to reflect on the quality of their actions (Senge, 1994). Ortenbald (2002) suggests that normalizing individual differences provides a means by which educational authorities can control the collective construction of meaning in the workplace. The question then becomes one of the quality of “groupthink.” If the collective viewpoint is wrong, leaders are faced with the challenge of having created a flawed approach.

Since professional learning communities often use paper/pencil representations of student work, the claim of improving student achievement may limit how that achievement is conceived. If teachers are preoccupied with a focus on results, the PLC may operate in such a way as to silence a broader educational debate that might include alternative perspectives that focus on the means by which schools provide society with responsible citizens (Tarnoczi, 2006).

Although PLC’s focus on collaboration is touted to improve teacher learning, Garrick and Rhodes (1998) noted that these collaborative practices serve other purposes as well. They claimed that organizational learning “legitimizes its practices through an unquestioned belief that [group learning] will lead to other valuable social goals. This legitimization creates totalizing views of organizational realities, values and priorities that can suppress and marginalize organizational and social activities which are not consistent with authorities’ interests” (p. 20). According to these authors, by controlling collaborative teams, educational managers, through the teachers themselves, are able to indirectly impose their view of education; i.e., the teachers
will come to normalize the educational authority’s vision of education by seeking personal changes that are consistent with the authorities’ vision.

With such a strong emphasis on collective learning, teachers’ individual learning may be minimized. They must bring their thoughts and ideas to the group to add to the “groupthink.” In this way, teachers can be limited in altering their instruction and in seeking alternate professional development opportunities. They may also experience reduced confidence in their own thinking and strategies. Janis (1972) suggested that participants reach groupthink in an effort to minimize conflict and reach consensus without critically analyzing and evaluating ideas. Individual creativity and independent thinking are sometimes lost in the pursuit of group cohesiveness and in avoidance of discomfort. In any setting, but particularly in education, groupthink disallows a complete survey of alternatives and promotes failure to work out contingency plans, which may be necessary for student success (Janis, 1972).

Finally, the context of the professional learning community must be examined. For example, in a high school setting, traditional norms of teaching subjects and not students often shape teachers’ perceptions of their professional responsibilities, where multiple class preparations draw teachers away from time to develop relationships, which, in many cases, are critical to student success. External contexts, including high stakes accountability systems that press for test score gains, sometimes foster competition among departments and create a disincentive for teachers to reflect on practice, invest in professional literature, or collaborate with colleagues (Blasé & Blasé, 1998).

Clearly, the success of a professional learning community depends on what the staff does in their collective efforts, but never necessarily asks questions of social justice. Although school structures can provide opportunities for learning new practices, the structures by themselves do
not cause equitable learning to occur (Peterson, 1996). If teachers are to be held accountable for collegial inquiry focused on meeting the needs of students, leadership must play a pivotal role.

Professional learning communities have become one approach educational leaders use to negotiate a complex and dynamic environment that demands new skills, thinking in different ways, and gaining a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. However, the major focus of this approach is the work that is done within the school or school system to create consensus. Schools do not exist in isolation, but rather must embrace the greater community. The next section will explore school-community relations and their potential to influence student achievement.

School-Community Relations

The nature of the complex entity called community cannot be confined within the parameters of a school; it must operate in the larger, more comprehensive community that includes resources to support the needs of children and adolescents. The idea of forging tighter links between schools and communities is not new. Kahne, O’Brien, Brown, and Quinn (2001) reference the settlement house movement of the late 19th century, the Community Schools Movement of the 1930’s and the Cities in Schools program of the 1970’s. These efforts focused on supports for families and the institutions that serve them, connecting services between schools and the surrounding communities.

Given the climate of public scrutiny that surrounds public education today, effective school-community relations are extremely vital to our education systems. Superintendents are faced with the challenge of developing quality school systems that create opportunities for success for all of their students. To do this, they must inspire a sense of urgency in the community toward a goal of all students graduating and considering post-secondary education.
Yet leaders are met with scarcity of resources and limited capacity for change within traditional approaches. School improvement has embraced renewed significance of community involvement. Community involvement as a focus in education has resulted in a unique body of literature that contains key concepts and issues, but no practical guidelines (Sanders, 2001).

**Parent involvement in schools and communities.** There are many reasons for developing school, family and community partnerships, which include improving school programs and climate, providing family services and support, increasing parents’ skills and leadership, connecting families with others in the school and community, and helping teachers with their work. However, the main reason, according to Epstein (2005), is to help all students succeed in school and in later life. Epstein drew three overlapping spheres of influence: school, family, and community, the three major contexts in which students learn and grow, and puts the student at the center of this model. Epstein has constructed a framework that delineates six different types of involvement that include assisting families with parenting, communicating with families about school programs and student progress, improving the volunteer program, involving families with their children’s learning activities at home, including families as participants in school decisions, and coordinating community resources for students and families.

Parenting involvement requires that schools assist families in establishing home environments that support children as students. Teachers may need to visit homes and become familiar with parental education courses in order to work with parents to develop plans to improve home conditions. Communicating requires teachers to develop skills in conferencing with parents and to build capacities to maintain ongoing and explicit forms of communication. Managing volunteers demands recruiting and organizing parental help, while learning at home requires teachers to provide ideas to families about helping students with school expectations.
Decision-making, as referenced by Epstein (1995) requires that teachers “include parents in school decisions, that they develop parent leaders and representatives” (p. 704). Collaborating with communities demands that teachers identify resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs and student development. Epstein founded the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) which provides in-service education and ongoing professional development for school, district, and state leaders, and teams of educators, parents, and others to improve programs of family and community connections.

School-community partnerships. School-community partnerships are not constrained by the geographic boundaries of neighborhoods, but refer more to the “social interactions that can occur within or transcend local boundaries” (Nettles, 1991, p. 380). They can be student centered, which might include student awards and incentives, scholarships, tutoring and mentoring programs, job shadowing, and other career-focused activities. They might be family-centered with parenting workshops, adult education classes, incentives, family counseling, or family fun and learning nights. Or they might be school-centered, such as beautification projects, donation of equipment, or classroom assistance. These partnerships are defined by the community partners involved, and success is largely determined by how thoughtfully these partnerships are planned (Sanders, 2001). Nasworthy and Rood (1990) emphasized the importance of including key stakeholders, especially school administrators and faculty, in the development of school-business partnerships. The plan should include open communication, a method of resolving differences, and a process of evaluation to maintain effectiveness.

University partnerships can also play a role as community partners, employing the use of professional development in their services, and fostering improved instruction in schools (Abell, 2000; Beyerbach, Weber, Swift, & Gooding, 1996). Others may focus on exposing students to
careers or increasing parent involvement in schools (Bermudez & Padron, 1988). In some cases, universities provide individuals to facilitate meaningful dialogue and shared decision-making across professional boundaries, helping to reenergize in their reform efforts (Burstein, Kretschmer, Smith, & Gudoski, 1999; Ebert, 1997).

Service learning partnerships are another popular form of community involvement in schools. Advocates of service learning argue that a focus on community and civic participation is a necessary balance to a focus on academic achievement (Ruggenberg, 1993). Again, careful planning that includes all stakeholders is important for students to have opportunities to tie their learning experiences to academic content and to analyze the consequences of their work (Halsted & Schine, 1994).

However, often the school-community partnerships, despite the interest in improving opportunities for youth, include the challenges of managing complex relationships, observing turf demands, and reconciling different values and orientations. School reform has included an emphasis on strengthening bonds between schools and neighborhoods. Recent policy shifts focus on the importance of community collaboration. Federal and state policies recommend, or in the case of Title I programs, require, participation of families, health and human service agencies, and youth organizations. Within the 1994 Goals 2000 initiative, Congress added to the original goals adopted by the governors by adding another: “Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (National Education Goals Panel, 1991, p. xvii). America Reads Challenge, another national initiative, depends on adult volunteers to tutor children during and after school and on weekends (Brown, 2004).
The current Response to Intervention model, a top-down state initiative, demands intervention time that may involve the use of parent tutoring. Yet state and federal legislation demands accountability measures that reinforce bureaucratic structures as opposed to collaborative community. Comprehensive school reform included community collaboration as a basic feature. After-school programs ask schools to connect students’ in school and out of school learning. These policy expectations put additional pressure on central office administrators who are assisting policy implementation (Honig, 2003). They were asked to allocate resources, modify office procedures, and build central office policy from the practice of school-community partnerships. Perhaps a first step would be to develop relationships between communities, often termed “building social capital.”

Building social capital. Bordieu and Wacquant (1992) suggested that social capital is the basis for the existence of groups whose resources result from social structures. These resources, according to the authors, accrue to an individual “by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 119). These relationships form a solidarity of support for members. More recently, sociologists and political scientists have emphasized the idea of social capital for facilitating community development and positive outcomes for youth. According to Kahne et.al., (2001), social capital refers to relationships within and between communities. It is created through positive, caring relationships where guidance and values are shared. Schools can increase students’ social capital through their connections with communities (Benson, 1996; Toffler & Toffler, 1995). These authors suggest that a variety of community volunteer and service programs can provide hope for students whose social environments are increasingly fragmented. Coleman (1987) referred to three forms of social capital: first, the degree to which community members trust that obligations
and expectations will be met; second, the degree to which social relations offer access to information that helps individuals accomplish their goals; and third, community norms which reinforce some types of behavior and sanction others.

Research indicates that educational communities with high levels of social capital are more likely to achieve their goals (Kahne, et.al., 2001). These three are somewhat reciprocal. A sense of trust and commitment may lead individuals to share information about potential opportunities and/or risks, or even about adherence to norms or expectations. A strong school network can provide supplemental support for educators. Meaningful collaboration among schools and between schools and other agencies strengthens understanding and promotes a stronger fabric of support for children and adolescents (Kahne, et.al., 2001). In some cases, community members are invited to offer input on decision making with collaborative site-based management councils.

**Site-based management councils.** Site-based management councils are an attempt to incorporate parents and community members into the school’s governance system via formal mechanisms such as site councils, which have some input on how discretionary funds, such as Title I monies, may be spent. They may also weigh in on school improvement programs and basic policies governing school life. In some cases parents have only advisory input, even when they believe they are more influential. Many of the most radical reforms have been attempts to improve schools by renewed calls for democratic, nonprofessional control of schools (Sarason, 1990). The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act dictates that every school in the district must elect a local school council that is comprised of two teachers, six parents, two community members, and the principal.
Merz and Furman (1997) commented on the efficacy of school-based management as a vehicle for community inclusion:

Most implemented models of school-based management hold little promise for community connections because they represent simple shifts of decision-making authority within the existing hierarchy…Community control models of SBM, though seldom implemented, theoretically hold some promise for community connections. However, even in its most ‘radical’ form, as manifested in Chicago, community-control SBM has had only moderate impact on the bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of the school organization and on the traditional influence of relationships among parent/community members and professionals (p. 55-56).

Collaboration may emerge more directly from a commitment to the ideals of the community, often expressed in shared values.

**Shared values.** One factor that is recurrent in the literature about school communities is that of shared values that unite stakeholders. Appropriate parent involvement supports academic achievement, regular attendance, good behavior, and improved teacher efficacy (Epstein, 2005; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Beneficial outcomes for children, teachers, and parents alike hinge on the relationships parents and teachers develop around shared commitments to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The local school context is an important factor (Gore, 1993; Lipman, 1998). Meanings and functions are constructed in these contexts and in relation to one another (Swidler, 1986).

However, values that might forge bonds may also be divisive, leaving out members who do not conform. Strike (1999) uses the term constitutive values to describe values that are thick enough to create community but are too thick to be inclusive. Thus, he states that it may seem that genuine educational communities can only exist in the private sector. However, some constitutive values can accommodate diversity and may be allowed to exist as a result of the freedom of association that is possible in the public sector. That is, there may be a middle ground with thick, but vague constitutive values important for making schools into communities. Strike
(1999) contends that constitutive values have two properties: 1. they generate a conception of the end of a good education; and 2. they forge common projects. They must be pursued cooperatively because they are difficult to pursue as individuals. Constitutive values generate a sense of being in something together.

Westheimer (1999) suggested that not only are beliefs shared, but that they also exemplify commitments to the ideals of the community, which include participation by all members of the community, equity, and inclusiveness, as well as autonomy and responsibility. He states that “community is not a universally defined outcome. It is a way of traveling with a new view” (p. 91). However, there are no agreed upon models. Some look to community to calm differences and to return to an old-fashioned sense of being part of a group, enjoying a strong esprit de corps. But this approach ignores the potential for marginalizing diverse people and their views. The common descriptors of learning communities ignore important differences among these communities (Westheimer, 1999).

Critiques. Although the school-community relationship is a desirable one, there are tensions between the public’s view of education and that of the professionals’, who believe that, to be involved in education, the public needs to understand the educational process, or at least express interest in it without presumed criticism. Personal interests often dictate public involvement in schools, not issues of policy. Attitudes toward public school often emerge from experience and not objectivity. In fact, Mann (1974) found that public understanding is characterized by low levels of factual information, a fact that would not surprise many administrators, who find themselves at the mercy of policy-making elites. Although current expectations include the need for the leader to be “transparent” with stakeholders, there continue to be barriers to communication and collaboration.
One of these barriers includes the schools’ fear of public scrutiny (Cushing & Khol, 1997). Another is staff burnout; teachers and administrators feel overwhelmed by the idea of extending themselves beyond the school (Sanders, 2001). Mawhinney (1994) identified barriers of territorialism that emerge from the recognition of professional turf. Perhaps, as Epstein (2003) noted, there is simply a need for schools to develop two-way forms of school-community collaborations so that schools provide useful services to the community, as well as receive useful services from the community.

Research on the involvement of schools in collaborative initiatives shows resistance to change and the persistence of existing organizational structures and patterns. Despite these findings, some schools do engage in numerous collaborative initiatives, changing structural elements to facilitate collaboration. The extent to which these changes are institutionalized is not determined (Mawhinney, 1994). Often institutional change is partial and contested. The institutionalization of collaboration is often dependent upon positive feedback from incremental adjustments (Mawhinney, 1994). Moving institutional structures toward collaboration often involves negotiating a process that may involve some preconditions, like the sense of a shared problem, and then some progress toward shared goals to address the problem.

Proponents of community involvement in schools cited the overwhelming nature of the mounting responsibilities placed on schools by an at-risk population. They argued that schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students and that these resources can be gleaned from the students’ communities (Epstein, 1995; Waddock, 1995). Community involvement is seen as one way to help schools produce a more capable workforce. Some proponents include the belief that community involvement in schools is important for maintaining healthy communities that can be a learning resource for schools. Combs and Bailey
(1992) suggest that the educational, social, and recreational needs of the adult population, especially in rural areas, can be enhanced by using local school facilities and expertise.

Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) explored “asset-based community development,” derived from lessons learned by studying successful community-building initiatives in hundreds of neighborhoods. His approach outlines what local communities can do to maximize resources in support of schools, accessing the support of local community leaders, government officials, and leaders in the philanthropic and business communities who wish to support effective community-building strategies.

Collaborative education policy formalized the more simplistic approach of the village raising the child. It typically called for at least three types of change: schools were to forge partnerships with community agencies such as Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs; those partnerships were to choose their own shared goals and collaborative strategies for improving a range of student outcomes; and central office administrators were to enable and support the implementation of local, collaborative decisions (Honig, 2003). Some states ask agencies to form school-community governance teams to implement a needs assessment process to choose goals and strategies for their partnerships that benefit local circumstances.

Social services need to be designed to remedy problems of deficits in nutrition, medical care, housing conditions, family support, and educational services. The nation’s moral responsibility lies in the improvement of the lives of poor children (Honig, 2003). Various models of integrated services have emerged in several states, most of which include the concept of local access to services at a school or neighborhood institution by families and children; the availability of a variety of services; collaboration among all service providers; a developmental, supportive model and a move toward the empowerment of families and community; flexibility in
funding; the development of new ways of working among diverse professionals; and some requirements for a change at a systemic level (Adler, 1994). Residents must discover and use the resources of local institutions, re-focusing their resources on community-building. Renewed commitment to these reforms means a rededication to solving the problems found in the community at-large in which the school is located. As Adler (1998) noted, “we cannot get better childhoods for children unless we build better communities” (p. 1).

Believing in community and conveying that belief to stakeholders and expecting them to work toward that end is tantamount to putting students into groups and expecting them to behave with inherently positive group dynamics. There must be consensus built regarding community ideals that provide inclusive opportunities and equitable practices. Parents have traditionally confronted professional elitism which has created conflict in school-community relations. Crowson and Boyd (1993) concluded that scripted roles created the institutional conventions of schools, constraining the capacity of teachers to reach out into communities. Institutional theory suggests that the actions of teachers cannot be separated from the “iron cages” created by the deep structures of schools (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Rules that are embedded and taken for granted imply that collaboration may need to be seen as the development of new ways to engage in community development, more focused on building community capacity rather than supporting professional collaboration (Mawhinney, 1994). Additional research needs to delineate the types of communities that exist in schools and to determine the organizational factors that contribute to the survival or dissolution of these communities (Westheimer, 1999).

A recurrent issue lies in communication. Teachers may, for example, depend on parental assistance in completing homework problems, but may fail to communicate their expectations in a useful manner to all parents, especially those with limited educational experience or different
cultural experiences. This creates a cycle in which an at-risk child continues to fail because the parents have not been sufficiently informed or instructed in the tasks that must be accomplished. This is particularly problematic when dealing with parents of different cultures or low socioeconomic status. When bringing the worlds of school and home together, it is likely that problems in either arena will be reflected in both; simple communication strategies that are clear and interactive can mitigate the potential conflict (Driscoll, 1998). When schools make demands on parents they cannot meet, the costs may be in terms of the parents’ own self-esteem, and belief in their educational potential.

No matter what they are termed – community involvement, community engagement, community partnerships, or community relations – schools need well-structured programs to nurture community understanding of their work. School leaders should ask themselves the following questions: Who are our community stakeholders? Who is connected to our school and/or needs to be? How are we communicating with stakeholders? Are we using effective methods to provide meaningful information and to gain feedback? What do stakeholders know and think about our school? Are we giving them the information they want and need to fully understand our educational programs? Hooper (2001) suggests that a possible way to answer questions regarding stakeholder interaction with schools is to develop a matrix to identify all publics, or customers, and then to list all of the ways schools communicate with them. This matrix would identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement with communication. In addition, stakeholder groups could be surveyed, conveying to them that their input is valued and that school leaders are listening. Kretzmann and McKnight (1996) suggest mapping community capacity which determines neighborhood needs and defines the local capacity for dealing with them, as well as the opportunities to build bridges to outside resources.
For any real meeting between the worlds of the professional and the community to occur, especially when race and class also divide those worlds, then new rules of engagement that respect the lives of both parties need to be developed (Driscoll, 1998). To address today’s diverse school community, I turn to the literature on communities of difference.

**Communities of Difference**

In working with heterogeneous groups that comprise today’s school communities, leaders must question the focus on shared beliefs, norms, and values as accepted commonalities, and provide opportunities for all voices to be heard in order to construct meaning as a group that, at the very least, shares the value of the importance of education for our children. Perhaps the greatest barriers to communication and collaboration arise from the assumption of homogeneity, which marginalizes members and encourages them to disassociate from the important work of school communities.

A community of difference is defined by Shields (2000) as “a group of people from diverse backgrounds, with differing beliefs, values, goals, and assumptions, coming together to achieve cohesion through new understandings, positive relationships, and the negotiation of shared purposes and norms of behavior” (p. 275). Even the traditional neighborhood school embraces families from a variety of cultures, differing socioeconomic status, with children of differing abilities. These differences must be acknowledged in order to reach a semblance of school community.

**Paradox of community.** Furman (1998) refers to this situation as dissonance and suggests that community building is a paradox, i.e., community in a school setting is thought to be based on commonalities, yet school populations are increasingly diverse. Furman (1998) asks how community, which continues to be valued in schools, can be achieved in a postmodern
environment. She suggests using a broader definition of postmodernism, as a social theory, both descriptive and constructive, and community as the experience of being in community, including a sense of belonging and trust in others, which appears to be a common theme across the strands of literature on community. In this type of community, however, many may be marginalized as a result of not adhering to the sameness that is required to be a member. Ironically, a concept that is based on uniting, instead acts divisively. In addition, the core values of a homogeneous community may be representative of the more influential and powerful who dominate.

The movement toward community has implied that individuals in an educational setting either share values and beliefs and work toward a common goal or they work in isolation. Furman (1998) suggests that persons can be interdependent instead of isolated, that they can construct a community where relationships are cooperative and where all cultures are respected, in tune with a global community. Sameness is not the center of this type of community, but rather has shifted to “acceptance of otherness.” Thus a new metaphor for community is “the interconnected web of global community – which requires cooperation within difference” (p. 307). The postmodern community can be described as a community of difference, based on respect for others, justice and acceptance of difference (Furman, 1998; Shields & Seltzer, 1998; Shields, 1999; Shields, 2004).

**Moving from homogeneity to valuing difference.** The experience of the postmodern community maintains basic needs, including trust and safety; however, these are related to the sense of guaranteed inclusion, regardless of difference, and the consistent acceptance of others in a safe environment. This approach fulfills the need for belonging and interconnectedness that communities can offer (Furman, 1998). This new concept of community conveys a sense of being dynamic, able to continually adjust to diverse people and their cross-cultural beliefs.
The concept of homogeneity may be archaic in today’s ever-changing landscape. Aside from the more obvious indicators of difference, seldom are individuals wholly alike; society invites deviation from the norm: family structures have changed, acceptable values have evolved into new territory, and individual priorities often drive life choices. These changes, among others, would demand that our notion of community, our ways of working together, change, and this movement would need to be mirrored in the school setting. If school is a microcosm of the wider community, then members can work together toward solutions of shared problems (Shields & Seltzer, 1997). In an effort to minimize the cognitive dissonance that emerges from the paradox of conceptions of community and inclusive practices, Shields and Seltzer (1997) suggest that the school as a moral community of difference should embrace dialogue as the norm. Through dialogue, individuals can express differences and can explore conflict, even though this exploration may result in discomfort and a feeling contrary to *gemeinschaft* concept of community, where there is a unity of will. Participants need to “recognize the strength that comes from valuing difference” (p. 433).

**Use of dialogue.** Shields (1999) explores the use of dialogue to understand how students feel about teachers, the school, the classroom, how subjects are taught to develop a community in which all experience a sense of belonging. Thus, a community of difference is not confined to one in which there is a diversity of culture. It is, instead, a community that may find difference with the wider community in which it is situated. Students need to understand how to represent themselves in this community that extends beyond the school.

School and district leaders must be instrumental in creating communities that acknowledge and celebrate difference and provide participants with opportunities to be heard. They must take “a moral and purposeful approach to leadership” (Shields, 2004, p. 110). Thus,
Shields contends that leaders must facilitate moral dialogue which can lead to relationships within socially just communities. Students must not be silenced; teachers must find ways to encourage dialogue about issues which are sometimes uncomfortable: those of race and social class. It is the information that can be gleaned from this dialogic approach that reveals the constraints that victimize students, the most powerful being deficit thinking. Often teachers are heard placing blame on a student’s home life or their economic situation as a reason for his/her struggle. Shields (2004) terms the treating of differences as deficits, pathologizing students and families, rather than exploring failures in the educational system itself. It is only with strong beliefs, determined effort, and innovative practices that educators can move out of the habit of pathologizing differences. Shields (2004) offers three possibilities in approaching this challenge. The first is for educators to become transformative leaders who work toward the “value ends” of equity, social justice, and the quality of life. Secondly, she underscores the centrality of relationships that are such critical parts of the human personality. The need for caring relationships, therefore, does not change with the conceptual change of community; rather it is determined to be central to being human. Thirdly, dialogue, as a factor in creating meaningful relationships, is then intrinsic to educational leadership. It may serve to reveal a commonality, or it may explore an emergent difference; but it must be grounded in a consistent acceptance and respect of others (Shields, 2004).

Thus, communities of difference do not pretend that everyone is the same, thereby ignoring potential celebrations of culture and practice. Conversely, they celebrate relationships that honor individuality and share difference. Educators must not be afraid of the conversations that provide information about lived experiences, but rather validate them so that children see themselves as being normal.
Critiques. The only explicit critique I have found related to communities of difference is from Robert Boostrom (2001) in a response to Shields’ 2001 article entitled “Learning from Difference.” In his article response, Boostrom contends that in describing communities of difference from a normative rather than a descriptive perspective, Shields imposes distinctions between a genuine community and a counterfeit community, thereby creating difficulty in studying what community means in an actual case. Boostrom continues to argue that “exploring differences” does not necessarily lead to a “fuller sense of community” (p. 69). Thus, he feels that a researcher needs to develop insight and understanding that requires, instead, finding some common ground. Inherent in the content of community, he maintains that community goes beyond respect for others.

Aside from this response, I have found no other research that critiques communities of difference; rather, the critique is of efforts to maintain a homogeneous approach to community that assumes a sense of belonging rooted in intrinsically shared values, beliefs, and ideas. That world no longer exists, and perhaps never did. If there is any critique involved in this movement, it may be one of a society that often shrinks from difference and adopts a “melting pot” approach. Or perhaps it would be of higher education that does not adequately prepare today’s educational leaders to make significant change in the face of resistance. Or maybe it is of a governing body that demands a test score to be a measurement of learning of a state standards-driven curriculum that leaves little room for the exploration of diversity. It seems almost axiomatic that celebrating difference and inviting all group participants to have a voice is simply the right thing to do.
Roles of the Superintendent in Building Community

Educational leaders have a moral and ethical obligation to provide equal educational opportunities for all students. Research has indicated that a significant step toward this end involves building relationships and developing community that embraces not only the learning community, but also the wider, public, community. There is no mistake-proof method of achieving this end.

In reviewing the literature on professional learning communities, school-community relations, and communities of difference, their intersection lies in communication, a common element implied and practiced in community. However, the focus is more than communication. Rather it demands that leaders work toward a community of trust where the primary mode of communication is meaningful, truthful dialogue based on understanding of alternate viewpoints and celebration of difference (Beck, 1999; Palmer, 1998; Shields, 2004; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Shields & Seltzer, 1997). It is a community where common vision is negotiated and established by the participants; a community where all voices are heard and life experiences validated.

Superintendent as communicator. The superintendent must be a communicator with skills honed to listen carefully and to interact positively with stakeholders. It is incumbent upon the leader to develop trusting relationships with staff, parents, community members, and students, in order for real communication to occur. The superintendent must craft opportunities for building a community that emerges from negotiation rather than hierarchical dictates; one that deviates from the notion of prescribed common values that preclude membership, and instead engenders listening to alternate perspectives that may challenge existing norms and assumptions. Through a commitment to dialogue, allowing all voices to be heard, community
values and norms can be constructed in order to pool resources for the important work of 
educating the children.

**Superintendent as public relations leader.** However, while attempting to develop the 
mandated school improvement plan, superintendents are responding to media criticism, 
determining the best approach to dealing with the school board, dealing with union demands, 
wading through state requirements, and trying to finely-tune human relation skills (Grogan, 
2000). They must devote energy to building coalitions and to negotiating trust and must identify 
common goals whenever necessary (Grogan, 2002). And, above all, they must act morally and 
wisely (Grogan, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1998).

**Superintendent’s use of discourse.** In the midst of confusion, one is faced with 
Foucault’s use of the term *discourse*, helping us to understand how we are positioned in different 
relationships with others (cited in Grogan, 2002). Grogan (2002) suggests that participation in 
discourse conveys how to do things approved by the discourse. Thus we make meaning of our 
experiences as dictated by the dominant values and beliefs of the discourse. For example, the 
common discourse around the superintendency prescribes expectations of the position, then the 
opportunity for real, new change does not exist. Superintendents will often, by nature of a 
discourse that has driven this position for decades, fall into existing patterns of behavior that will 
not address complex change. Shields (2004) maintains that dialogue is a tool to challenge 
existing beliefs and practices; it is a vehicle to “help the educational leader to become firmly 
grounded in a moral and purposeful approach to leadership” (p. 110). A superintendent, 
dedicated to the care and education of the children in the district, must overcome historical 
positioning and serve all stakeholders better than before. Superintendents must connect with their 
communities and hear the voices of dissent (Grogan, 2000), realizing that there is not certainty in
this work. They must deal with the paradoxes of regulatory demands while addressing the
tensions of pluralistic school districts (Grogan, 2000; Shields, 2002; Shields & Seltzer, 1997;
Furman, 1998). “A superintendent will only be able to discover what works by paying close
attention and being in relationship with those she or he serves” (Grogan, 2004, p. 135). He/she
must therefore listen carefully for values which divide most communities and seek ways to
lessen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

**Establishing vision in a diverse community.** Current literature on school improvement
dictates the need for clear targets, a vision, or mental model, of what the school or district could
and should be, followed by an action plan that garners buy-in from stakeholders and moves the
institution toward the targets (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989; Broido & Reason, 2005; DuFour &
Eaker, 1998). Others caution leaders to build on a shared image to ensure ownership and
commitment to long-term change (Fullan, 2001; Lambert, 1998; Bryk, et.al., 1994). Starratt
(cited in Ylimaki, 2006) suggests that vision includes not only a future ideal, but also current
insight into complex problems. Thus, the superintendent is faced with planning for the future and
implementing change, while simultaneously dealing with the daily conflicts involved in running
a school district. Ylimaki (2006) states that leaders are those who need to “act from their
authentic selves by telling the truth without blame or judgment, who know and communicate
their creative purpose of life dreams and actively honor [alternative perspectives]” (p. 648). She
suggests that leaders need to trust their intuitions and communicate the current realities of
education with honesty and integrity. Communities must be redefined as places where members
have a mutual obligation and relationship, but also a responsibility to preserve norms of
tolerance and non-exclusion (Mawhinney, 2004).
In order to make sense from the competing realities of fragmentation of a diverse community and the standardized approach to global competition, it is important for superintendents to listen to multiple perspectives, for there is no one right way to build community; rather leadership and community building are contextual. Superintendents must explore the tensions within the school community, and develop a plan that addresses the school experiences of the disadvantaged. Brunner (2002) suggests, “A superintendency grounded in social justice would use some of the traditional advice but use it differently and for different reasons” (p. 423).

Superintendents, as transformative leaders, can create communities of difference by including issues such as race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality in the discourse of teaching and learning, openly acknowledging difference. They must enable their staff to explore the development of an inclusive environment and the necessity of working with parents and community members (Shields, 2004). This author states, “If we neglect the conversation, we fail to make our schools relevant, meaningful, and accessible to all students” (p. 40).

**Transformative leadership.** Transformative leaders must be willing, in the interests of children, to use authority appropriately, to get people to do something they have resisted, perhaps because it causes more work and takes more time. Transformative leadership seeks to make better, more inclusive, more democratic, and more socially just schools, but moreover to use power to transform present social relations (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 2001). Leaders should be located at all levels of the organization raising authority and responsibility at these levels. Social justice, based on democracy, requires a commitment by all members of the group to accept the responsibility for the success of the organization. Dialogue is at the center of change; it is the conceptual framework for understanding the nature of authentically collaborative
relationship. Leaders must stimulate this dialogue in the hopes of developing leadership throughout the organization. It is feasible that the conversation about change will look different in each school and district, depending on the existing culture. Shields (2001) states that there is no prescription for community. Moreover, “the rules and customs need to be negotiated through the meaningful dialogue of all participants…each community may develop differently as a result of the collaboration and dialogue that occurs within it” (p. 73).

Time is a factor; the destruction, creation, and transformation of social formations take time, knowledge, discipline, and authority to establish new kinds of counter-hegemonic ideas about school community (Weiner, 2003). Transformative leadership taps into the potential for critical and democratic leadership possessed by the participants in America’s schools (Foster, 2004; Quantz, et.al., 2001). Leaders “speak in multiple discourses to multiple audiences” (Weiner, 2003, p. 98). A social movement is a long-term journey; holding to the sincere belief that what is learned can be unlearned, is a requisite for sustaining social justice allies (Broido & Reason, 2005). When educators act on their passionate beliefs, they can and do make a difference.

**Educative leadership.** Foster (2004) suggests that leadership must be educative. The leaders must motivate participants to question previous narratives in order to grow and develop and begin to consider alternative approaches. The leader must communicate a new sense of the future. The superintendent must establish communication and relationships across the district and wider community, purposefully working toward what Furman (1998) calls an ethic of community.

Inevitably, norms of interaction will always favor some and exclude others. Wenger suggests that
we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves…We define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of membership into one identity (p. 149).

At the very least, community should carve out a space for discussion. The superintendent should reflect on questions involving who benefits from the work of community building, whether or not all voices are heard and recognized, exploring who will judge the success of social change, and ensuring that participants act as moral agents and raise the ethical dimensions of community life. Perhaps a bringing together of the common elements of community reflected in this paper will provide a framework on which to build this work.

**Framework**

This examination of existing research reveals that the unit of analysis for community has been the school; the learning community research is replete with data that has resulted from the efforts of school personnel to implement a professional learning community approach. There is ample evidence to support the school as the location to implement change; and this change is often top-down. This approach is understandable. Students are in schools and schools are led by principals who are being held accountable for legislated benchmarks. Thus, the gap in the literature is at the superintendent’s level. What role does he/she play in the change process? How does a superintendent create community across a district? The failure of educational reform has proven that it most certainly is not by way of dictates.

With the extreme diversity in today’s students, families, educators, and society, I would argue for an approach that views community-building through a different, more democratic lens. There is no fool-proof method for success, but rather a necessary emphasis on caring for, listening to, and respecting others. This framework borrows from the ideas of Shields and Edwards (2005) highlighting the importance of dialogue, as well as Giroux’s (1991) approach to
guide district leaders through change priorities. It involves a primary focus on dialogue, accompanied by determining common ways for multiple voices to be heard; a collective determination of each individual’s role/responsibility in the change process; the support of pedagogical experimentation and creative production within the learning environment, and an agenda for freedom and action.

The visual (see Figure 1) highlights elements of professional learning communities, school-community relationships, and communities of difference, with their intersection being that of communication, a common element implied and practiced in community. However, the lens of this study is more specific than communication. Rather it demands that superintendents work toward a community of trust where the common vision is negotiated and established by the participants; a community where all voices are heard and life experiences are validated. Together the emergent community can examine the context within which the work of education is being done. Who are the stakeholders and what are the existing practices? Which artifacts tell the symbolic story of the district? What is the prevailing culture? What are the strengths and weaknesses? What are the community values? What are the obvious challenges? What previous goals have been targeted and what work has been done toward them? How strong are the bureaucratic practices? This examination includes introductions and conversations, exploration of documents, analysis of data, and keen observation.
**Figure 1.** Dialogic leadership as the intersection and driving force of community

**Dialogic leadership.** It is important to note that dialogic leadership is distinguished from leadership that understands the importance of dialogue in affecting change; i.e., within this approach, the leader does not establish the rules of engagement or direct the participants down a predetermined path; rather the direction emerges en route. Shields and Edwards (2005) contend that a community of difference suggests “…a school community forged out of the norms, beliefs, values, perspectives, and practices of all of its members” (p. 136). They suggest that understanding and relationship are two sides of the coin. Thus, dialogue is “words in relationship” (p. 137). True dialogue in a community is based on the practice of acknowledging and addressing the inherent inequalities in a diverse community instead of being blinded by superficial attempts at conversation. It is based on believing that people not only need to feel
connected to others, but that they are driven toward understanding diversity and accepting alternate viewpoints (Shields & Edwards, 2005).

This chapter has included a focus on the superintendent as a communicator. These communication skills must be honed in order to listen carefully and interact positively with stakeholders. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to build trusting relationships with staff, parents, community members, and students in order for real communication to occur.

He/she must develop opportunities for dialogue. Shields and Edwards (2005) state that once dialogical understanding is developed, collaboration toward a collective decision is possible, because participants have determined a shared set of values, meanings and language. This shared understanding, new to all, creates a synergy of input from diverse voices.

The literature emphasizes the need for a common vision in community; though I have cited authors who contend that commonality can essentialize a viewpoint and marginalize individuals and groups, I argue that the vision may be common and that it may be espoused by the superintendent if it is one of social justice. In this way, the superintendent can advance and maintain a focus on equity, which is critical to a democratic approach to education.

It is possible that teachers, parents, and community members have not been involved in an agenda for social justice. If so, the superintendent must provide professional development opportunities with dialogic components that offer conversations about change, equity, hegemonic practices, and changing district culture.

Finally, the superintendent must develop communication tools, both one-way, to update constituents, and two-way, to open, honest, interactive dialogue with internal and external communities about truth. Palmer (1998) defines truth as “an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline” (p. 106). I believe children are what matter;
excellent teachers are passionate about ensuring that all children be offered equal opportunities to learn. They are driven to create a space for this important work and engage in the collegial discourse that provides collective wisdom and continual support. Teachers in community “gather around the great things called teaching and learning…” (p. 146).
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

In this study I developed an understanding of the complexities a school district superintendent experienced as he worked toward a goal of building district community. I began by exploring the beliefs regarding community that guided the work of a superintendent, as well as the methods used to create opportunities for dialogue as an essential tool for fostering opportunities for community-building. I sought to understand how a superintendent thought about the need for community among school leaders in his district, as well as how the creation of a sense of community contributed to the superintendent’s ability to affect change.

Overview of Methodology

Creswell (2007) states that qualitative research shares a detailed understanding of an issue. Interpretive inquiry embraces the notion that participants construct realities based on their personal perspectives of phenomena (such as school settings) and the establishment of shared meanings between the researcher and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Thus, a qualitative approach was suited for this study involving an analysis of the complex, contextual nature of community-building.

Qualitative research is naturalistic; i.e., the researcher collects data through observations, interviews, and documents at the site. Here he/she attempts to construct a picture that takes shape as the researcher is gathering the pieces, taking in as much detail as possible, and recording the most significant information (McEwan & McEwan, 2003).

More specifically, within the qualitative paradigm, a case study is defined as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection. Bounded means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries”
(Creswell, 2003). Stake (1995) writes that bounded systems are collections of particular interacting events and contexts that comprise a functioning system. Additionally, an “instrumental case” serves the purpose of illuminating a particular issue; in this study, it is the challenge of building district community. The literature and practice of community-building focuses on the school as the unit of analysis; I am interested in a framework for developing community at the district level with the ultimate goal of improving teaching, learning, culture, and climate.

Yin (2009) suggests that a case study strategy is preferred when the researcher seeks to answer “how” or “why” questions, when the researcher has little control over events being studied, and when the object of the study is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. This study fulfills Yin’s criteria.

**Personal Standpoint**

All research depends, to some degree, on interpretation. Stake (1995) suggests that “standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness” (p. 41). I made observations, analyzed and synthesized data each day as I found my way through the first year of the superintendency. This particular case study was one to which I was deeply committed. I continue to be amazed at the complexity of the superintendent’s position and feel that the commitment of heart and mind that is demanded by daily challenges may lead to mixed priorities. Although I believe a superintendent is an instructional leader, he/she may delegate leadership for learning to principals at the building level, assuaging any guilt with the thought that principals are closer to day-to-day teaching and
learning, have closer relationships to students, parents, and teachers, and have greater influence on instruction.

Then does the superintendent take the role of manager, politician, facilities’ coordinator, and simple administrator? I do not think any leader embraces the position of superintendent in order to excel in these somewhat mundane, though necessary, activities. Superintendents must create the enthusiasm for change so that teaching and learning remain dynamic in an organization. In fact, the literature demonstrates that, in order to achieve excellence and equity, the superintendent must build relationships and create conditions for community building that celebrate what each person brings to the group. Superintendents hold the “bird’s eye view” of the district. They can seize opportunities to break down barriers, to share viewpoints and to value difference – and, in fact, they must do this work.

**Ethical Considerations**

Data collection and interpretation require sensitivity and skepticism (Stake, 1995). The researcher must ready herself for “hard work under the critical examination of colleagues and mentors” (p. 50). Although preparation is partly achieved through study, Stake contends that expertise emerges from reflective practice. The researcher must be conscious of invading the home territory of participants. Ordinary common sense and decorum will be observed at all times, along with adequate information about the study, reiteration of anonymity, and a follow-through on any promises.

Creswell (2003) maintains that the researcher should present a rationale for the importance of a problem. With the focus on community building in current literature and practice, participants had some prior knowledge of the potential influence of community on relationships, on dialogue, and ultimately on student achievement. Aligning the interview
questions with the purpose of the study encouraged participants to see the connection, and minimized fear of a hidden agenda.

Review of the research plans by the Internal Review Board was a required protective measure, along with the use of an informed consent form that participants signed before they engaged in the research. In addition, visits, observations, and interview times were planned so as to reduce any impact on the regular flow of the day.

Finally, although interpretation is subjective, the researcher reported information as accurately as possible. The details of the research were released so that readers can determine the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2003).

**Site and Participant Selection**

The site selection, restricted to a single mid-west state, was dependent upon the reputation of the superintendent. I was seeking a new superintendent of a multi-building district, preferably K-8, who, by reputation, was engaged in the work of building district community. My dissertation chairperson coincidentally was in conversation with a superintendent who had just received a new position; when she asked him what his biggest challenge would be in the new district, he answered that it would be his plan to build district community. This conversation led to indentifying Mr. Edwards as my case study superintendent. I contacted him first by phone to seek interest in this study. During this conversation, I explained the nature of the study, the approximate time involved, the methods of data collection, and the assurance of confidentiality. He was very interested in the study and invited me to focus on his new district; I then sent the necessary consent form and set an initial interview date.
**Data Collection**

To address the objectives of this case study, data collection was done through observation, document review, and semi-structured interviews. Field notes rendering a description of people, places, events, and activities were used extensively, as soon as possible following an interview or observation. In addition, I recorded my ideas and reflections, and noted patterns that emerged (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). For example, I noted the manner in which the superintendent began meetings, the interactions he had with the attendees, and the apparent tenor of the meetings. These authors suggest that field notes are two-fold: they are descriptive, “to capture a word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations as observed” (p. 108); they are also reflective in order to capture more of the observer’s frame of mind.

**Observation.** Creswell (2005) defines observation as “the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (p. 211). It affords the researcher the opportunity to record information as it occurs in a setting and to study actual behavior. Observations can be done as a participant or as an observer. For this study, I was an observer at activities that might support district community-building. These included meetings between the superintendent and various stakeholder groups, particularly the central office personnel, the building principals, the school board, and the teachers’ association. In these settings, my goal as a researcher was to act as a “data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 2002). Through the use of “thick description,” I conveyed a sense of context and provided the reader with a sense of “being there” (Stake, 1995, p. 63). I observed nine meetings the superintendent held with his directors and principals, one school board meeting, and a teachers’ association meeting. After each meeting, I took time to reflect on the meeting and to write field notes accordingly.
Document review. Written documents may contain a wealth of information about the culture and perspectives of individuals and organizations (Patton, 2002). During the course of the study, I gathered and analyzed documents that appeared relevant to the investigation. These documents included agendas and minutes of stakeholder meetings, various vehicles the superintendent used for communication to stakeholder groups, newsletters, an online blog, and an invitation to the community budget meeting. Patton (2002) maintains that document analysis can provide a “behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through documents” (p. 307).

Interviews. According to Stake (1995), “the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). Each interviewee has had unique experiences and sees the district realities through his/her own lens. Semi-structured interviewing involves direct interaction between the researcher and a respondent or group. These types of interviews differ from structured interviews in that the questions used guide the ensuing dialogue. Unlike traditionally structured questioning techniques, semi-structured techniques forego a formal instrument and rely on a set of guiding questions in order to encourage free and open responses from the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Each interviewee will have had unique experiences and special stories to tell (Stake, 1995); the purpose will be to derive, possibly through follow-up probes, a description of an episode, an explanation of events, and/or a reflection on his/her experiences in the district. I conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions so participants could best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher. Creswell (2003) contends that interviews in qualitative research provide useful information which the researcher may not directly observe. The researcher can also tailor the
questions to elicit the information needed for the study. On the other hand, information from interviews is filtered through the views of the interview as he/she summarizes the participants’ responses. For this project, along with the superintendent, the interview data sources were school and district administrators, who included principals, directors, and an assistant superintendent.

Precautions were taken to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the interview settings by asking them to select the setting, and they were fully aware of the nature of the study. They were given a consent form that fully described the project and shared the researcher’s intent to use pseudonyms to protect identity and confidentiality. My interview protocol included getting permission for the interview and reiteration of the anonymity of the interviewee and of the site. I also gave the interviewee a copy of the questions prior to the interview so as not to imply a competing agenda (Stake, 1995). I digitally recorded the interview, made sure my equipment was functioning well beforehand, and used written notes for any necessary support. Questions included the following: Tell me a little about your path to your present position. How important do you feel a sense of community is at the district level? How does the superintendent go about supporting this approach? Can you tell me about collaborative practices in the district? Describe how participants gain a voice during consensus building? Are some excluded? Why? Do you feel your views are valued? If so, how do you know this? How would you describe the current relationship and interactions between the superintendent and directors and principals? How is your group validated? How are your voices heard? What latitude are you given with decision making? Do you think it is important to have opportunities for input? If so, why? How do separate buildings find commonalities that create connections for them? How does the superintendent facilitate this type of community building? What benefits do you see with this approach? Throughout my research, I maintained a personal log in which
everything was kept, including a calendar, telephone numbers, observation notes, and reflections (Stake, 1995). Participants were interviewed on two occasions, once at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the study, approximately five months later. Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour each time. The second interview allowed me an opportunity to check the progress of community building, relationship building and responses to change.

All interviews and conversations were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were used for clarification as soon as possible following each interview to ensure accuracy of the data. As part of the protocol, participants’ schedules were used to determine the time, place, and length of the interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

Case study relies both on direct interpretation of an individual instance and on aggregation of instances where categories and themes emerge, which are necessary in instrumental case study in order to understand phenomena or relationships within it (Stake, 1995). I looked for patterns while reviewing documents, observing and interviewing. The search for patterns, for consistency within certain conditions, is called “correspondence” (Stake, 1995, p. 78).

Creswell (2003) asserts that data analysis is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data; he suggests that the researcher ask analytic questions and write memos throughout the study. Prior to the coding process, the researcher must “get a sense of the whole” (Creswell, 2003, p. 192), by reading and re-reading textual data, writing thoughts in the margins about emergent topics. These topics then may be listed and clustered by similarities. As Creswell suggested, I abbreviated the topics as codes and wrote the codes next to the appropriate segments.
of text. These codes were then abbreviated and alphabetized. I also color coded different categories.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest codes for setting and context, perspectives, process, activity, and relationship and social structure. These resonated with me, as I explored patterns of behavior among people and grouped them under “relationships” (p. 171). For example, a sub-question was, How does the superintendent work with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community? I sought commonalities in responses from district leaders as they reflected on this question. More specifically, I asked, What strategies did this superintendent use to develop community? The codes a researcher ultimately uses must be closely matched to the data that she collects. I reflected on each data collection session soon thereafter, and attempted to develop codes accordingly. In addition, I used the computer program, NVivo, to determine various levels of coding, to assist with thematic analysis of the data, and to access findings more readily.

Finally, interpreted relationships between the identified themes were used to assemble a narrative that included thick description and participant quotes to enable the reader an “opportunity for vicarious experience” (Stake, 1995, p. 86).

Considering the contextual nature of case study research, one does not seek generalizability in the same way that quantitative research may do so. However, that is not to say that important understandings do not emerge from case studies. Evers and Wu (as cited in Shields, 2009), advocate the use of “abductive reasoning” to acknowledge the prior knowledge both researchers and readers bring to the study. These authors maintain that humans share knowledge of common terms, assumptions of behavior incurred as a result of rules, and behavior that is defined by rules. It is impossible to approach a research setting without some type of prior
knowledge from which inference arises. Thus, the role of the researcher is to consider all possible explanations of the data; therefore, I did not conduct interviews, document review, or observations assuming that the superintendent was creating district community. Rather I stepped back to consider other possible explanations of the data.

**Data Presentation**

In presenting the data, I considered using the themes to direct the organization of the findings; however, the nature of the study and its impact on me as the researcher lent itself to a narrative presentation form. In Chapter Four, the events that highlighted the journey of the superintendent in this case study were told in a narrative framework, acknowledging that individuals often construct very different narratives about the same event. Creswell (2007) states that, in qualitative research, we “tell a story that unfolds over time” (p. 43). He maintains that we analyze the participants’ stories and then “restory” them into a framework that makes sense. “This framework may consist of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story, and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence” (p. 57). This was the approach I took as I related some of the experiences and responses of the cast of characters in this study.

Riessman (1993) suggests that telling about complex events should vary because they are laced with social discourses and power relations. However, she also asserts that “trustworthiness, not truth, is a key semantic difference. The latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process into the social world” (p. 65). Thus, the researcher was compelled to tell the story as it unfolded; i.e., to tell the truth; however, that truth rests on the shared experience of the interviewee.
Creswell (2007) shares that researchers might determine themes that arise from the story to provide a more detailed discussion of the meaning of the story. Thus, the events in this narrative were followed by emergent themes that were applicable to all three communities; these themes were discussed in Chapter Five with respect to the research questions. Finally, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), *intersubjectivity* is a potential abuse of the narrative approach; it is the process of “slipping into a commitment to the whole narrative plot and the researcher’s role in it, without any appropriate reflection and analysis (p. 109). My vantage point was unique for this study; I was a superintendent completing a case study on the complexities of the superintendency. The result was that I was moved to reflect throughout the study, sometimes trying on one of Mr. Edwards’ approaches for size, and other times concluding that my practice was a better fit for building community; consequently, the study offered a timely opportunity for growth. My reflections were included at the end of Chapter Five.

**Standards of Validation**

Qualitative research does not focus on generalizability and reliability (Creswell, 2003). However, it is important for the researcher to validate findings; i.e., to ensure accuracy and credibility. Patton (1990) emphasizes that credibility in qualitative inquiry depends on the richness of the data collected and the researcher’s ability to recognize emergent patterns. Findings based on data obtained from participants, and not determined by the researcher’s biases or motivations, enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers triangulate among different data sources to increase the validity of their findings. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals’ point of view, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions or themes (Creswell, 2005). To ensure validity, this study triangulated data from multiple sources in an effort to confirm or disconfirm descriptions of events, perceptions, and meaning.
I also used the strategy of peer debriefing, or venting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is a process that my colleagues and I have employed throughout our doctoral journey; they are aware of my project, but not overly involved in its focus. I feel very comfortable sharing ideas with them and asking for their views. In addition, I used member checking, sometimes called interim analysis (Hatch, 2002) to continue to build trustworthiness. In this process I encouraged participants to read the collected and transcribed data to help determine if I had captured participants’ meaning. Webster and Mertova (2007) assert that “the trustworthiness of [a narrative] lies in the confirmation by the participants of their reported stories of experience.”

**Significance**

It is axiomatic that if schools and districts are bureaucratically organized in the way they have been for a hundred years, and educators mimic hegemonic ways, students and staff will be marginalized and their chance at success diminished. So much has changed in our society: the family structure, early onset of puberty and adolescence, increased media messages, and more diverse communities, to name a few. It is ludicrous to believe that schools can address these differences with outdated approaches.

Literature is replete with research on the success of community building: the need for learning communities, the importance of building relationships between schools and the greater community, and the need for recognition of increasing diversity in our society and therefore in our schools. At the same time, statistics support the media frenzy around failing schools and high drop-out rates. There has to be a better way to enhance teaching and learning and improve student achievement. Educators understand the importance of community and witness evidence of this phenomena on a regular basis.
It is critical that leaders embrace the need for community as a vehicle for excellence and equity. Superintendents must lead with this model in mind so that district community is fostered; they must engage in meaningful, honest dialogue that conveys the importance of each stakeholder and validates their experiences. They must invite all to have a voice in the decisions that create a new approach – one that values individuals, fosters honesty, and celebrates diversity. It is important for leaders to know where to begin. It is my hope that this study provided a framework to consider, a flexible approach that opens minds and hearts.
Chapter 4

Findings

There is a widespread belief that our public schools are failing, which has resulted in a persistent clamor for change. This is based, in part, on what Berliner and Biddle (1995) identify as “the manufactured crisis of fraud and myths used in the attack on America’s public schools” (p. 23). These researchers reinterpreted the evidence used to document the attack on public schools’ credibility, since the Nation at Risk commission report of the early 1980’s. Reanalysis led these authors to declare that much of the evidence used to indict schools’ costs and performance was contradictory. Nevertheless, schools subject to public scrutiny and uncertainty must rely on strong and insightful leaders who, believing that children are our future, are focused on the successful preparation of all children for a democratic society. This goal has demanded that educational leaders be prepared for change, while maintaining a strong vision; that they have unwavering resolve to assure that the organization performs at the highest level of achievement.

The list of qualities and qualifications suggested in scholarly literature for the top leadership position, that of the superintendent, is not surprising (Blasé & Blasé, 1998; Brown, 2004; Brunner, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1995; DuFour, 1998; Foster, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Furman & Shields, 2003; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Grogan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Senge, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1998; Ylimaki, 2006). Typically, this person must demonstrate unimpeachable moral character; must demonstrate capacity to organize people and resources to successfully pursue goals; must create an organizational culture in which people will be heard; must groom future outstanding leaders to empower the entire organization; and must catalyze commitment to, and pursuit of, a compelling vision. This leader must build a learning community where voices are heard, experiences are validated, and change is embraced. What is surprising is that the literature on leaders who build community is focused primarily at the
building level. Numerous texts explore the nature of the principal and ways in which he/she engages stakeholders. The superintendent, however, is somehow removed from much of this literature, as if the person in this position puts the organization in motion and then steps out of the arena in order to manage the effects of change.

This chapter will present and analyze the data collected for the study and report on the findings of each research question motivating this study. The primary data for this research were collected through interviews, observations, and document analyses. Four principals and four central office leaders were interviewed twice, once in August/September at the beginning of the study and again in December/January at the end of the study. These administrators who worked most closely with the superintendent were in charge of implementing district initiatives and conveying district messages to their staffs and families. The superintendent was interviewed three times, along with a debriefing meeting at the end of the study. Observations were completed in five principals’ meetings, two Cabinet meetings, a school board meeting, and a teachers’ union meeting. The schedules for the interviews and observations are shown in the appendices D and E. Although document data were minimal, information was utilized from agendas, correspondence to the community, newspapers, and the online community forum entitled “TOPIX.”

The purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of the complexity of the task of a superintendent, who was new to a district, as he attempted to develop a strong sense of district community. The study sought to determine levels of implementation of community-building practices within the first eight months of the school year, as well as the reaction of leadership to these efforts. The study focused on two research questions:

1. How does the superintendent work with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community?
2. How does the district leadership team respond to the superintendent’s efforts?

Creswell (2007) instructs that providing a detailed description of the setting is an important component of case study reporting. Patton (2002) concurs that presenting rich descriptions enables the reader to understand the importance of context in effective leadership practices. Therefore, descriptions of the district and each of the participants will provide background information for the reader.

**Background of the District**

This story began in a district in a mid-west state whose superintendent resigned in order to maximize another opportunity. It was a K-12 district with four buildings: a primary building, an intermediate center, a middle school, and a high school. Three of the buildings were in close proximity to each other and to the District Office, with the primary building being located approximately five miles away. The daily routines, school improvement activities, celebrations, and professional dialogues in each school happened independently of the others; i.e., they operated as silos, a practice that was supported by the actions of the departing superintendent. This was the critical factor that attracted me to this case study site; the incoming superintendent, understanding the status of the district, set the creation of district community as his greatest challenge and one of his most important goals.

In gathering data to be able to describe and contextualize the district, I reviewed the school district report card to explore demographics and academic reports. The Tyler School District serves an economically diverse population of approximately 1900 students Pre-K through 12th grade. The student demographics are as follows: 94.6% White, 3.8% Hispanic, 0.3% Native American, 0.8% Black, 0.2% Asian, and 0.3% multiracial. Approximately 23% of the families are economically disadvantaged.
Thus, the diversity was that of low income rather than ethnic or racial diversity. Although this district was situated in a predominantly blue collar area, the interviewees all shared that, in their community, education was valued and that all families expected their students to get a high school diploma. In fact, the district report card showed a 100% graduation rate, with test scores ranking above state scores averaging 82.5% meeting or exceeding state standards.

**Cast of Characters**

**Table 1**

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Edwards</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Newman</td>
<td>Primary School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Waters</td>
<td>Intermediate School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>Middle School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rizzo</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Greenfield</td>
<td>Technology Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Morgan</td>
<td>Special Education Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Petersen</td>
<td>Curriculum Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ryan</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent of Operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 depicts the participants in the order in which they are described in the following section.

**Mr. Edwards.** The new superintendent, having begun as a teacher and then as an assistant principal, moved quickly to the superintendency of a small school district in the Midwest. During his tenure at that district, Mr. Edwards focused on improving curriculum,
building a team, and creating teacher capacity for change. After five years, he felt that he had reached his goals, had made a home for his family, and had been a change agent for the district. Perhaps it was time to try his skills at a larger district.

Mr. Edwards shared, “I wanted to move north. I was familiar with some of the county in terms of the leadership, so I was able to check on the district a little bit and liked what I saw.”

Acting on that notion, he began the application process. His interview at Tyler School District included three groups, all of which asked a similar question: “When faced with our budget situation, how would you plan to make cuts in spending?” Mr. Edwards answered the same way to all groups: “I won’t be making those cuts – we will,” indicating the value he placed on group decision-making. Mr. Edwards got the job as superintendent of Tyler School District and began this position on July 1, 2009.

The superintendent’s immediate charge was to balance the budget, and so he began with a study of revenues and expenditures. The district had been overspending their budget for the past six years; as a result, they saw reserves dwindle from $75 million to $12 million. Even before his arrival, it became apparent that an initial step would be to freeze salaries. (The average salary at this school district was $73,645, well above the state average and also much more than the average community salary.) He knew that he would have to work closely with the teachers’ association to implement such a bold move. The meetings went to mediation, with the attorneys interrupting the process. Mr. Edwards met with the association president, a teacher who had held this position for 17 years. Through honest dialogue, they were able to bargain a one-year contract with a salary freeze. This bought Mr. Edwards time to sort out the budget and to create a plan.

He wanted the staff members to understand that he was willing to make the same sacrifices they had made. Laying the foundation for his emphasis on valuing his role in the
school community as a whole, he requested that the School Board vote to freeze his salary, not only for the current year, but for the next three years, which was the length of his contract. They were very surprised by the gesture, which they had not experienced with previous district leaders.

**Ms. Newman.** The primary school principal held a doctoral degree and was very knowledgeable in educational theory with an emphasis on reading instruction. Having moved to the district for this principalship, she loved her job, worked hard at incorporating the community, and held teachers accountable for their teaching strategies. She spent time in classrooms and did not shy away from challenging conversations when they were aimed at improving teaching and learning and building climate. Her building was the greatest distance from the Administration Building, and she felt a sense of isolation. In addition, many of her families were low income, and she found it difficult to engage them in the school community. She was poised for change and shared with me that she would embrace the work toward district community, trusting that the newly-hired superintendent would make this goal a reality for Tyler schools.

**Mr. Waters.** The principal at the intermediate school had held administrative positions in other districts. He did not live in the Tyler School District, but commuted each day about forty miles. This principal was very well-read, had continued his education on leadership styles and strategies, and was typically not afraid to voice his opinion. He had led his building through several changes and understood the impact of change. He said he was very attuned to the need for communication and collaboration and the opportunity for having all voices heard. For example, he reported opening the year with his teachers engaged in an exercise where they developed a social contract that continued to guide their interaction throughout the year, and placed boundaries on emotional exchanges during the stressful time of budget cuts. This
principal enjoyed leadership and said he would love to see a community-builder in the role of superintendent, reiterating Ms. Newman’s enthusiasm for the new leader’s goal of community.

**Ms. Miller.** The middle school principal was a long-time district resident whose children attended school there and whose husband taught at the high school. She had begun as a teacher at Tyler and then had moved to assistant principal at the high school, and finally to middle school principal. Although she had wanted the high school principalship, she had embraced her role at the middle school and had led with patience, consistency, and creativity, with a continuing focus on adolescents. She had supported professional development, created common grade level meeting times, worked on curriculum, and set aside time for her teachers to develop assessments.

**Mr. Rizzo.** The high school principal was also a resident of the district and had taught there for 17 years before becoming principal. Having spent three years as the assistant principal, his major focus was still discipline. He admitted to being a novice in school leadership, but it was evident to me that he was a quick study. He knew his teachers and worked to maximize their strengths. While he shared that there had never been an overall sense of district unity, he said he worked to build community in his building. He would like to have seen more curriculum articulation and felt that this work could be used as a vehicle to begin unifying conversations. He was eager to make his mark on this building and appreciated not being micro-managed by the new superintendent.

**Ms. Greenfield.** The Technology Director had been a teacher and school counselor and entered technology through her interest in music. She shared that she had left the counselor’s position because of the magnitude of problems that students were facing; she felt ill-equipped to deal with the sordidness they were sharing. She had dabbled quite extensively in the tech world
and transitioned easily to this role. She was a thoughtful and intellectual person, who reflected deeply about teaching and learning and who seemed very dedicated to the district.

**Ms. Morgan.** The Special Education Director, although part of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, was actually employed by a regional cooperative. In this state, it is common for school districts to defray the cost of special education personnel by paying an assessment to a special education cooperative. A special education cooperative typically enters a joint agreement with area school districts; through this agreement, the cooperative offers support services for students with disabilities, while helping districts implement services for non-disabled, but struggling, students. The Tyler School District had been her only district for over twenty years, so she had seen many changes. She had led the district Response to Intervention plan, and had worked tirelessly to accommodate an ever-changing special education population. She appeared to be open to new leadership, but did not assert herself as part of the decision-making body.

**Mr. Petersen.** The Curriculum Director was a young man who also had taught in the district. His recent focus had been on differentiated instruction (DI); the last superintendent determined DI as a district initiative, and the director had been in charge of finding a consultant and establishing a teacher training schedule. He had also worked closely with math teachers to develop a common district math assessment. This director said he was very committed to state standards as a guide for curriculum and encouraged teachers to use these parameters for instruction. In addition, he operated as the assistant principal at the intermediate site and oversaw much of the discipline there. He felt that his proximity to students and families allowed him to stay grounded in what teachers were dealing with on a daily basis.

**Mr. Ryan.** The Assistant Superintendent of Operations was the new superintendent’s immediate support person. He was extremely dedicated to the district, had built a house there and
had sent his children to Tyler. While raising his family, he taught engineering at a nearby junior college and served on the Tyler school board; much of his tenure was as school board president. Upon retirement from his teaching job, the district was seeking someone for the operations job. He indicated that they had wanted him for the position because of his extensive knowledge base, his understanding of the needs of the district, his connections with the community, and his focus on continuous district improvement. He saw the superintendency through multiple lenses: as a community member, he knew the importance of public relations; as a former board member, he understood the need for the board to set policy and to refrain from running the district; as a staff member, he saw the building and district needs. Mr. Edwards shared that Mr. Ryan’s alternate perspectives were invaluable to him.

With this cast of characters, I begin my narrative. It is a story constructed from my interviews, interlaced with observations and some analysis. For purposes of anonymity, I have changed the names and, in some cases the gender, of the participants.

**Act I: Setting the Stage**

The first Cabinet meeting, which included all administrators, was held in July. Mr. Edwards had emailed them prior to the meeting, asking them to bring two artifacts that best represented themselves, and he did the same. He began the meeting by sharing his own symbols, to eliminate barriers and to encourage them to risk the vulnerability this exercise involved. Mr. Edwards first showed the 6-inch ruler that he carried in his portfolio all of the time and shared that it reminded him of the “measure twice, cut once” approach to carpentry he used. He said that, in his work, it reminded him to carefully measure the full impact of his decisions and actions on everyone involved before jumping into a course of action “to avoid having to look back and see that I blew the chance to do it right.” He also shared a can of chrome polish that he
kept as a reminder that something can be shined, but all the defects in the chrome would allow it to tarnish again. “Surface treatments are very temporary and the polish reminds me that we have to change deeply to make a real difference.” Both of Mr. Edwards’ artifacts led his leadership team toward an understanding of the careful approach he used to make decisions, along with his commitment to sustainable change.

The Cabinet members seemed surprised by his openness, and they were encouraged to share their artifacts, which included such items as cell phones symbolizing their need to stay connected with others, pictures of their children representing their strong family ties, a flash drive to indicate that they were organized, and many others. As participants shared their symbols, they explained the reason for their choices and how those artifacts represented something important about them. This meeting demonstrated Mr. Edwards’ invitation to the leadership team to share something that was unique to each, while emphasizing that their individual strengths would contribute to the success of the district as a whole. The exercise was a very successful ice breaker, which was followed by a discussion of how the district would maximize each of their strengths to move forward. During this meeting, Mr. Edwards established weekly principals’ meetings and monthly cabinet meetings. The tone was positive, and participants seemed enthused.

Mr. Edwards and I met intermittently over the following six months and had several conversations in which we discussed his journey to this position, the challenging district finances, and his enthusiasm for this district. I also attended several Cabinet meetings to observe Mr. Edwards’ interactions. In one of the cabinet meetings, he invited dissension – the kind of resistance that resulted from the likelihood of change. Mr. Edwards challenged the curriculum, the participants’ use (or lack) of technology, the Response to Intervention model, and their
adherence to state standards. Mr. Petersen said he had led his staff in an alignment initiative and had worked with the math department to develop a common assessment, and he was proud of this work. Mr. Edwards suggested that the state standards as a curriculum were not acceptable; that instead, curriculum should be designed around application and synthesis of ideas and higher level thinking skills to enable students to be competitive in the 21st century. He shared,

The content is no longer relevant in our schools. It is the ability to use the skills of acquiring knowledge, how to access it on your iPhone or iPod or whatever, how to evaluate it and assess its quality, how to synthesize new knowledge from it, creativity, thinking, and synthesis and how to communicate.

Mr. Petersen seemed a bit taken aback, but countered,

The state standards are what our curriculum is built upon…[if] we throw them out, we are going to have to start at each grade level and determine what is important to learn. I agree with that philosophy completely. But, when you think about the staff development and the curriculum time that needs to be spent outside of the classroom to change everything that you’re doing, the cost will be prohibitive. I think if core standards are adopted, we are going to find that we’re pretty much on track.

This appeared to be a time where dialogue was encouraged; although the methods may have differed, i.e. standards as opposed to creative curriculum, the agreed upon target was the same – that of maximizing learning for all students. Building community demanded that individuals valued the others’ contributions negotiating the path to a common goal.

During this meeting, Mr. Edwards continued to focus on curriculum and instruction within the district. He addressed RtI as a label that was placed on what should be called good instruction. Ms. Morgan was interested in this comment and suggested that Mr. Edwards lead the next meeting since they apparently “had been approaching RtI incorrectly for the last year.”

Mr. Edwards moved on to discuss technology as a tool for leadership. “If we, as educators, are expecting students to embrace new skills, we have to lead the way…we have to model new technologies for our staffs and set an expectation of their using them.” He shared his
goal of their use of the software to add to meeting agendas, to have a group conversation, and to convey necessary information. The room was quiet except for Ms. Greenfield, who gave overwhelming support. She shared, “Our job is to help teachers be the best they can be; I think technology is a vehicle for that work. I will be glad to help anybody grow their skills. Just give me a call!” Mr. Edwards saw technology as a communication tool, both internally and externally. He was invested in moving the district forward in their use of technology, convinced that, as educators, they were preparing students for a world in which their communication would revolve around technology. He shared a YouTube presentation on the resistance educators had over the decades as they moved from bark to paper, from pencils to pens, from pens to typewriters, and he shared this angst to the present where they were experiencing the challenge of changing media. He shared, “We need to embrace the technology of the present in order to validate our instruction and to motivate our learners.”

**Act II: Mr. Edwards Begins Communication and Collaboration**

Mr. Edwards had set the stage for building community; he had moved to the area and been visible at the local haunts. He took his morning walks in the neighborhoods around the district, becoming a familiar presence; he shared that this was an opportunity to feel comfortable with the area and to interact with other early risers. He had obviously established a measure of trust with the teachers’ association; for the first time in many years, they had agreed to a one-year contract with a salary freeze. Mr. Edwards shared,

I got handed a great opportunity by coming in when it (the contract) was in mediation, frankly, because there’s this thing going on between the Board and the teachers and I finally said, ‘All right; let’s get this done.’ So I basically stepped in and told the Board that I wanted a chance to sidebar with the association. I cleared it with the president of the association; she was great with it. I told our professional negotiator to sit still for a while; I told the mediator to sit still for a while. We sat with our district’s attorney and put together a proposal. Then the two of us sat in with the negotiators and the teachers and hammered out the final agreement that I then brought to the negotiator and said, ‘Go
put this on the table and they’ll accept it.' They did. And we got it done right so that it benefits the district.

As he familiarized himself with the district’s financial picture, Mr. Edwards anticipated that contract negotiations would be challenging. As a gesture to develop trust and to indicate his own understanding of necessary sacrifices across the district, he had refused a superintendent’s contract that included salary increases for three years, thereby freezing his own salary; in addition, he had shared some of his beliefs with his leadership team, conveying that he was a thoughtful decision-maker, and that he was committed to raising the quality of education across the district. He saw his ice-breaking activity with staff as an opportunity for him to give each a voice at the table where he invited their dialogue and validated what they shared.

At this point Mr. Edwards entered the conversation posted on TOPIX. This site was an Internet forum, where community members were free to comment on occurrences in their town; their posts included a focus on anything from garage sales to city council meetings to police arrests. Since the Tyler School District was a major part of the community, the news related to the district was also a topic of conversation on this site. Some of the posted comments during the budget crisis were negative and somewhat uninformed. Hoping to open the lines of communication with the wider community, Mr. Edward identified himself, responded to the comments concerning budget cuts, and invited the community members to visit in person. He shared that he valued their input and would appreciate any ideas they would like to share. He continued to dialogue via this medium throughout the time of this study. For example, when community members posted comments about losing new teachers as a result of budget cuts, Mr. Edwards posted the following:

We will certainly look at that issue regarding new teachers. I know we have some excellent ones and it is my wish to keep any good teacher we can. It is not, unfortunately, the case that we can rely solely on retirements to solve the financial issues. Retirements
are not placed where we can afford not to rehire and even reducing the payroll to account for lower paid new teachers we will not be able to balance the budget. We have spent through reserves far enough that it becomes dangerous to continue to do so even for one more year…Rest assured we will do what we can to keep good teachers. If there are those who are not making the grade we will also have no hesitation letting them go. Quality education is the goal and I believe we can provide that without asking taxpayers to do more. I do appreciate those who look for ideas and share them. Keep them coming in and feel free to contact me to talk more about any of these issues.

Mr. Rizzo, one of the principals who had been a teacher and who lived in the district, said he tried not to take the online forum very seriously, sharing that there were many unsubstantiated comments on it, and that it sometimes offered an opportunity for community members to complain anonymously. Instead, he preferred talking about pride in the district, about moving teachers forward with new ideas, about the importance of meeting students where they were academically, and using differentiated instructional techniques to facilitate improvement. His hope was that Mr. Edwards would communicate well and would be a visible presence in the district. Mr. Rizzo stated, “I never really felt an overall sense of unity or community for all buildings…There has always been tension between the middle school and the high school…Honestly I think there was a lot of…competition within the district.” Mr. Rizzo was refraining from any judgment about Mr. Edwards until the budget was reconciled, and felt that the financial challenge was a huge obstacle for the new superintendent.

I think there is change coming, and I believe that Mr. Edwards is on the right track as far as building a team. The regular meetings are definitely a great start. I also think that it is important that the superintendent should be in all buildings. So far he’s been very visible at our football games and our Open House.

Other participants echoed Mr. Rizzo’s investment in regular meetings. The previous superintendent had not maximized collaborative opportunities; in fact administrator meetings had been limited in number and scope. The principals enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas and to request input from others experiencing similar challenges. They were a group who had felt very
isolated; the previous superintendent rarely visited the buildings and expressed little interest in their building and school improvement goals. They were allowed to flounder without strong district leadership; consequently, they built co-dependence, calling on each other when a crisis emerged, but never really built a team.

All of the administrators, except for Mr. Ryan, had started their jobs under the previous superintendent and only knew his style. Mr. Edwards, however, was focused on communication and visibility, both concepts that would draw them together. Ms. Morgan shared that they needed “someone who cared about them” and that the regular meetings were a step in the right direction.

Mr. Rizzo shared that he thought the new superintendent should be present at community events, perhaps an occasional town meeting where many stakeholders were involved. He felt that this would be a way for community members to become better acquainted with the superintendent and that it would convey the message that he valued their input.

Mr. Edwards was sensitive to this expectation; he was making inroads about which his leadership team was uninformed. He conveyed,

I’ve gone out to the community and become active with the Chamber of Commerce and I still make contact with a guy that wants to get me to a Lion’s Club meeting…and the foundation group is also a community group that I’ve managed to get involved with. They had a golf outing where I was scorekeeper. I just hung around and was able to talk and visit with them all. I went over to city hall and visited with some folks about the TIF district and some issues on that. I met with the attorney for the city…just building those ties and acquaintances and networks of people so they see you out there.

Visibility seemed to be a priority for these administrators, as a good faith effort on Mr. Edwards’ part, to show he was committed to building community. Mr. Waters, an insightful leader who shared his need to establish trust with staff members, hoped that Mr. Edwards would communicate face-to-face and establish a presence in his building as the year progressed. This
focus on visibility was consistent with Mr. Waters’ commitment to building relationships with administrators and teachers and, through those relationships, to impact teaching and learning.

Their discourse about the role of the superintendent was dependent upon their experience with a leader who was not visible. This experience drove their dialogue. Mr. Edwards understood their feeling and was committed to maintaining a presence throughout the district. He shared that his predecessor could hear the football games from his home but never attended a game. So Mr. Edwards made a point of attending as many games as possible, where he could interact with students, teachers, and community members. At one point, the high school athletic director, who was about to retire, said, “Well, I can tell you this; I’ve been here for however many years, and you’ve seen more minutes of high school football than the previous superintendent has in thirteen years.” Mr. Edwards shared, “You go to encourage the kids a little bit and to show the parents you know what is going on. You support the program, whatever it is.”

Additionally, administrators were not aware of the presence Mr. Edwards had established with the teachers during contract negotiations, because they were not part of the bargaining unit. During this time, he had met with representatives on numerous occasions, establishing a positive working relationship that allowed the association membership to understand the financial condition of the district and resulted in successful negotiations. This had been unprecedented in the Tyler School district. It seemed that Mr. Edwards’ actions were appreciated and that he was off to a good start.

Ms. Greenfield was somewhat removed from the rest of the group; she had been a high school counselor, who felt it impossible to continue in that vein because of the horrible problems that faced some of the students. Her move into technology was, to an extent, an attempt to insulate herself from those experiences. Ms. Greenfield had definite opinions about the
superintendency, although she would not want the job. She felt that the last superintendent had been an introvert, which did not lend itself to being effective in that leadership position. Ms. Greenfield felt that Mr. Edwards “looks at things as a series of problems to be solved.” She suggested that there could be a problem if Mr. Edwards forgot the affective side of things. She felt that community was an affective concept, and, in building this concept, the superintendent needed to juggle the management of the district with the relationships of the people.

Ms. Morgan was reluctant to engage in dialogue about her expectations of the superintendent. She echoed previous comments on the budget decisions, as well as the contract negotiations. Ms. Morgan felt that Mr. Edwards would be a strong leader for their district and that they needed someone who collaborated with them. She felt that the district had been more cohesive in the distant past and looked forward to his reconnecting them. She, too, felt that the monthly Cabinet meetings were a step in the right direction. She also shared that Mr. Edwards had already taken a greater interest in Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and had even left her a note applauding her role in one of the meetings. These were the meetings at which a special education teacher shared the progress of a particular student on her case load, used data to develop academic and/or social-emotional goals and developed learning activities to support the goals. In reference to Mr. Edwards’ attendance at these meetings, she shared, “He is trying the find the best solutions for the district.” Ms. Morgan said that she looked forward to sharing ideas and challenges and to creating a better understanding of the district vision.

Mr. Ryan, Assistant Superintendent and previous Board member, came from a different perspective on interaction.

My experience as a school board member and as an employee would indicate that a sense of community is probably one of the most important aspects of a school district’s job – not just the superintendent’s, although that person has to lead the effort. When you say community, I am referring to community in a more general sense; community within a
school district – a school district community – a cohesive group of people who want to work together and we’re all in this together type of thing and then a community as a whole, which includes the parents and the businesses and whatever kinds of groups might be out there that can help you in that regard. I think the superintendent’s role is to make sure that it happens and orchestrate it. It’s everyone’s responsibility to be part of it.

Mr. Ryan suggested that a superintendent could not create community on his own, but rather needed to coordinate it and have some type of feedback mechanism to measure whether or not it was actually occurring. He added that there were many things that occurred within a school district that were not documented, so that a superintendent needed to seek opportunities to recognize people who might otherwise go unnoticed; for example, the parent who donated many hours to build a console to house the music equipment in the back of the auditorium; or the parents who donated money for various programs. “I think the superintendent has to be receptive to those types of activities so that he can somehow acknowledge them…[this] goes a long way in garnering other people’s support and maybe repeating the effort or doing something similar.”

I asked how Mr. Edwards was doing thus far in Mr. Ryan’s opinion.

He’s making an effort to improve communication between the administration center and the various managers and principals in the district, which allows information to be disseminated to them that might include things like acknowledging folks that are volunteering or expressing a need of some things we need to look at financially. I think communication in that arena is probably as important as any…I don’t think Mr. Edwards thinks about it; I don’t think it is a conscious effort. He just has a system of doing things that automatically leads to that.

Mr. Ryan offered that he thought public relations was one of the most important aspects of a superintendent’s job. He shared that the previous superintendent had a community newsletter that went out four times a year, but that the mailing became too expensive. Now the district was using a mass caller system to share important information with parents, and Mr. Edwards was supporting this system. He appreciated this support, feeling that the calling system could be a way to promote positive public relations.
When asked what he expected from the superintendent, “…we expect leadership; the superintendent is the CEO of our company, so we expect communication between him and the Board so that they are informed on what they need to know.” The daily challenges of running the district are the superintendent’s, according to Mr. Ryan; he needs to run the district efficiently and the Board needs to trust him to do so; the superintendent needs to have control of the Board.

Mr. Ryan continued,

One of the things with Mr. Edwards that I’ve already noticed is that he tends to be very black or white. That is…far better than what we had; the former superintendent never had black or white, but everything was gray and there were not decisions being made. Mr. Edwards will make a decision, but unfortunately he tends to look at things one way or the other, which doesn’t always fit.

Mr. Ryan shared that a superintendent did need to be consistent in his message and had to work at developing common goals. He thought that the district leader needed to listen to all the stakeholders in order to determine the big picture. But, he insisted, the superintendent needed to draft the plan on how to get there, because often others would not know enough about the process and the system to guide their efforts. This matched the conversation I had had with Mr. Edwards. He shared that, in his interviews, he told each group the same story because he was “consistent in [his] beliefs.” His beliefs included that it was necessary to develop common goals, for each school to be moving in the same direction. His community-building vision included listening to all voices and using a collaborative format to engage stakeholders in shared decision making where possible.

Mr. Ryan felt that the superintendent had to be honest and trustworthy, strong and decisive. “I’ve always subscribed to the mentality that you have to serve people before you can lead them. That’s a characteristic; I think you have to be a servant.” He added that he was sure Mr. Edwards could fulfill this role.
One of the initiatives of Mr. Petersen, the Curriculum Director for the district, was to train all of the teachers in differentiated instructional strategies, which created challenges with the new superintendent’s philosophy. This stemmed from Mr. Edwards’ position on standards not being important. Mr. Petersen felt that articulating the curriculum was a component of creating community from an instructional approach because the process and the implementation demanded conversation. He shared that the district, not unlike most, had seen many initiatives, but few had seen a finish. Although this created a challenge in their relationship, Mr. Peterson looked forward to where Mr. Edwards would take them.

During this time, Mr. Edwards was continuing to work on the budget, the charge that was handed to him upon his arrival. The previous district leader had not focused on decreasing expenditures, which created increasing conflict for Mr. Edwards; staff members had been spoiled and used to requesting and receiving anything they wanted or needed. It was proving difficult for them to understand that the time of carefree spending was over. They did not realize that reserves, $75 million at one time, had plummeted to $12 million, as a result of continual expenditures that exceeded revenues. However, as with most districts, specifics about the budget are not typically shared unless there is a crisis; the imbalance in this budget had reached crisis potential. Principals were asked to scrutinize purchase orders and approve only necessary expenditures. The process of analyzing the existing budget and creating a proposal for the school board for the new budget was a time-consuming task and one that Mr. Edwards wanted to showcase as a collaborative endeavor. He shared,

You have to see where you’re going and you have to gather people around to do it. That’s the whole concept…if you stand alone and make cuts, you’re an easy target. I’ve been very honest in saying that’s my purpose. I know I’m not going to be the most popular guy in town because I’m cutting budgets. That’s life. We’re going to do it together. You’re going to do it with me, (I tell them) and we’re all going to weep and gnash our teeth and
bang our heads against the wall. But we’re going to come up with numbers that can be cut and do it.

During this “communication and collaboration” phase, Mr. Edwards had shared the budget concerns with the staff via meetings, and with the larger community with his comments on the TOPIX community forum, where he addressed criticisms and invited parents and community members to share ideas with him. He established regular meetings with the principals and with the Cabinet, and invited them to contribute to the substance of the meetings by adding significant agenda items. He had established a presence in the community with his attendance at local club meetings, his interaction with neighbors, and his visibility at district athletic events. Finally, he had begun to develop relationships with stakeholders, particularly with the central office and building administrators, with whom he collaborated regularly. He had begun to build the foundation for district community, but this was challenging work that would take time.

Act III: Listening and Leading

By December, Mr. Edwards had a sense of the way the district had been running, and wanted to make some changes. For example, the Board meetings at Tyler School District had previously been held twice a month, with the district offering dinner, and the meetings lasting several hours. Mr. Edwards sought to change this pattern; he shared that he thought the meetings had become a social event for the Board and that dinner pre-empted the evening’s work. He presented this idea to the Board, suggesting that they meet once a month with a tight agenda that advanced the meeting. The selling point was his assurance that, without dinner, the work could be accomplished in less than two hours, providing there was not a crisis involved. They responded favorably, apparently ready to embrace a less time-consuming, more productive schedule. A single monthly meeting was scheduled on the third Wednesday of each month, making their time together less frequent, but perhaps more efficient.
The principals continued meeting each Tuesday. The agenda was minimal, with a few, apparently noncontroversial items. The meeting began with Mr. Edwards discussing business cards and stationery that would be the same for all schools; he shared that the logo was a work in progress. The emphasis on these outward signs of district connectedness, was his way of addressing the importance of tangible items that would become symbols of community. The formal meeting process was one that first addressed any emergency matters. (I eventually understood that all meetings would begin with whatever the principals needed to address – as long as it had been added to the agenda.) Mr. Edwards shared that they did not have to wait until Tuesday to address a concern, and that he was a phone call away.

Successful leaders must identify and articulate the fundamental purpose of the organization, building shared knowledge as a prerequisite for the collaborative decision-making model, so that community members can operate from a consistent conceptual framework. As a step in this direction, on one occasion, Mr. Edwards wrote “Values Discussion” on the white board; he had asked them to come prepared to discuss their values. They shared such items as school needing to be a safe place; students needing to be respectful and responsible; everybody needing to recognize and value individual differences; and all being learners able to embrace change. Mr. Edwards asked if there were any they might prioritize differently or any they might even omit. A discussion that was focused on conditions fostering student achievement resulted in a final list of shared values. Mr. Edwards said he would print and laminate these as a tool to remind them to stay focused on their values, even when the job was challenging. To borrow from the musical metaphor, he was asking them to be “in tune” with each other as they developed a shared set of educational commitments. Mr. Edwards was encouraging them to engage in honest
reflection, to respect each other, and to dialogue about their beliefs. He was modeling community.

Mr. Edwards moved through the other agenda items that addressed teacher evaluation and discipline approaches. He remarked that there was no district discipline policy, and that all schools worked in isolation. The principals shared that they had had no direction on district discipline, although some had been trained in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This was a program that was based on student incentives for positive choices. There was some disagreement about the adoption of this program, as it demanded further training. Mr. Edwards shared that he was not convinced of the need to pay for PBIS training. He felt that they were all savvy enough to develop a system that worked for their students.

The previous superintendent had not involved himself in instructional leadership. The teachers’ evaluation tool had been outdated, and the district bordered other districts that embraced a dynamic approach to instruction. As a result, the superintendent decided to adopt a more progressive, research-based tool just prior to leaving. This tool demanded a more in-depth approach, and enabled principals to hold teachers accountable for lesson planning, instruction, classroom environment, and professional learning. This type of evaluation led to disgruntled employees who had previously been evaluated as “excellent” with little effort, and who were now challenged to reach that identified level of performance. The new superintendent had inherited yet another change that invited resistance. He encouraged the principals to use the tool with integrity and to approach the process with a focus on discussions about professional growth.

Mr. Edwards addressed the issue of professional dress, clearly one of his values. He shared that he had the support of the teachers’ association and that he would communicate to all staff, but would first share the communiqué with principals after it was developed. His focus was
on the fact that teachers should not wear jeans to teach; he realized that there would be exceptions associated with various roles, but that he needed the support of the principals to change the culture of a staff that had become a bit too informal. As a result, there was some hesitancy on the part of the high school principal, who would have to carry this message to his staff, but he elected not to pursue this issue. Mr. Edwards’ reiterated that “teachers and administrators were professionals all week long, including Friday.”

During this meeting, as usual, participants began to understand that Mr. Edwards offered some non-negotiables, and this appeared to be something new for them. For example, principals would be expected to be instructional leaders by prioritizing time in classrooms and having professional dialogue with teachers; they would also participate in the budget process by selecting areas to sacrifice from within their building resources; and they would designate someone in each building to maintain a current website. The previous superintendent had few clear expectations; although they shared that they were ready for a clear direction, they were used to leading their buildings or departments without strong superintendent input. Times were changing, and the new leader had new strengths.

The format at principals’ meetings remained generally consistent. Each week, Mr. Edwards posted the agenda on a Wiki space, which he had established to encourage principals to collaborate electronically. Wiki spaces are collaborative web pages; the superintendent’s Wiki space was one that the Cabinet could access and “edit” by adding meeting agenda items that they would like discussed at their meetings. If an item was not posted, it would not be considered for discussion at the meeting. Reminding them that leaders needed to model what students were expected to do, Mr. Edwards insisted they use some more modern technology. He shared he would be “pulling them kicking and screaming into the 20th Century…and then they would
worry about the 21st Century!” Apparently, the new superintendent was focused on productive meetings that were collaboratively planned. Since this approach was new and a bit intimidating, Mr. Edwards’ items were still (after six months) the only ones on the agenda; they ranged from schedule decisions, to programs, to curriculum.

At another meeting, Mr. Edwards addressed the agenda item entitled “Student Achievement,” sharing the current belief that classroom focus should shift from the teacher to the learner. He explained his idea of a Mastery Project where interested teachers would plan a unit of study with the targeted learning in mind, and design lessons around that target, using formative assessments en route, and authentic assessment to determine if learning had occurred. He was not particularly interested in grades, but rather an assessment of learning. This was a departure from their typical instructional approaches where the units of study were based on the textbook, with summative evaluations at the end of each chapter. Mr. Edwards wanted teachers to try something new that focused on meeting the needs of diverse learners. He shared that this project would be different depending on the grade level, and that teachers would be encouraged to share their results in professional discussions with colleagues. He suggested that he would meet with the teachers involved in each building and would dialogue with them at the end of the process in hopes of refining it, as well as encouraging others to try this approach. His collaborative invitation was extending to the teachers.

In another principals’ meeting, Mr. Edwards addressed the change in the evaluation instrument and pledged support for the work that was being done in the district to embrace the evaluation process. He also stressed communication, sharing that they should “reply all” to emails that impact other members of the leadership team. They perceived this as a reprimand, both for not using email (they were used to the in-district snap mail), as well as for replying to
Mr. Edwards and not to the whole group; this was a way for him to remind them that they needed to share information. He moved on to the subject of Data Walks, returning the focus to instructional leadership. This conversation was one that encouraged principals to be in classrooms. Mr. Edwards wondered,

How can you be instructional leaders if you don’t know the type of instruction that is occurring in your building? …You need an overview, an instructional profile of your staff….Perhaps you may find that your staff needs development on levels of questioning. The principals responded with different levels of comfort regarding Data Walks.

Some had been trained and others did not understand the process. Mr. Edwards followed up with his belief that it was necessary for them to get a baseline about instruction in their buildings. He said, “Let me suggest something.” Somebody interrupted. He responded, “Let me finish a sentence.” Mr. Edwards wanted meetings to stay focused and he resisted tangential conversations. He restated the importance of principals regularly visiting classrooms and then pulled the conversation together to encompass all comfort levels, suggesting they use classroom visits as an informal tool this year when they were not formally evaluating teachers, and that they would revisit the structured Data Walks for next year.

That meeting continued to the next agenda item, where Mr. Edwards suggested that the district would no longer pay for overnight conferences; the district would pay for conference registration, but would limit this to the amount of Title II money they had. The principals had no reaction to this; they knew it was a function of the budget constraints that were just beginning. Once again, this was a departure from current practices; teachers had not been limited with regard to their professional development and also had not been held accountable for using their newly acquired information. Mr. Edwards shared that internal professional conversations, collaborative planning, and discussions about student work were often more meaningful than workshops or conferences. He asked, “How often do teachers attend conferences and use none of
what they have learned? I would like for us to move toward professional development practices that are embedded in practice. This will be cheaper and more meaningful.” Here, he was sharing his beliefs as an instructional leader, but also was opening the door to increased teacher collaboration.

By now, prior to the meetings, Mr. Edwards interacted informally with the participants. I overheard him talking with the male participants about football, and they shared personal stories. He shared some info about his family and used humor to connect with them. The previous silence before meetings was no longer in existence; the tone was more relaxed than in earlier meetings and indicated an increased comfort level in the group. The focus of the principals’ meetings was still the budget; although the teachers’ association had settled on a one-year contract, and during this year, Mr. Edwards was to determine district needs, monitor spending, and develop a balanced budget, while anticipating contract negotiations once again during the year. Mr. Edwards shared that his intent was to visit schools and answer budget questions and that he would also be meeting with representatives from the teachers’ association and with the community to invite suggestions for cost containment. He said he would also share the process of cutting staff after the information-gathering step.

Mr. Edwards suggested that the principals send invitations to community members to become involved in the community budget information sessions. He stated that a wage freeze would save jobs, but felt that the association would not settle on that for a second year. He reminded them that they can pay more people less or fewer people more. Mr. Edwards told the principals that they needed to clarify the situation to their staffs and avoid adding to potential gossip. He suggested that they were the leaders who could keep conversations positive. Mr.
Edwards did express appreciation for their efforts and shared that he knew this was a challenging time for them.

Principal meetings continued to focus on the budget situation; this was understandable because previous superintendents had never enforced financial boundaries. In fact, principals were never questioned about building expenditures, and most requests for materials, supplies, furniture, and staff were not questioned. Mr. Edwards’ role was to field questions and to share current information about imminent changes with his leadership teams. He moved to a discussion about expenditures at the building level. The principals had obviously been allowed to submit expenditures at will. Mr. Edwards shared that they would need to scrutinize requests for materials and supplies, and that frivolous expenditures would not be supported. Although the subject of budget cuts was unpleasant, he continued to insert humor into his conversation, calling the emphasis on copies “the great color cartridge caper,” in guiding them to a realization about the cost of even simple things like printing in color.

A meeting with the teachers’ association representatives was part of Mr. Edwards’ effort at collaboration. He was, from a community-minded perspective, giving them a voice at the table regarding the district’s financial situation. He had asked them to come to the meeting ready to make suggestions about budget cuts. He began the meeting with a few Power Point slides explaining district finances. One of the slides included a graph of the budget funds, providing a visual that reiterated the understanding that most of a district’s budget is contained in the Education Fund, from which salaries are paid. His idea was to underscore the fact that the only significant budget cuts are those that involve salary.

Mr. Edwards had brought an easel, tag board, and markers. He asked for their input and wrote each idea on the tag board. The challenge was to keep the teachers focused on the task of
offering ideas without explaining how they would work. Mr. Edwards reminded them that this was just an information-gathering phase. In theory, this idea was a good one; it empowered staff members to offer ideas they felt would contribute to savings. However, it also proved difficult for members to discuss particular program cuts without insulting colleagues, which evidenced their sensitivity to the daunting task of balancing the budget.

In addition, Mr. Edwards was very honest in sharing that they could not save enough in materials and supplies to balance the budget. Teachers were adamant that a lot of small savings would add up to a bigger savings. Approximately two hours later, Mr. Edwards, showing that he had valued their input, stated, “I really appreciate the thoughtful way you have approached this meeting and would like to hear any additional ideas. But I respect your evening time, and it is almost 6:30. Would you like to meet again next week to finish?”

All agreed that another meeting was in order; they were gratified by the opportunity to give input, and had deliberately considered cost reductions. Mr. Edwards’ plan was to offer the same process to the community members and then to cost out all of the items, share them with the groups, and work them into his proposal to the Board where they were appropriate. He had embarked on a process that was new to these stakeholders; their input had never been considered in district decisions. Mr. Edwards was practicing deep listening and was working to validate all voices.

During the next Cabinet meeting, participants returned to a discussion, a bit challenging, on the nature of Response to Intervention in the district, as well as the work that had been done with alignment. Mr. Edwards was clearly at odds with the instructional tools that were in place, and offered food for thought. It was obvious that leaders were not going to blindly accept a major change in practice without fighting for their work; but interestingly enough, they chose not to
have that discussion at this time. Mr. Edwards proceeded to talk about the need for a spiraling curriculum, the focus on Professional Learning Communities, and the expectation that school improvement plans align with district improvement initiatives. He also shared the expectation of the use of formative assessments.

Mr. Edwards wanted teachers to create a set of meaningful standards that developed students’ ability to read, think, and calculate. He believed if students could do these things, they would do fine on standardized tests. He shared that students needed multiple opportunities to succeed and that teaching methods needed to change according to the way kids learned. He suggested that RtI was not a remedial model, nor was it a road to special education. He wanted the leadership team to decide what a diploma from Tyler meant. Mr. Edwards was asking them to collaborate once again; but this time, he was more deliberate in his expectations. He wanted them to take more responsibility for developing school “as a human place for authentic learning” (Starratt, 2004).

The leadership team hoped to see the superintendent become involved at the building level and in the community; they understood his need to address the budget and were leading their stakeholders to an understanding of the process of cost containment; they wanted the superintendent to communicate, although they wanted a stronger voice in the chosen mode; and they looked forward to building a relationship with him that fostered dialogue. This information was consistent with Mr. Edwards’ goals; it would prove interesting to watch the development of this story.

**Act IV: Change Is Challenging**

By Mr. Edwards’ second semester, he had been consistent with his collaborative approach to informing stakeholders about the budget process and inviting their input; he had
raised the standard for instructional leadership for the principals; he had interacted with the wider community; and he had fought for a place of trust with the teachers’ association. The budget continued to occupy a good amount of his time; it had provided an opportunity for discussion.

He reflected on his progress:

I was hired specifically to come in and pull back the spending…You have to see where you’re going and you have to gather people around to do it. That’s the whole concept; my thought is that if you stand alone and make cuts, you are an easy target. It’s like zebras; if you can get everybody around to make the cuts, then they can’t pick one out. I have been very honest in saying that’s my purpose. We’re going to do it together.

Having said this, Mr. Edwards had encountered the complexity that surrounded a seemingly straightforward plan. When stakeholders are brought in to a process, they sometimes internalize the belief that they can make the final decisions; this was not possible with the budget process.

They had to understand that his invitation to give input was his way of validating their ideas, but that not all of the ideas were financially feasible. Mr. Edwards talked about his focus on student achievement.

If we taught kids…if we took four standards and we said, ‘These are the skills you must have and demonstrate by the time you get out of high schools,’ and we focused on nothing else, we would have kids who could read and calculate and communicate and do all the things they need to do; and they’d be going out wildly successful in this world.

Our interview moved on to another question. I asked, “Mr. Edwards, when you came here, you said your goal was to build district community. What does that mean to you?”

He responded,

I want my leadership team to feel like a team, to be close and feel like we’re pulling in one direction. I want it to expand to teachers and staff, people feeling like we are all in this together and that we can all solve problems and that we can all deal with what we need to do. And everybody has a voice and participates. And then also, make the wider community feel like the school district is part of the community and that we’re here with the community – not we’re here doing this to the community, which is a challenge in these days, too…So we have to work especially hard to make the community feel like the schools are here as part of the community and working with the whole community, so I think community to me means getting as wide a circle as we can to feel like they’re part
of the process. They’re involved in this enterprise and that their opinion matters and that their participation matters in the process.

With regard to engaging stakeholders, Mr. Edwards shared,

Mostly at this stage being in touch, being present, getting out to the buildings several times, down the halls, and talking to teachers when they’re out there. My bus drivers are telling me that I need to come ride the bus with them around the district, so I’m going to have to do that one of these days. They all see me; I walk down to the lake every morning and back early. I’ve got a couple of buses that come out and wave; and if I’m not out there, they stop and say, ‘Are you okay? You weren’t out walking.’

Mr. Edwards continued to discuss his plan for principal and Cabinet meetings, and his approach to settling the contract, which gave him an opportunity to build ties with the teachers’ association. He shared that he had become active with the Chamber of Commerce and was contacting the Lions’ club to join. In addition, he was making himself available to talk to groups about the school district and their goals. Since leadership style is a critical part of community building, Mr. Edwards described his style.

I like people around…I’ve got some ideas and you’ve got some ideas. Three more people will have three times what I have…eventually we’ll put them all together, and who is it that said that the best way to get a good idea is to get as many ideas as you can and that’s certainly my philosophy. Together we can probably come up with good solutions. Individually we probably won’t.

Ms. Miller was very open about her relationship with Mr. Edwards and positive about the status quo.

He gets out an agenda [for the administrative meetings]. We are all given time to…talk about any problems or emergencies. He has allowed us to come to him for guidance. That’s what I like. And he has allowed us to run our own building. I never see Mr. Edwards, [in his building] which is fine. I see him every Tuesday morning. If there’s a problem he calls me; and he hasn’t called me one time this year. So, I’m happy. He is very honest; I’ve gone to him with some things when I wasn’t sure what I should do. He told me exactly what I should do – I wanted his input, and he gave it to me right away.

Communication, according to Ms. Miller, could always be reduced to honesty.

He’s told us what is going to happen and what is not going to happen. He’s made it very clear; he’s not being wishy-washy or beating around the bush. That is the way it’s got to
be. I appreciate that. I spent an hour-and-a-half with Mr. Edwards. We went over every
grade level and every subject and …looked at what programs we needed to keep and
what we didn’t. I hope we can tell the people involved very soon.

Ms. Miller continued to emphasize the communication aspect of relationship-building. I asked
what else she would like to see the superintendent do to build community.

He needs a vehicle to get involved in the wider community…he needs to go to some city
council meetings…If I had to give Mr. Edwards a grade right now, it would be an A
minus, and I would include the minus, just because I would like to see him take a more
active part in the community.

It was evident that Ms. Miller’s view of “being active in the wider community” had to include
the city council meetings; she was evidently not aware of his outreach to the civic groups and to
the athletic boosters.

Mr. Edwards had shared,

I want to make the wider community feel like the school district is part of the community
and that we’re here with the community – not we’re here doing this to the community,
which is a challenge in these days too. So we have to work especially hard to make the
community feel like the schools are here as part of the community and working with the
whole community…we need as wide a circle as we can get to feel like they’re part of the
process. They’re involved in this enterprise and that their opinion matters and that their
participation matters in the process.

Ms. Miller continued,

I wish he would have assistant principals at the weekly meetings; a past superintendent
included them and even a teacher…it worked well for communication purposes…I also
like that Mr. Edwards is a problem solver. I will give you an example. For many years I
have talked about needing a form for fire drills and bus evacuations. Mr. Edwards got us
the form and took us through it, so now we know. No other leader has ever clarified that
for us.

Ms. Miller reflected on her expectations once the budget was completed.

I would like to say his communication because he is pretty black and white; but some
people think he’s cold…Actually he’s very caring, but the teachers don’t see that…I have
invited him to come to the building and to visit teacher meetings, but he said he was very
busy…that he doesn’t need to visit because things are fine…he is spending time where
things aren’t going as well. That made me feel good…that he had confidence in what I
was doing.
Ms. Greenfield, who was a very reflective practitioner, shared that, although she once had thought about administration, she had come to realize that she could not handle the hard decisions. She did not want to alter the course of lives by removing a paycheck. It was clear that the budget cuts were a raw subject. I told Ms. Greenfield that our second interview was like a scorecard to determine how the new superintendent was doing in light of the emphasis on community we had discussed in the first interview.

My impression is he’s trying to get the big picture and trying to decide where to make cuts. It’s a nice way of saying who loses their job…I know it’s a bit of a jigsaw puzzle because of the contractual and legal issues involved. We talk about it at every meeting. The challenge [for a superintendent] becomes how to make those decisions [about job cuts] in a way that people may disagree …but don’t look at it personally. I’ve known superintendents who could care less what other people think about them, and that’s always puzzled me because it’s so contrary to my own viewpoint.

She continued to share her thoughts about Mr. Edwards’ approach to district relationships.

I can tell you my hunch. I could be totally wrong. My hunch is that he does not want to enter the affective domain of people that much because he has to do some unpleasant things to people’s careers. So my observation has been that he’s not gone out and pressed the flesh and developed relationships.

“Does he need to?”

I can only tell you from my own perspective; I think that a superintendent should do that. But as I said, my hunch is this is by design because he has to do some things that might be painful if you have to build relationships with people. I could be wrong…It just could be his demeanor. He’s a brilliant guy. I am a firm believer that you are replenished in many important ways by interpersonal relationships. We’re like all other mammals. We like to hang out in groups and have relationships and roles within that group. And with the absence of that group and relationship there’s a price to pay and we see it every day.

Mr. Edwards continued to seek avenues to streamline expenditures so that he could protect jobs; this involved meetings about local taxes, connections to the power plant, meeting stakeholders, and reports to the school board. Additionally, he was attempting to lead board meetings electronically, which demanded that he do the preparation work instead of allowing an
administrative assistant to assemble the materials. He was also networking with area superintendents to share ideas and seeking professional development opportunities. He visited buildings when possible and was available to leaders who needed advice regarding parents or teachers. He consistently reflected on the growth of the leadership team, reiterating his focus on community. He shared,

I want my leadership team to feel like a team, to be close and feel like we’re pulling in one direction. I want it to expand out to teachers and staff, people feeling like we’re all in this together and that we can all solve problems and that we can all deal with what we need to do. And everybody has a voice and participates.

Mr. Petersen, who had formerly been fairly removed from Mr. Edwards, echoed the understanding about the budget priorities. I began with the scorecard question, and heard that Mr. Edwards was letting him “go along with business as usual.” Sharing about communication, he said,

He’s open and we’ve discussed things and had emails back and forth where I’ve just said I don’t quite agree with that. He’s very fair in regards to that. I don’t think he holds a grudge. I don’t think he gets upset…All the things he says are positive for learning. But how much of it is actually something that he definitely wants to put in our district, or is it just theory that he has read? I am just kind of waiting.

Mr. Petersen went on to share that the Tyler School District had been through three leaders in eight years. I asked, “So does the staff think they will outlast the new guy?” Mr. Petersen responded, “I would guess I am going to. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to learn from him and take some things he has to offer and implement them.”

Mr. Petersen continued, “I finally really learned the huge difference between high school and elementary. And that’s one thing that I don’t think that Mr. Edwards knows, because he’s never been in the elementary.” But he thought anyone new to a position could learn about the climate and people. Mr. Petersen continued to share that he felt that communication was key. But Mr. Edwards had to be open to others’ ideas. “We all have other perspectives to offer…His goal
is to get us together and have these meetings. But then when on every agenda item, he has the final say, that’s not being collaborative…I think he intimidates people.”

Ms. Newman also understood Mr. Edwards’ need to be focused on the budget.

I believe that if he’s asked to do something, he will get it done…If you are in the way, you move over, jump on board, or be rolled over. There’s no grey area with Mr. Edwards…but sometimes when you deal with kids, it’s grey. I think he has a problem going from black and white to grey. I think that’s just how he’s wired.

I asked how the meetings were going and if they indeed were collaborative. She answered, “Unless it’s on the agenda, we are not supposed to bring it up…but he is finding that we do not participate in the agenda…He is technology driven and we aren’t. Not that we can’t be.” She went on to talk about team-building.

When I came here I was so excited to be here when I could work with a team. And there wasn’t a team. They were just people. And they are very nice people. We actually don’t work like a team at all. But we do know each other’s strengths and we openly share.

“So what would working like a team look like? How would you put that in place? Is there one developing?” Ms. Newman said,

Just meeting is not the answer. It’s actually the wrong answer. An idea would be to pick an area that needs work, say vertical alignment. Have each person say what they are going to do, how it will look in their building, and how they are going to set up their teams. Each person needs to be accountable for a part of the work which demands that they interact with other people. So, for example, I can’t do my language arts piece without having conversations with the others. But they can’t do theirs either without me.

She reflected on whether or not she could have a conversation with Mr. Edwards about this idea.

I probably could. I had a wonderful conversation with him about the evaluation instrument. That’s when I thought of him more as a person. And that person does not come across in meetings. That person was very different. When I walked away, I thought, ‘This was cool. I know what he wants from me. I know what I want from myself. We have kind of a goal.’

This was an example of Mr. Edwards’ being true to his word; he had told principals that he was only a phone call away. Ms. Newman needed to dialogue with him about the new evaluation
instrument. Teachers were skeptical of the higher expectations and were sometimes disappointed with their ratings, which put the principal in an awkward position. Mr. Edwards was willing to talk her through her insecurities and to reinforce the need to use the evaluation process to foster excellence.

Ms. Newman was adamant about the need for visibility of the superintendent.

He does not come in our building. I’ve seen him probably two or three times all year. And that’s not what he told my staff, which is disappointing. When he talked to my staff, he said he’d be out here a lot – that he likes to be a hands-on learner. I don’t think he realized everything that was going to hold him to the administrative center. I’m not saying he couldn’t get away…You have a schedule; enforce it. ..If you open the doors and you force yourself out there, that’s where you learn stuff.

Mr. Waters was a very competent, independent leader, as evidenced by his building climate and academic achievement scores. We addressed the budget, a topic that had become worn, but that seemed to preoccupy the participants as well as the superintendent. I listened to Mr. Waters’ reiteration of Mr. Edwards’ focus on the budget and his comments on his inclusive meetings. Some of his parents had not received an invitation to the community meeting, so he had to fill that gap. He shared that Mr. Edwards was traveling and somehow did not give a completed list to his secretary. As a result, Mr. Waters had fielded several phone calls from disgruntled community members. Ultimately, the list was revised, and they received an invitation. He was quick to comment on the meeting with the teachers’ association, but saying that the feedback was not positive. The teachers shared that they were invited to share ideas, but felt “shot down” each time they did. Mr. Waters thought that the teachers needed to be validated for their ideas and thanked them for taking the time to develop them.

Mr. Edwards was attempting to create a collaborative culture, so important in the foundation of community. I wondered how Mr. Waters viewed this attempt.
We’re not at a place where trust exists. It’s like, ‘You’re at the top and you tell us what to do, and we’ll do what you tell us to do.’ I think it’s not collaborative like we’d be sitting at the table… what I’ve tried to do a lot of times is pose it to the other principals. ‘What would you do? What are you going to do with this? How are you handling this?’ I don’t see Mr. Edwards leading into, ‘What are your thoughts?’

He shared the advice he would give Mr. Edwards regarding his goal of building community. “He needs to [visit] and walk around, say hello…I think that staff would feel that they mattered – that he wanted to see what goes on here. It’s almost like a nonverbal communication piece. It’s just, ‘I care enough to…’”

He reflected on whether or not he would be comfortable talking to Mr. Edwards about his visibility.

I don’t think he’s at a place to hear it right now because I think it would be more of an affront to him…and I don’t have that relationship with him. I had a previous superintendent that would stop once a week and say, ‘Let’s walk.’ We’d walk the building and talk about things. He’d talk to kids, to teachers…greet people along the way. But while we were walking down the hall, he would be saying to me, ‘Remember we have a life safety visit; you need to make sure this is done….how are you doing with this?’ We’d walk the whole building and then he’d say, ‘You need anything, give me a call.’ I could have said anything to him. But I don’t have that yet; I’m not comfortable with how that would be received.

We continued our conversation about aligning the school improvement plan with district initiatives, and landed on mission and vision.

Sometimes I don’t feel that there’s clear communication about a mission and vision…we don’t need to abandon everything we’ve done…I need to know where we’re going and then I’ll be more than happy to help design how we can get there…let [people] see that they have value.

The financial concerns presented a complex picture as I tried to determine the success of community building in the Tyler School District. On one hand, Mr. Edwards’ mission to balance the budget mitigated the feelings of his leadership team as they grappled with their perception of his lack of interest in building level activities. They understood the sense of urgency he had in
light of the school board’s direction and, to a person, believed that it was a very time and energy consuming process.

Mr. Rizzo did not seem to need communication in terms of feedback from Mr. Edwards, and almost preferred to be left to find his way as a new principal. I began this interview reminding Mr. Rizzo of the guiding question of how a superintendent creates community after his/her arrival in a district. I referred to his previous interview where we discussed community within the building, within the district, as well as the wider community, involving the parents and community members. I wondered about Mr. Edwards’ success thus far. Mr. Rizzo reiterated the thoughts of most of the other participants as he talked about the consistency of the weekly principal meetings and monthly Cabinet meetings; he felt that this was a structural element that fostered communication and connection among buildings. He talked about the Christmas meeting where Mr. Edwards “seemed a little more human.”

Ms. Newman reiterated this feeling when she referred to this Christmas meeting where they had a white elephant exchange.

We did our white elephant thing for a good laugh and he (Mr. Edwards) got an ab exerciser. First he had something else that was stolen from him. He got a kick out of the gift exchange…I am going to keep working on him. I think he would like to loosen up.

It seemed that the leadership team was seeking more depth in their relationships with Mr. Edwards, perhaps realizing that he was multi-faceted. It was evident that the financial situation was taking its toll and that they needed a little levity.

Having heard Mr. Rizzo refer to team-building activities, he seemed to understand Mr. Edwards’ focus on shared leadership. I asked him how this was being implemented at the district level, if there were things that were collaborative or if they all had a voice. He answered that the buildings were really only sharing a focus on differentiated instruction, but that he realized Mr.
Edwards was making change. He apparently supported the goal of building community, and he shared, “I will truly try to sell whatever I need to sell” (to support Mr. Edwards’ goal of district community).

Mr. Rizzo talked about the capacity of Mr. Edwards to value different perspectives. “I don’t know; I don’t know if we’ve gotten to that point yet….I know we all thought he would try to run the high school because of his background, but that hasn’t happened.”

Mr. Rizzo returned to the budget as the major focus for the year, understanding the challenge of the new superintendent. He shared that 86% of the teachers voted to freeze their salaries after having two years of 9% raises. Mr. Edwards asked the principals not to have conversations with teachers about salaries, but rather to send any inquiries to him; he also asked them to determine what could be trimmed in their buildings, and how they might increase class size. “This (budget cuts) is going to have to be very delicately handled and continue to be at least for the next year or two.” He shared some advice he would give Mr. Edwards for the future.

Sometimes the first year it’s better to sit back and just kind of absorb everything you can and learn. I don’t feel like he has done that all the time, although he was put into a crunch time, so it was like, ‘Yeah, this is what I was supposed to do, but yet…there are a few minor things that could have been eased into, like the jeans on Friday.’

Mr. Ryan was an educator who felt a great sense of dedication to Tyler School District and who truly wanted Mr. Edwards to succeed. Not surprisingly, we began with the budget. He commented on Mr. Edwards’ flexibility in changing his initial plan when the numbers proved to demand fewer cuts. “I like the fact that he re-thought and adjusted and made some changes and didn’t just stick with his initial plans.”

I proceeded to ask how Mr. Edwards was doing with his goal of creating community.

Well, if I’m detecting any weakness emerging, it may be in communication. It isn’t because he doesn’t want to communicate. It’s because I’m not sure he’s found the avenue to do it yet. He assumes that people know things that they don’t. It’s because he has spent
so much time either thinking or talking with one group about an issue that he just assumes word has spread to everyone and it hasn’t. So I’ve been kind of working with him a little bit to point that out to him that you need to make sure that everybody hears the same message and that you get that out to all.

Mr. Ryan expanded on this thought with an explanation of the community meetings Mr. Edwards was having to ensure that the wider community understood the process of cutting back on expenditures and had an opportunity to voice their opinion. Mr. Edwards was establishing community meetings at the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the library, and the town hall. But, Mr. Ryan pointed out, he needed to make the same effort with the staff. Determining how that might look, he stated,

Well, one thing that the former superintendent was criticized for was not visiting the schools enough. I’ve tried to point that out to [Mr. Edwards]. But I’m in a tough position, because I don’t want to tell him how to do his job…I just want him to be successful…He goes to the buildings when a mini-crisis is brewing, but he needs to go when there is nothing on the table, when he can just walk around and say hello.

He went on to share that the Wiki space had given the leadership team a place to give input on the meeting agenda, and that Mr. Edwards needed to find mechanisms to connect with the rest of the staff.

Mr. Ryan reflected on several examples of Mr. Edwards’ work. In one case, a veteran PE teacher, who was retiring at the end of the year, invited him to observe an elaborate obstacle course she created at the primary school each year; Mr. Edwards shared that he didn’t have time, because he was preparing for that evening’s board meeting. Mr. Ryan said,

He (Mr. Edwards) was a little rattled that day because he was changing the format of the meeting to be electronic and has no help with that right now. But the PE teacher will never know that was the reason and neither will the principal. And I don’t feel it’s my place to mitigate.

In another case, a custodian’s wife of 43 years died, and the funeral home was close to the administration building. Mr. Edwards decided not to attend because the custodian didn’t
know him. Mr. Ryan thought this was a mistake, and that “those are things that all
superintendents need to do.”

He shared a story about a couple of teachers who were writing a grant and had asked Mr.
Edwards to visit and see their work; but he had not connected with them after the invitation. “I
know he would be supportive of it, but he needs to let them know that. Just go down and see
what it is that they are doing. Those are just the little things.” Mr. Ryan wanted Mr. Edwards to
succeed; he thought about the idea that there may have been a conflict between what Mr.
Edwards wanted to do and thought he was doing, and what was actually occurring. “We are a
people business, and people are trying to figure him out. He has to go to the buildings and be
visible there. And it needs to be a meaningful visibility, not just because he has to.”

When asked about the future of leadership in the district, Mr. Ryan shared that
accountability came to mind. The district went from one of the poorest in the state, gained a
power plant, and catapulted to one of the wealthiest, and landed somewhere in between, despite
budget imbalances. Teachers had high expectations and were paid for anything extra. Mr. Ryan
stated that we are all in this system to educate kids and that that must come first. The
superintendent must convey this. Mr. Ryan had faith that if anyone could accomplish this goal,
Mr. Edwards had the personality and the fortitude to do so.

Before my last interview with Mr. Edwards, I reread the transcription of one of our
previous conversations, where he talked about team-building with his principals and then
growing that model to the Cabinet and then continuing to broaden the learning community. He
shared the importance of building ties with the teachers’ association as he approached budget
cuts, being active with the Chamber of Commerce, and offering to speak to community groups.
He stated, “You have to see where you’re going and you have to gather people around to do it…” He validated giving voice to all, including his critics.

I deliberately go after the harshest critics and those who are the most vocal in a negative way about the schools and say, ‘Come in and sit down with me so that we can talk and I can listen and hear what your concerns are…be part of the process and talk to us about what you’d like to see.’

Our final interview concentrated on the progress Mr. Edwards felt he had made, laced with reflection on his role as seen through my findings. He shared his awareness of the great strengths of his administrative staff, his feeling that he was forging new ground with district technology, to which he was greatly committed, and the challenge of changing district culture with respect to student learning.

He admitted to being happy at this new district, amidst the angst of changing financial conditions and the task of building district community. He was encouraged by the teachers’ ability to embrace new instructional paths with the Mastery Project. He reiterated that his first charge was to balance the budget and felt that he had done so very systematically.

Having had a sense that understanding the leader’s personality was a factor, I asked Mr. Edwards for input on this. He did not reflect on his personality, but felt that personality was something inherent to the ways leaders lead. More importantly, he stressed the need to build relationships with others. I asked about change. He responded,

Honest to goodness change does not occur without dialogue. If people are not meeting together and sharing minds and understandings, you really are not changing things, you are just manipulating things…People don’t change because you tell them to. They will obey and wait for you to leave. They change because they have been part of a process and developing and understanding is something that leads them to a different place.

I shared that Foster (2004) states that the leader must motivate stakeholders to question previous narratives in order to grow and develop and begin to consider alternative approaches, and that the leader must communicate a new sense of the future. Mr. Edwards thought that
leaders needed to invite critical analysis and reward it and encourage and engage in it, helping to coach people in terms of setting examples and asking questions critically.

If you can start conversations with questions and a shared development of understanding of the issues involved, then eventually you can get to critical questions. But I think it has to be an invitation; it has to be permission; you can’t be upset by being questioned.

The way in which Mr. Edwards sought stakeholder involvement in the budgeting process invited not only questions, but also criticism. In fact, one of the ways Mr. Edwards had interacted with the wider community was with the TOPIX online comments. At the beginning of the budgeting process, he entered the conversation by introducing himself and inviting them to come and dialogue with him in person. He also explained some things that emerged from misconceptions and tried to dispel rumors about extreme budget cuts. He felt that since he had been upfront with subscribers, the tone of the conversation had changed. He shared what he wanted his legacy to Tyler to be:

I’d like us to forget about the financial troubles. To get to where we are just operating on solid ground financially, because that is a shadow on everything else. I don’t have a destination, because I think you are never there. But I would like to see learning become student-centered entirely. I’d like to see us giving much more agency to students in their learning, so that they have that responsibility thoroughly at the end when they graduate from here. I’d like to see us giving feedback based on what kids know and are able to do, not grades based on whatever percentage is in the book. I’d like to see this community justifiably feel like its schools are truly excellent and be able to point to kids coming out of there succeeding in college or the trades or whatever it is they are doing, because they got a good foundation here. That would be my goal.

**Act V: Conclusion**

My visits to the Tyler School District covered a span of eight months. During that time, I had a “balcony view” of the work this superintendent was doing to build community in an environment where there had been no strong leadership, where the previous superintendent had chosen to be isolated, and where money had never been an issue. He was a leader who said he was very intentional in weaving his belief about community into every aspect of his leadership,
from connecting with the teachers’ association prior to the school year, to building a stronger leadership team, to participating in special education meetings, to modeling instructional leadership, to joining in at the community level. His emphasis on visibility was contrary to the habits of his predecessor. Mr. Edwards shared, “You have to see where you’re going, and you have to gather people around to do it.” He began with the challenging task of negotiating a contract in a year of deficit spending, and approached this task by involving union leaders in dialogue. He moved to creating collaborative structures for meetings with building principals and central office leaders, all of whom were more directly impacting the work with students. Mr. Edwards modeled instructional leadership, signaling to the principals what to do to encourage teachers to risk changing their practice. He shared the challenge of becoming involved in community groups and his goal representing the district in those groups. He conveyed the importance of “staying the course” in the face of resistance to change.

In the next chapter I draw together the findings from my research, questions to consider some of the major lessons that may be learned from this study. I begin with a brief review of each chapter and continue to examine the findings through the lenses of the superintendent and then of the administrators, and finally, through my own lens as an observer.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood, et.al., 2004). However, leading schools and districts has become more complex than ever, due, in part, to increased diversity of students and families, unfunded mandates, increased pressure to perform in an unstable political environment, and negative press associated with public schools. The role of the superintendent demands a knowledge and skill base that relates to communication, collaboration, data-based decision making, and politics (Fullan, 2001). In this demanding role, the superintendent must be able to build capacity with building and district leaders in order to maximize skills and to achieve optimal results with students. To do this effectively, the superintendent must create a plan for building district community. The findings in this study, consistent with the literature, indicate that this plan should include deliberate communication via personal connection, as well as technological approaches; it is clear that superintendents must build relationships by spending time in buildings as well as at athletic, scholastic, and community events. They must possess managerial skills in order to run buildings efficiently and effectively, both from the financial perspective and the operational perspective (Lambert, 2000; Little, 1982; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989).

A superintendent who is new to a district has an added challenge. Typically, the school board who selects this candidate is seeking a particular skill set and has district goals in mind. These often involve change; thus, the new superintendent must be able to address the complexities of the change process. He/she must be adept at coalition building and public
relations in order to move the district forward. Again, building community is an essential element in this endeavor (Fullan, 2001; Leo & Cowen, 2001; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Skytt, 2003).

Against this backdrop, I chose the focus of my study. The study was an attempt to understand the complexity of the task of the superintendent, who was new to a district, as he attempted to develop a strong sense of district community. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. How does the superintendent work with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community?
2. How does the district leadership team respond to the superintendent’s efforts?

In Chapter One, I introduced the study with an explanation of the problem and the purpose. I reiterated that the gap in the literature occurred at the superintendent level; moreover, that the literature combining leadership and community is primarily centered on the principal and school levels. I included a brief overview of the literature and explained that my methodology would be a case study. Finally, I determined that the significance of the study would be to add to the existing literature, to inform practice, and to offer suggestions for preparation programs.

In Chapter Two, I delved into the literature on community, exploring the role of the superintendent in the existing hierarchy of public schools, and settled on the dominant theoretical approaches of professional learning communities, school-community relations, and communities of difference. Although research is replete with information on school communities, in retrospect, I am comfortable with these choices. Professional learning communities have been at the heart of collaborative efforts in schools since Hord’s work in the 1960’s, and became popularized with the models of DuFour & Eaker (1998). Although the term has morphed to represent a variety of approaches, the model, in its purest form, retains the tenets of shared vision
and leadership, collaborative culture, focus on student outcomes, and shared professional practice.

The inclusion of the school-community relations is a critical one; for interview purposes, I termed it the wider community, indicating an inclusive approach to community stakeholders. Without parent and other community groups, educators miss out on a rich source of knowledge and support (Epstein, 1995; Sanders, 2001).

Finally, the diversity in our schools today necessitates an awareness of communities of difference, (Furman, 1998; Shields, 1999; Shields, 2004; Shields & Seltzer, 1998) of ways in which we can listen to the voices at the table and value diverse experiences, even if those experiences have emerged from a socioeconomic difference, rather than one of race or ethnicity. These three types of communities set the stage for my conceptual framework, which I depicted as three intersecting circles with dialogue at the center. This framework changed, as I reflected on the roles of the superintendent in each of these community approaches. I will share the changes later in this chapter.

In Chapter Three I discussed my research methodology, focusing on case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) as suited to the analysis of the complex, contextual nature of community building. I stated that, after I had decided to use a reputational approach to determine a subject, I was told of a superintendent whose initial goal upon arrival in his new district was to build community. He became the focus of my study. I revealed that my data collection would be done through observation, document review, and semi-structured interviews. Although the document review presented the least amount of information, the use of technology, including email, Wiki space, and the TOPIX blog, helped me to understand how Mr. Edwards was trying to use technology to build community. I relied on field notes after each interview and observation, and
reflected throughout the study. It is important to note, that, although I did use NVivo to categorize themes, the use of this technology presented only a veneer of objectivity. The quality of the research still depended on the quality of the researcher’s efforts in checking the accuracy of transcript, determining definitions of categories for coding, and systematically applying those definitions to the data.

I approached Chapter Four in a sequential, narrative format, in order for the reader to develop an understanding of the overall experience of the superintendent in question. In part, this understanding was constructed from my insights and observations developed through the conversations that occurred during this study, as well as my observations of meetings and interactions among the participants. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “The purpose of retelling, like retellings in any aspect of the narratives of our lives, is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things” (p. 189) i.e., to inform practice.

In this chapter, I now draw together the findings from my research questions to consider some of the major lessons that may be drawn from this study. In addressing the question of how the superintendent works with the district leadership team to implement the changes necessary to build community, the data indicated that the communication he established with this team, along with the relationships he developed with them, provided a foundation for building community. Shields (2004) maintains, “We are born out of and live in relationships. Because we live in interdependence with others, we need to communicate; and, living in community, we are fundamentally predisposed to better our human conditions…” Mr. Edwards was invested in providing an excellent and equitable education for the students in the Tyler School District – to better their condition – to optimize life choices for them. Building relationships with his staff was a critical component of this work. He developed these relationships with his collaborative
approach to the budget process, with his consistent principal and Cabinet meetings, with his technology-based communication loop, and with his availability for crisis situations. He shared some of his life with them (family stories, reading materials, etc.), and engaged socially at the Christmas party and football games. With respect to the first research question, four themes emerged from the data: communication, visibility, collaboration and shared leadership, and change.

**Emergent Themes With Respect To Research Question 1**

**Communication.** The superintendent bears an enormous responsibility in this area, since a major job responsibility is to communicate timely and accurate information to the school board, to the faculty and staff, to parents, and to community members. This person must create systemic vehicles in order for communication to maintain consistency, to build credibility, and to increase stakeholder knowledge. Kowalski (2006) maintains that a superintendent’s communication produces “mutual understandings, mutual influence, negotiation, openness, credibility and trust” (p. 249). Communication is an important factor in building community, as the superintendent can validate and address concerns, model transparency about district practices, and collaboratively problem-solve. Konnert and Augenstein (1990) contend that communication comprises nearly ninety percent of a superintendent’s work.

The data that informed the theme of communication supported the study’s focus on the complexity of the superintendent’s position. He communicated to the participants in a variety of ways: the Wiki space, the information about the contract, the budget process, the use of email, and his sharing of the fact that he was available through a phone call. However, the participants felt that he was lacking in this area, evidencing the potential ambiguity of communication.
Communicating is difficult; sometimes a leader thinks he is communicating something, and the perception is quite another.

To communicate with the leadership team, the superintendent structured weekly principals’ meetings and monthly Cabinet meetings; for these meetings, the agenda was posted on a Wiki space where participants were encouraged to contribute to the agenda items. Mr. Edwards felt that it was an avenue for shared decision making as well as an opportunity for them to have a voice during the meeting, as nothing short of emergency status would be discussed unless it appeared on the agenda. He maximized technology, an area of expertise and interest, and communicated via email on a regular basis.

This superintendent was faced with a budget cut, the first in decades for the Tyler School District. As a result, his community-building efforts during the first eight months of his tenure were constructed around the need to listen to all stakeholders and to share the process of expenditure reductions. His initial experience included deliberate interaction with the teachers’ association to settle the contract, where a pay freeze enabled him to study the budget and to determine cost containment measures. In addition, he established meetings with the leadership team, again with representatives of the teachers’ association, and with members of the community where he listened to, and recorded ideas, answered questions, and explained the process that would take them to a balanced budget.

Mr. Edwards established communication with the community via the TOPIX online conversation. Although many of the comments, emerging from anonymity, were critical, Mr. Edwards introduced himself, validated the participants’ concerns, and invited the public in to dialogue with him about the direction of the district. He shared, “…we’re going to seek out those
who’ve been pushed away and those who are the most negative and say, ‘Come in and be part of this process and talk to us about what you’d like to see.’”

Thus, the superintendent in this study felt he had provided internal structures for communication and had encouraged the leadership team to use them. He had engaged in external communication and had availed himself to various civic groups, hoping for invitations to join. Additionally, he had invited all stakeholders into the process of budget cuts.

**Visibility.** A predominant theme across interviews and observations was the visibility of the superintendent. This theme was one that was implied in the literature emphasizing collaboration and shared vision (DuFour, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006) since these goals cannot be met without the presence of all participants. However, there is an omission in the literature about the superintendent and his/her need to be visible. Within the district, visibility translated into visiting each school building and attending events there, some of which he was invited to attend. The superintendent must develop positive working relationships with all constituents. In doing, so, his is a highly visible position in the community also, with an expectation of promoting the district image and developing advocacy for what is effective and working well in the district.

Mr. Edwards shared that he felt it was very important to be visible. He enjoyed his morning walks and his interaction with the bus drivers. He had been attempting to be a part of local business groups and had availed himself of opportunities to talk with the public. He shared, that he was endeavoring to

be in touch, be present getting out to the buildings, down the halls, and talking to teachers when they’re out there. My bus drivers are telling me that I need to come ride the bus with them around the district, so I’m going to have to do that one of these days. They all see me.
He felt that he was making headway in the community with his readiness to join civic groups and his inclusive approach to the budget cuts. Mr. Edwards moved to the Tyler community in order to immerse himself in the community culture and to be readily accessible to all stakeholders. Finally, he felt that he was visiting schools as much as time would allow. There was a possible disconnect between his assessment of this endeavor and that of the leadership team.

Mr. Edwards was trying to maximize visibility, while learning the expectations of his job in a new setting, studying years of overspending the budget, developing a plan that would balance finances without harming instruction, learning the district culture, and developing an understanding of staff’s strengths. He had begun to participate in community events, e.g., the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions’ Club, and had offered to speak at public events. Internally, he was most visible in the high school, which was physically connected to his office building; consequently, that principal was more comfortable with him. As the financial bleeding was stemmed, and the cuts were completed, he would need to examine ways in which he might be more visible in all of the schools. This would afford him opportunities to connect more consistently with leaders in those buildings and to “[listen] with the ears and with the heart” (Shields & Edwards, 2005).

Collaboration and shared leadership. When Mr. Edwards talked about building community, his conversation was around validating the stakeholders and collaborating toward a common goal. This approach is important in professional learning communities, where building leaders have to foster collaborative time and practices; in communities of difference, where stakeholders must feel validated and heard; and with the wider community whose input is critical for schools to be vital with the public. Kowalski (2008) posited that when a collaborative
learning environment was developed and focused on the future, it produced a community of support and forward-thinking partners.

Although Mr. Edwards was collaborating with separate stakeholder groups, his community of difference lay in collaboration among and between those groups. He did not bring them together around any common topic to enable them to have a voice in the larger community. Thus, one group had no knowledge of his work with another group. In building district community that involved connecting diverse groups with which he was working, he would need to collaborate across communities, bringing multiple perspectives to an issue. Thus, building community is tied to the perception of the leader who is addressing this endeavor.

Mr. Edwards felt that his technology expectations would offer an opportunity for collaboration and shared leadership. From his perspective, leaders had to think about priorities, and be prepared to share them in an open meeting with their peers. He was giving them a chance to give input, but was demanding that they be thoughtful in their preparation. He was assuming that the expectation, along with their need to have a voice and to hear feedback on their issues would lead them to participate.

In another instance, Mr. Edwards met with principals to collaborate on positions that would be cut in their buildings. He listened to their reasoning, studied their schedules and class sizes, and validated their contributions. All were grateful to have these one-on-one conversations, as the reality of losing staff became more painful.

Mr. Edwards worked first with the principals and then the teachers involved in the Mastery Project, his foray into instructional leadership in this district. Another way of being collaborative was by working directly with the teachers. He asked principals to recommend teachers who were interested in approaching a unit of study differently, and then he met with the
teachers in each building to hear their plan and to outline the project, which included learning targets, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and a detour from summative grades. He planned to visit the classes during implementation and then meet with the teachers to debrief. His hope was that the idea would spread and that principals would lead others to evaluate their instructional practices. This was clearly a collaborative approach.

Finally, Mr. Edwards collaborated with all stakeholders as he addressed the grueling task of balancing budgetary revenues and expenditures. With the process he constructed, he heard from representatives in all areas, and shared a brief lesson on district budgeting practices. He also used the interaction to explain that the majority of the district budget was allocated to salaries, and, as a result, a decrease in positions would be the greatest money-saving action. Those who did not want to hear that message did not validate his approach.

Change. Change emerged as an unexpected theme, because it was not the focus of this study. However, it seemed to underlie much of what the leadership team was experiencing, as change was rampant in this district. Fullan (2004) suggests that leaders are change agents; that they must develop the capacity to bring about change as they plan toward improvement. Senge (1990) maintains that a learning organization is “continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p. 13). The future of the Tyler School District, with a new superintendent included a huge change in budgeting amounts and procedures. The leadership team had developed a culture on its own and was being asked to do things differently. The high school principal was new, succeeding a short-term failure and, before him, an icon. The evaluation instrument was changing. The teachers’ work, as well as the teaching assistants’ work, was changing. And all were suffering from a sense of uncertainty, working at different paces, toward different goals.
Although Mr. Edwards was sensitive to the ripple effects of change in schools, he felt strongly enough to develop systems that would right the ship. His systemic approach to the finances, both the financial projections and the human interaction, were consistent and became predictable over eight months. He upset the curricular approach during a Cabinet meeting, but, after giving them food for thought, developed the Mastery Project, for which he assumed the leadership role. It was clear that he did this not only to learn more about the most dynamic teachers, but also to model the change process for building leaders. He validated the work of all levels of the organization and worked closely with the Assistant Superintendent of Operations to ensure organizational efficiency. All of these actions worked in part to instill confidence and to calm fears, even though he did not share this verbally with his leadership team.

My analysis revealed answers to the second sub-question, “How does the district leadership team respond to the superintendent’s efforts?” I answer this question with a continuing discussion of the overall findings and emergent themes. The leadership team was one that had not been accustomed to any strong (of course there had been some) district leadership; as a result, they were not sure what to expect. They were resistant to change, but they needed to be heard and validated. For example, all of the principals said they wanted the superintendent to be visible in their buildings. Although they understood his need to spend the time necessary to examine the district finances, they maintained a need for their work to be recognized by a superintendent who observed them in action in their buildings.

The participants were still hesitant in their relationships with Mr. Edwards; they needed more time to understand his approach and expectations, and were still figuring out their roles in relationship with him. They understood that the bar was being raised and that high performance was necessary. He had articulated his philosophy about the purpose of school being to teach
students how to think critically, which implied minimizing dependence on state standards. This idea was in conflict with the existing district focus. School leaders would need to dialogue with him in order to negotiate this change in vision.

Emergent Themes With Respect To Research Question 2

Communication. Mr. Edwards was working with a team that was trying to mitigate the impact of budget cuts on their staffs, and so would protect him as long as they felt informed. They had increased their knowledge of district budget and were given input on positions in their buildings that could be eliminated without harming instruction. In this area, they were supportive of the process, even though they felt it was time-consuming and that it put other kinds of interactions on hold.

However, this was also a team that was not technologically savvy. They were not participating in the meeting agendas and seemed a bit resentful about the technological expectation. They wanted meetings to be a little more informal and felt that Mr. Edwards was inflexible. Mr. Waters shared, “Sometimes it becomes impersonal…I would like to talk over the phone, or better yet, have him visit my office and sit down and talk with me.” And from Mr. Rizzo, “That’s been my only struggle. I’m using it (technology); I’m doing my work – I’m doing it just so that he knows I’m using it …rather than utilizing it as a tool.” Ms. Newman shared, “He is technologically driven and we aren’t. I’m not saying we can’t be; I’m just saying that if there is something we really want addressed, we would like to call him…” However, the principals did enjoy the predictable weekly meetings. “I think they have allowed us to bounce things off each other.” “The meetings have allowed us to look at things like RtI as a district, and vertical articulation of curriculum.”
Several comments from the principals indicated that they needed an opportunity to have an open conversation with Mr. Edwards, not just as an avoidance of technology, but to be able to ask questions that would clarify his perceptions. They did not feel comfortable doing this at the weekly meetings, especially if a topic did not appear on the agenda. Mr. Waters shared that he and Mr. Edwards had had a conversation about standards-based report cards and had agreed on it being best practice. But he shared, “…I just don’t know what the next step is. I like to know… need to know…show me where we’re going and then I’ll be more than happy to help us design how we can get there.”

Except for Mr. Petersen, the central office staff members had ready access to Mr. Edwards and so did not feel challenged with interaction. Proximity was at work here. One of them was the Technology Director, and so he was clearly thrilled that Mr. Edwards was “pulling them kicking and screaming into the current century.” However, he understood their hesitancy, and was trying to make himself available for instruction and support. Mr. Ryan shared, “He’s done great things with Wiki spaces as tools for communication.” In support of his communication to others, the general feeling among the central office administrators was that Mr. Edwards was very systematic in his approach and that he would develop additional avenues for communication as the year progressed.

Communication takes so many forms, and some are more comfortable than others. It was clear that communication involved so much more than talking at a group, even though that is often what human beings do. It is important for a superintendent to know what he/she is communicating through words and actions. Brunner (2002) maintains that if superintendents modeled listening as the center of practice, as opposed to talking, there would be potential to transform the traditional superintendent discourse. Mr. Edwards had listened to stakeholders
about the history of the district and about their concerns regarding finances. The data suggested that some voices from the leadership team were not being validated. Perhaps returning to listening at the center of practice would address this need.

As I watched Mr. Edwards at numerous meetings, he was demonstrating strong leadership, but it was not always being received as such. As the new superintendent, Mr. Edwards was setting the ground rules without taking the temperature first. He was telling and not doing much listening. It was clear that he wanted to challenge their thinking, and that can be very good. What I was observing was culture shock, and it required the remedies of time and attention. Were stakeholders getting an accurate picture of Mr. Edwards when the dominant part of his communication was about the budget? What was the good news in the district? Finishing the budget projections would allow time to address these questions.

**Summary of findings on communication.** Communication was an element in all three communities comprising the framework of this study. Real communication demands being both a transmitter and receiver of information. Kowalski (2006) suggests that competent superintendents must be driven to communicate in ways that build interpersonal relationships. District leaders must have a clear vision, but this vision must be shared by stakeholders. In this study, one of the superintendent’s priorities was communication via technology; he felt that it was important to model the processes that were expected of teachers and students. He felt very justified in “dragging them kicking and screaming” toward what he considered ease with technology. However, K-12 educators are notorious for their limited skills in technology; they continue to struggle with valid usage in instruction, partly due to lack of preparation in this ever-changing area. He acknowledged the resistance from the Cabinet, but vowed to stay the course.
Instead of being recognized as a raising of the standard, the administrators saw it as an obstacle to real, personal communication. In the midst of negotiating a relationship with their new leader, they needed to see a more personal side to him; they wanted him to validate their leadership and accomplishments. They wanted face-to-face conversations with him. These leaders did not feel that Mr. Edwards was sincerely interested in what was happening in their schools. Perhaps he had not clearly communicated this interest to them.

Including the stakeholders in the budget conversation was a definite step in the right direction towards building community. His responses on the TOPIX blog invited them to meet and problem solve with him. He was attempting to join community groups and would undoubtedly achieve that goal. Two of the principals felt he should attend county board meetings; that was a place where the superintendent could gain an understanding of local governance and participate on an as-needed basis.

Visibility. This theme was addressed from all of the interviewed stakeholders. To a person, they felt that it was extremely important for the school and wider community to see the superintendent. They felt he should be present at public governance meetings, in clubs, and at speaking engagements. Mr. Ryan shared, “One of the things the former superintendent was criticized for was not visiting the schools enough.”

The administrators felt that Mr. Edwards needed to get in touch with happenings in the buildings. One shared,

He just needs to come over and spend a few days and just see how the kids are. When you haven’t been around that – think how long it’s been since his kids were that age. The kids have changed, and the family structures have changed. And what we deal with on a daily basis is sometimes frustrating and depressing.
Another stated, “I remember in the interview that was a big selling point...that there was going to be a great deal of visibility. And there’s actually less than there was with our last one.” However, most did qualify their disappointment with a comment about the budget.

I guess the fair part of me would want to say that it’s because of everything he’s dealing with within the budget and the financial crisis we are in. I would guess that’s what’s keeping him from making his rounds.

The perception of Mr. Edwards was colored by the ghost of the previous superintendent, who was never visible in the district or in the community; this perception would take time to change. It was clear that Mr. Edwards thought he had been far more visible than the team did. I found that he was more visible in the buildings that were attached to his office building – the junior high and high school. In fact, his comfort zone was the high school, so his presence was felt more there. This would have been natural, since he could offer input and interaction from his experience; with time as a factor, he was able to visit them more easily. In order to visit the other buildings, he would have to get into his car and drive to their locations. This was something that would have to be a calendar priority.

Visibility in the wider community is an expectation of any superintendent. His/her role is to forge tighter links between schools and communities in order to support academic achievement. Toward this end, the superintendent needs time to learn about appropriate opportunities for this involvement. Mr. Edwards was taking the right steps; he was interested in the wider community, and they were interested in him. No doubt, his participation would increase.

**Summary of findings on visibility.** All but one respondent felt that the superintendent was rarely visible in the schools. They excused him, more in the first round of interviews than in the second, acknowledging that he was busy with finances. In several instances, quoted earlier in
this paper, Mr. Edwards was explicitly asked to visit a class or a function and did not find the
time to do so. This lack of follow up can be hurtful to stakeholders and detrimental to their
perception of the superintendent. Mr. Edwards felt that other stakeholders saw him in the
community and celebrated his being there. These persons were not part of this study.

A general hallmark of competency is leading by example. Mr. Edwards was committed to
diversifying instructional practices in his district. However, to do so, not only must the building
leaders be on board, but they must spend time in classrooms – they must be visible. Mr. Edwards
needed to model his expectations. If he wanted to develop relationships, he needed to be visible.
If a superintendent wants to develop trust, he must be visible.

**Collaboration and shared leadership.** There are many factors that color the lens of an
employee; these may include how successful the day has been prior to the interview; it may rest
on recent interaction with the person in question (the superintendent); or it may emerge from the
academic standing and resultant demands in a particular building. In the case of district level
administrators, their lenses reflected the ways in which their jobs had changed since the arrival of
the new leader, or how frustrated they were with their work.

Each of these leaders saw collaboration and shared vision a bit differently. Mr. Petersen
did not believe that anything was tying the buildings together except for the differentiated
instruction initiative. One of the principals did not see Mr. Edwards as being collaborative.

He shared,

*A lot of times what I see is that he just comes over the top instead of asking if we have
thought a different way or suggesting something that would work. I don’t see a lot of
leads into, ‘Well, what are your thoughts?’*

Perhaps this was a matter of style; this principal may have needed a more explicit invitation to
share his thoughts.
Two participants referenced the need for Mr. Edwards to have a feedback mechanism in order to learn more about the buildings as well as to understand what was being implemented that was consistent with the district vision.

Three principals indicated a need for Mr. Edwards to work on dialogue with them. One shared that he had a hard time valuing others’ opinions when they differed from his.

I don’t think he’s wired that way. (overtly valuing other’s opinions.) I think he would need someone to force him to do that, because I don’t think he realizes how he phrases his words or the tone he uses in his words…he needs to plant the seed and see what we will do with it…he doesn’t have to drive everything.

Perhaps Mr. Edwards needed to be more explicit in sharing his goals with the leadership team. For example, what was the purpose of the Mastery Project? He also needed to validate the fact that moving the district forward would include some growing pains and that he would work with them to minimize these when possible. Leadership is a people business, and it is incumbent upon leaders to be sensitive to the needs of stakeholders.

**Summary of findings on collaboration and shared leadership.** Learning communities are based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Collaboration provides a mechanism for working together toward a common purpose (Reichsttetter, 2006; Stoll, et.al, 2006). Structural changes are often important to facilitate change; in this study, the superintendent instituted weekly principal meetings and monthly Cabinet meetings. However, setting meeting times does not ensure collaboration, particularly when the superintendent is leading those meetings. It is conveyed as a top-down approach. From Mr. Edwards’ perspective, if they wanted a voice in the meetings, they should have added an agenda item on the Wiki space. The leadership team clearly was not making that choice. At that point, I thought it was important for Mr. Edwards to assess his approach to determine if it was
creating or hindering collaboration, and if the goals of demanding technology and creating community were in conflict.

Additionally, the meeting could have been formatted in ways that fostered participants’ sharing. This would allow them to highlight their strengths and celebrate their staffs, as well as to seek alternate perspectives. As things stood, there was no discussion on anything except for the agenda items that were presented by the superintendent.

If a superintendent wants to create community, which by definition emerges from collaboration and shared visioning and conversation, then he/she must create the conditions for this to happen and perhaps explore reasons it is not occurring. Collaboration is not always a natural occurrence; it is one in which leaders, with occasional competing egos, must persist.

**Change.** A few members of the Cabinet were insulated from much change. For example, the Special Education Director conducted her role in much the same fashion she always had; one exception was Mr. Edwards’ involvement. The root of this attention was the money that was being spent on special education programs and/or tuition to other districts. In his expenditure cutting mode, he wanted to be kept informed about IEP’s that included program changes. The director actually welcomed his input.

Mr. Rizzo was the leader who was confused about the necessity of the blue jeans rule; they had formerly been allowed to wear jeans on Fridays.

Sometimes the first year it’s better to sit back and just kind of absorb everything you can and learn. I don’t feel like he has done that all the time, although he was put into a crunch time, …but there are a few minor things that could have been eased into – simple things like the no jeans on Friday.

Ms. Greenfield concurred, “People struggle with change.”

Mr. Petersen shared, “We have been through three leaders in eight years…[many of us] outlast them.”
Another principal questioned his need to be part of controlling so many things. “When you first come in, you dabble in everything. His focus was the budget. And, you know what, if he just worked on that, we’d all be good with it.” (instead of the curriculum, instruction, technology, etc.).

The stakeholders were resistant to change as evidenced in their body language and side-bar comments during meetings. However, Mr. Edwards’ systematic approach would breed consistency which may lead to acceptance, if not agreement. There were too many changes at this time. Perhaps Mr. Edwards should have a conversation about change. What is working? What is not? How can he support them as they lead others? If the superintendent is to have an impact on the district, the leaders who work more directly with staff on a regular basis are the vehicles for change. The relationship building with them must be done via listening and validating, as well as by clarifying targets.

**Summary of findings on change.** There is no shortage of information (Chhuon, et. al., 2008; Darling-Hammond, 1993; DuFour, 1998; Fullan, 1998; Skytt, 2003) or experience about change being a process and about the critical nature of valuing existing culture before introducing possibilities of doing things differently. I think this must be done explicitly and not subtly. The leader must celebrate what has been going well, and seek input about changes that may improve conditions for learning. Mr. Edwards was proud of his new district and shared their high test scores and student success rates. However, the leadership team did not realize his feelings. Instead, they sometimes felt devalued, largely because of a lack of developing relationship with him, and wondered if he understood the work they had done.

Change demands determining what can be maintained and then prioritizing steps toward an expressed goal. Those steps should be crafted by the leadership team, not by the
superintendent as a solo. Sustainable change involves buy-in and ownership, which demand communication and relationship-building. Each of the communities embodied different perspectives and different goals which needed to be heard by all members. Mr. Edwards saw his work in each community as separate from the rest, instead of connected to each other. He had some work to do in this area, before the change process would be successful.

The themes that emerged in the study, i.e., communication, visibility, collaboration and shared leadership, and change, are illustrated in Figure 2 where they are shown surrounding professional learning communities, school to community, and communities of difference. This figure emphasizes my findings that, with respect to the superintendent’s role, the themes of communication, visibility, collaboration/shared leadership, and change are important in the creation of community.
The themes that emerged related to the research questions were emphasized by all participants, but communicated differently. In this section, I will review the three communities that underlie this study, then briefly discuss each theme as it relates to the responsibilities of a superintendent in these communities, and finally revisit the framework in light of the complex work of the superintendent. The center of the original figure included a convergence around dialogic leadership, indicated by the literature. However, the data in this study did not support dialogic leadership as being present in this superintendent’s practice. The revised framework (p.
replaces dialogic leadership with the roles of the superintendent, which were supported by the data, surrounded by the four themes that seemed to emerge.

**Professional learning community.** Although there are multiple conceptions of the Professional Learning Community (PLC), researchers agree that teacher collaboration around student work, that includes dialogue to refine instructional strategies and assess the impact of lessons, is a step toward improving student achievement (Blasé & Blasé, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1993; DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997). This model has offered a departure from the traditional teaching in isolation that served to reiterate units and practice, be they effective or not. Schools that have embraced this model have had to engage in the work of breaking down cultural barriers and opening up to honest dialogue. The principal’s role in this work is to identify a shared focus for improvement in order to guide staff in developing and articulating a vision for students; to model an expectation of collaboration and to structure a time for collaborative meetings to occur. Prior to any of this work, however, the leader must build shared knowledge about the process of developing a learning community.

In the revised framework, the superintendent’s role in this type of community is similar to that of the principal’s. First of all, he/she must identify and articulate the fundamental purpose of the organization and clarify ways in which the district might improve its capacity to achieve that purpose. In an educative role, the superintendent must motivate participants to question previous narratives in order to grow and develop and begin to consider alternative approaches (Foster, 2004). Mr. Edwards was modeling this approach with his Mastery Project, as he listened to, and worked with teachers, to develop a lesson based on learning targets and authentic assessment.
As public relations leader in this model, the superintendent is negotiating trust and developing relationships with administrators, many of whom are leaders in the community. A sense of common purpose and pride in contribution to the shared goal, would encourage positive conversation about the work that is occurring in the school.

In the role of communicator, the PLC model demands that the superintendent listen carefully and interact positively with stakeholders. He/she must build a community that emerges from negotiation rather than from hierarchical dictates, one that promotes listening to alternate perspectives (Mawhinny, 2004; Mindell, 2002; Quantz, et. al.; Shields, 2004; Shields & Seltzer, 1997.)

With a group that brings diverse issues from each of their areas, the superintendent built on a shared vision to ensure ownership and commitment to long-term change. He was faced with planning for the future and implementing change, while dealing with the daily conflicts of running the school district. In a broad sense, a learning community framework was a model to support systemic change. Building a learning community implied building the capacity for learning. Learners (all stakeholders) are sources of prior knowledge that serve as a foundation for taking stock of existing culture and practices and determining opportunities for growth. Learning communities best develop when the leadership is empowering and distributed (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). The superintendent in this study accessed all stakeholders in order to mobilize them toward a vision of excellence through consistent communication, high standards, models of instruction, and collaborative approaches.

**School-community relations.** Relationships with the wider community are critical to inspire a sense of urgency in the community toward the goal of excellence in education for all students (Benson, 1996; Coleman, 1987; Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997).
The idea of forging tighter links between schools and communities enables the public to better understand the local school system, offers the opportunity for schools to access services in the community, and provides opportunities for community involvement through volunteering and school-business partnerships. It has the potential of engaging stakeholders in positive, caring relationships based on trust and shared values.

The superintendent played a strong role in the wider community. As the main public relations liaison, he listened to multiple perspectives and explored the tensions within the community (Benson, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Shields, 2004). An important skill was communicating articulately, which included communicating persuasively at forums on behalf of the district and using the mass media effectively in shaping and forming public opinions. The superintendent modeled the development of an inclusive environment and necessity of working with parents and community members (Shields, 2004). School reform has included an emphasis on strengthening bonds between schools and neighborhoods. The National Education Goals Panel, as far back as 1991, stated, “Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participate in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.” As the district leader, the superintendent fostered these partnerships to maximize opportunities for student achievement.

Mr. Edwards was reaching out to the community as a representative of the district. However, there was not much parent involvement at the school level outside of school athletics. Herein lay an opportunity for collaboration around ways to invite parents to participate at all levels.
Communities of difference. In working with heterogeneous groups that comprise today’s school communities, leaders must provide opportunities for all voices to be heard in order to construct meaning as a group that, at the very least, shares the value of the importance of education for all children. Shields (1999) suggests that a community of difference demands us to address the question of how we can construct a safe environment that allows, and moreover encourages, students to construct their own identity. This implies a departure from the sameness that pervades common perceptions of community. But the Tyler School District is not particularly diverse ethnically; its diversity is one of economics. The students are from families from various socio-economic levels, and there is a homogeneous attitude toward the student body. In fact, I could gather very little data about diversity from participants. Mr. Rizzo shared, “They all sit together at lunch and don’t judge each other.”

Mr. Ryan stated that they accept each other as being part of various neighborhoods, and that there is no dissension based on economic status. The part of the framework related to communities of difference did not prove useful in this setting.

Superintendent and community-building. Mr. Edwards shared that his definition of community building was creating a sense among all participating groups and individuals that we are all working together moving in the same direction to solve the same issues and needs for the entire community. It involves people with diverse individual interests making the interests of the larger community more important and working for those larger needs. Community includes a feeling of common purpose and common goals and needs.

At the center of all of these community-building endeavors, the superintendent is a dialogic leader (Palmer, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994; Shields, 2004). The superintendent as communicator must listen carefully and interact positively with stakeholders. It is the
responsibility of the superintendent to build trusting relationships with staff, parents, community members, and students in order for real communication to occur.

It is also imperative for the superintendent to internalize his/her role as an educative leader, as a communicator, as a public relations liaison, and as a leader who celebrates diversity. It is my belief that the superintendent can most effectively fulfill these roles within the context of community. To create this environment, he invited stakeholders to participate in the development of a vision that articulates the goal of schooling – to bring greater equity and equality while facilitating maximum learning for all students. While doing so, this leader must recognize that a community is a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple points of entry; thus, stakeholders will demonstrate different comfort levels and must be celebrated for what they contribute. As Morgan (1986) wrote, “Educational communities are many things at once” (p. 35). Leaders must understand the ways participants make sense of being in a community in order to understand how to create one.

To more easily display a comparison of themes, Table 2 shows the similarities of perspectives and Table 3 shows the differences from the points of view of the superintendent, the Cabinet, and the observer.
### Table 2

**Similarities Among Lenses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Superintendent’s Lens</th>
<th>Cabinet’s Lenses</th>
<th>Observer’s Lens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Held weekly meetings</td>
<td>Attended weekly meetings</td>
<td>Numerous meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology tools for communication</td>
<td>Technology tools for communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focused on budget cuts</td>
<td>Understood his focus on budget cuts</td>
<td>Understood his focus on budget cuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Felt the importance of visibility in the schools</td>
<td>Felt the importance of visibility in the schools</td>
<td>Felt the importance of visibility in the schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt the importance of participation and visibility in the wider community</td>
<td>Felt the importance of participation and visibility in the wider community</td>
<td>Felt the importance of participation and visibility in the wider community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Shared Leadership</td>
<td>One-on-one conversations re: staff cuts</td>
<td>One-on-one conversations re: staff cuts</td>
<td>Leadership as a people business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration was missing or not working for all</td>
<td>Collaboration was missing or not working for all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiated instruction initiative</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction initiative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Financial situation was a consistent focus</td>
<td>Financial approach was a consistent focus</td>
<td>Stakeholders are resistant to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not need to be working on everything: curriculum, instruction, technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 depicts overlapping comments by the superintendent, Cabinet, and observer regarding the themes of communication, visibility, collaboration/shared leadership, and change.
### Table 3

**Differences Among Lenses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Superintendent’s Lens</th>
<th>Cabinet’s Lenses</th>
<th>Observer’s Lens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Maximizes technology</td>
<td>Not technologically savvy</td>
<td>Communication takes many forms, and some are more comfortable than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting agendas online – encourages</td>
<td>Meeting agendas online – resent and don’t participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avenue for shared decision making; have a voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wiki space</td>
<td>Prefer face-to-face communication or phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Felt he should be present getting out to the buildings, in the halls, and talking to teachers when they’re out there</td>
<td>Felt he needed to get in touch with happenings in the buildings</td>
<td>Saw that Mr. Edwards thinks he’s visible, but the team does not see him as visible (font size)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt it was very important to be visible.</td>
<td>Less visibility than with last supt.</td>
<td>Noticed Mr. Edwards thought he was being visible, but others did not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration was not working for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Shared Leadership</td>
<td>Technology expectations for collaboration</td>
<td>Needed Mr. Edwards to work on dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt he was creating an open meeting with their peers; a chance to give input</td>
<td>Felt he had a hard time valuing others’ opinions when they differed from his</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Felt strong enough to develop systems that would right the ship</td>
<td>Does not need to work on everything; curriculum, instruction, technology</td>
<td>At first – you should absorb everything you can and learn before making changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Made several changes from the onset</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 displays differences that emerged through each lens as the four themes were discussed.

**Framework revisited.** The literature suggests that superintendents, new to a district, must take time to learn the district culture and determine what change is meaningful and necessary, as they keep an eye on the common goal of the continuous improvement of practices that enhances student achievement (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Fullan, 1998; Johnson, 1996). However, the superintendent in this study was given a challenging expectation: he was to create a proposal for the board regarding a plan to balance revenues and expenditures in a district that historically overspent by millions of dollars. School districts are not always so different from businesses or personal finances where money is spent more freely when it is in abundance. The Tyler School District had enjoyed the affluence brought on by the initial years of a nuclear power plant. In this environment, teachers and administrators received whatever was requested. And, finding themselves in this position for a number of years, they became spoiled, and continued to expect lavish expenditures. Mr. Edwards was given the task of changing this behavior. So his dilemma was two-fold: first, he had to scrutinize the budget, working with stakeholders to determine what steps would be taken to cut back, and secondly, he had to sell it to the staff.

As evidenced by the quoted material in Chapter Four, Mr. Edwards approached this task in a community-minded way. He was upfront about the situation in the newspaper, online, and with the staff; he garnered input from all stakeholders, sharing the extent of the money that could be saved in each fund; and he worked with administrators to trim finances without harming students. However, this major endeavor detracted from his work in other areas. While working and reworking figures and preparing for Board Meetings and community meetings, he did not
spend as much time in buildings as the staff expected. Although they understood the magnitude of his work, they wanted to see him more frequently.

This leader was relentless in his expectations that administrators use technology for communicative purposes. They were resistant, perhaps, because it was out of their comfort zones. Was this worth fighting? Could it have been incorporated more sensitively? It was another change, and they were experiencing the effect of higher standards, and the drive of an instructional leadership focus. Somehow the leadership team had to explain the need for these changes to their staffs. So their anxiety was not only personal, but also a professional concern over how to lead differently.

The new superintendent felt he was making headway in building community, and, structurally, he was. However, he was not assessing progress from anyone else’s perspective. Granted, he was fulfilling his job responsibilities for the School Board, but he was missing his target of community building. I have discussed that community must be built around the roles a superintendent plays as he builds relationships, engages and educates stakeholders, fosters collaboration, and constructs a shared vision, which typically involves change. He/she must play these roles in each community setting, including professional learning communities and school-community relations, and bring these communities of difference together. A vehicle for this collaborative approach would have been dialogue; however Mr. Edwards made no attempt to connect these diverse groups through dialogic leadership, contrary to the literature on community. Thus, the revised framework included the roles of the superintendent in each of the communities as the commonality, although the superintendent sees each community as separate, as shown in visual format in Figure 3. He interacted in each community, but saw no importance
in bringing them together. If he thought about the communities in a more integrated way, he would have been building community.
Figure 3. Revised Framework

On the basis of insights learned from the analysis and discussion of my data, I now turn to recommendations for further practice and subsequent research.

**Recommendations for practice.** Superintendents must find time to be visible in schools. This may require prioritizing school visits as one would a calendar appointment so as to emphasize the importance of them. This is an opportunity for superintendents to learn the district culture and approach change with an eye toward trust and sustainability.

A large part of any superintendency is timely and accurate communication. Superintendents must communicate with their leadership team and create a feedback loop to
encourage responses. This would enable them to assess the success of initiatives and to act accordingly.

Community building is no longer foreign (if it ever was) to leadership practice in public schools and districts. Superintendents must be able to create an organizational culture of teaching and learning in which student learning is paramount. They must collaborate, communicate, engage, and empower others, both inside the organization and in the larger community. They must focus on their roles as educators, communicators, public relations leaders, and coalition builders. They must build capacity within the organization through transparent leadership and trust that embraces a common vision. However, these efforts may not be successful; i.e., superintendents may believe they are leading in community-building ways, when, in fact, their efforts are not perceived in that way. They must develop relationships that allow for feedback regarding their expressed goals, and progress toward those goals. They must allow for the complexity of the change process, and persevere over time. They need to celebrate the success of this work along the way and reinforce positive results.

In short, a new superintendent focused on building community must recognize the complexity of the role, being cognizant of the need to be an active listener, validating input from stakeholders and learning the district culture in order to effectively implement change, realizing that this will take time. The leader must develop a collaborative environment by developing trusting relationships that create a safe environment for dialogue. He/she must develop feedback mechanisms to check for progress, realizing that change takes time and often breeds resistance.

**Recommendations for policy.** Board policy plays a primary role in governing the work of superintendents. Board members need to revisit their expectations as the role of the superintendent changes from an emphasis on management to one of leadership. The Board must
reflect on the role of community, both internally and externally, and its effect on student achievement. From this base, superintendent evaluation and accountability can be more authentic.

**Recommendations for superintendent preparation programs.** Preparation programs should include space for prospective leaders to explore the complexity of the position and to examine their own beliefs, prejudices, strengths, and deficiencies and to consider what it takes to act in wise and just ways. Preparation for a practice must include the elements of that practice. It is important to understand theory as the bedrock of educational history, but candidates for the superintendency must be exposed to the realities of that job. For example, the clinical experiences portion of preparation should be longer and more experiential so that the successful candidate can have at least limited experience in the real world.

**Recommendations for future research.** The role of a superintendent in a school district is dynamic and evolving. This study sought to provide insight and guidance for those interested in community building with a particular focus on dialogue. However, it was limited by its focus on one superintendent during his first eight months. Future studies might include the following:

1. A study could be longitudinal to discover the changes the superintendent makes with time in a district, to assess the work of community building, and to check on the sustainability of those efforts.

2. A study may include an additional lens, perhaps that of the teachers, to determine if there is consistency throughout the organization. How do they view the community-building process?

3. A single case study documents the journey of only one superintendent; it would be interesting to conduct a comparative case study with multiple superintendents to determine the most successful approaches to this work. This may provide greater anonymity and the potential for using focus groups.

4. A study situated in a more diverse setting would allow greater investigation into communities of difference.
**Closing reflections.** Positioning was a large part of this study; my role as a second-year superintendent allowed me to view some of Mr. Edwards’ successes and some challenges in relation to my own reflections. My district includes six buildings that were used to functioning in an isolated fashion. There were no district initiatives, no district focus, and no district community. My goal was to begin that work, and I did so without enough support. Though this experience motivated my study, it also prepared me to observe a more experienced superintendent as he began a new position.

I was pleased with having started the study in July as Mr. Edwards was approaching the school year with a newly-signed teachers’ contract and planning for the year ahead, and I felt lucky to be in the unique position of being a second-year superintendent in a similarly sized district. This study challenged my thinking and my practice, motivated me to try new approaches, and sustained my drive toward continuous improvement. It has increased my understanding of the complexity of the role of the superintendent and sharpened my awareness of the importance of study and networking. I had secured the optimum vantage point, and I applied my learning to my relationship-building, to my communication efforts, and to my visibility. I began to explicitly discuss goals and encourage diverse perspectives. In short, I think this study has enabled me to be a better superintendent.

However, it would have been a good longitudinal study; many lingering questions could have been addressed. Did the leadership team begin to work better with Mr. Edwards’ personality? Were they ultimately able to use the technology? Did Mr. Edwards’ post-budget freedom encourage him to visit buildings more frequently? Did the wider community get to know him? What was his approach to the change process? This study was able to address the actions the superintendent used to create community. In this case, the superintendent was
constrained by the time he had to spend on the budget crisis, so even the creation of community was slowed. A subsequent study might look at how he/she sustains community.

Palmer (1998) suggests that community is a byproduct of commitment and struggle; that it always involves a “collision of egos” (p. 19) and continues to share that the companions, whom we often do not choose, often upset our view of ourselves and of the world. Perhaps the leadership team needed to include Mr. Edwards in their “community of difference,” thereby recognizing his strengths. He is not predictable for them because he is bringing a new set of standards and expectations and new ways of doing the business of school. However, they do need to have a voice in the decisions and policies that affect them (Furman & Starratt, 2002). He needs to value open inquiry and perhaps not bind it with an emphasis on technology.

Building community demands that all diverse voices work together. Mr. Edwards’ definition of community was as follows:

Creating a sense among all participating groups and individuals that we are all working together moving in the same direction to solve the same issues and needs for the entire community. It involves people with diverse individual interests making the interests of the larger community more important and working for those larger needs. Community includes a feeling of common purpose and common goals and needs.

There appeared to be some dissonance between what he thought about community and what he did to achieve that goal. Shields (2000, 2004), in talking about communities of difference, recognizes the heterogeneous groups and the need for vision to emerge from the multiple perspectives of these groups. Even as he talked about the needs of the district being bigger than the needs of each community, Mr. Edwards did not talk about bringing them together; he will have to take seriously the notion of community of difference, bringing groups together to identify goals that will guide them as they move forward.
If superintendents truly want to build a sense of district community, they are going to have to take seriously the recommendations noted in this paper and work to develop strong communication systems, prioritize visibility in the schools, as well as the wider community, focus on collaborative efforts that build a shared vision, and be sensitive to the implications of change in schools. Each of these areas is challenging by itself; together they present a daunting task added to the repertoire of skills and talents the superintendent is expected to embody. However, effective superintendents must be centered on having the capacity, knowledge and aspirations to develop a collaborative, relationship-driven culture; their responsibilities encompass not only the management of the organization, but also the people and the processes through which they relate to each other.

This study will assist superintendents in understanding the importance of community building across school districts and to clarify some of the issues inherent in this work. It is imperative for the superintendent to internalize his/her role as an educative leader, as a communicator, as a public relations liaison, and as a leader who celebrates diversity in all communities. The motivation for this work, as well as the evaluation of it, lay in the opportunities a collective effort can offer to all students for a more exclusive and educational experience.
References


Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets*. Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications.


Appendix A

Interview Guide

The interview guide will include a list of questions; clarifying questions may be asked to guide the participant to a more developed answer. It is foreseeable that additional questions will be asked, but this guide will serve as a reference point for basic information.

Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent/Director/Principal:

- Please share with me your journey to your current position in this district.
- How do you prioritize the work you do?
- What is your philosophy regarding community building?
- What are some of the tools you use to build community?
- How do you motivate your staff?
- How do you use dialogue in community building?
- How do you involve the greater community?
- What is the role of the professional learning community in your district? How can the PLC approach be brought to the district level?
- How do you train your staff to work collaboratively?
- Please describe the diversity that is present in your district. How do you determine what voices, if any, are silenced? How can this be addressed?
- What do you feel the impact of community building is on student achievement?
- How can leaders validate all stakeholders in a learning community and still develop a common vision?
- How important is a common vision/mission among schools in a district? How can these be established?
- How would you describe your leadership style?
- What are your biggest leadership challenges?
Appendix B

Interview Consent Form

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

A Superintendent’s Role in Creating Community
You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by doctoral student candidate, Marybeth Ahillen, under the guidance of professor and advisor Dr. Carolyn Shields, in the Education Organization Leadership department of the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Thank you for your consideration.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the methods by which a superintendent builds district community: how he/she engages collegial leaders, how this initiative is implemented at the building level, what tools are used to engage stakeholders, how the greater community is involved, how relationship building contributes to this effort, and how this community building approach impacts schools and student achievement. My study aims to develop a framework to other superintendents who are challenged in their attempts to do this work. To do this, I will be interviewing the superintendent, directors, and principals about the superintendent’s leadership style. In addition, I will be observing his designated meetings toward this same goal. Prior to these meetings, I will send the superintendent a letter stating my intention to observe, which he will share with meeting participants. At the first meeting, time will be allotted for participants to ask questions about this project. Finally, I will collect and peruse documents to further elucidate the superintendent’s leadership. These documents will include meeting agendas and notes, superintendent’s newsletters, and written communication vehicles.

Your voluntary participation will involve a semi-structured interview to last approximately 60 minutes, at a time and secure location most convenient for you, such as your office. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview and/or focus group as a means to collect more specific data, also at a time and secure location most convenient for you. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue participation at any time during the project and hits decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your status at or future relationship with the University of Illinois. The total approximate time of the project is 15 hours, spread over six months.

There are no foreseeable physical risks associated with this research; however, there are emotional risks because you will be discussion the strengths of this approach, but also the frustrations and challenges that may accompany it. You may benefit from your reflection on the work you are doing in your district as well as develop a greater understanding of the vision of district community. In addition, you will be contributing to the body of literature on this topic, which has been focused on the principal and school levels. Upon completion of the interview, you will be given a gift card to a local restaurant for lunch as a token of appreciation for your time and willingness to share your leadership experiences.
All digital recordings and transcriptions of your interview will be kept strictly confidential and secure, and I will do everything I can to protect your privacy including use of a pseudonym and removing and/or concealing identifying comments in my writing. Results of this research will be published in a dissertation thesis and may be presented at conferences and in journal publications. After three years, all recordings and transcripts shall be destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Carolyn Shields, professor and advisor at the University of Illinois at 217-333-0084 or by email cshields@illinois.edu, or Mary Ahillen, doctoral candidate researchers at 309-663-1995 or mahillen@lincoln27.net. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Bureau of Educational Research at 217-333-3023 or via email at info@education.illinois.edu. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu (collect calls are accepted by both the BER and the IRB if you identify yourself as a research participant).

I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I agree to being digitally recorded: Yes____ No_____

Participant’s Signature______________________________________ Date_________________

A copy of this consent form will be given to you.
Appendix C

Observation Consent Form

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

A Superintendent’s Role in Creating Community
You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by doctoral student candidate, Marybeth Ahillen, under the guidance of professor and advisor Dr. Carolyn Shields, in the Education Organization Leadership department of the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Thank you for your consideration.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the methods by which a superintendent builds district community: how he/she engages collegial leaders, how this initiative is implemented at the building level, what tools are used to engage stakeholders, how the greater community is involved, how relationship building contributes to this effort, and how this community building approach impacts schools and student achievement. My study aims to develop a framework to other superintendents who are challenged in their attempts to do this work. To do this, I will be interviewing the superintendent, directors, and principals about the superintendent’s leadership style. In addition, I will be observing his designated meetings toward this same goal. Prior to these meetings, I will send the superintendent a letter stating my intention to observe, which he will share with meeting participants. At the first meeting, time will be allotted for participants to ask questions about this project. Finally, I will collect and peruse documents to further elucidate the superintendent’s leadership. These documents will include meeting agendas and notes, superintendent’s newsletters, and written communication vehicles.

Your voluntary participation will involve a semi-structured interview to last approximately 60 minutes, at a time and secure location most convenient for you, such as your office. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview and/or focus group as a means to collect more specific data, also at a time and secure location most convenient for you. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue participation at any time during the project and hits decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your status at or future relationship with the University of Illinois. The total approximate time of the project is 15 hours, spread over six months.

There are no foreseeable physical risks associated with this research; however, there are emotional risks because you will be discussion the strengths of this approach, but also the frustrations and challenges that may accompany it. You may benefit from your reflection on the work you are doing in your district as well as develop a greater understanding of the vision of district community. In addition, you will be contributing to the body of literature on this topic, which has been focused on the principal and school levels. Upon completion of the interview, you will be given a gift card to a local restaurant for lunch as a token of appreciation for your time and willingness to share your leadership experiences.
All digital recordings and transcriptions of your interview will be kept strictly confidential and secure, and I will do everything I can to protect your privacy including use of a pseudonym and removing and/or concealing identifying comments in my writing. Results of this research will be published in a dissertation thesis and may be presented at conferences and in journal publications. After three years, all recordings and transcripts shall be destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Carolyn Shields, professor and advisor at the University of Illinois at 217-333-0084 or by email cshields@illinois.edu, or Mary Ahillen, doctoral candidate researchers at 309-663-1995 or mahillen@lincoln27.net. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Bureau of Educational Research at 217-333-3023 or via email at info@education.illinois.edu. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu (collect calls are accepted by both the BER and the IRB if you identify yourself as a research participant).
Appendix D

Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>1st Interview Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>2nd Interview Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Edwards</td>
<td>Aug. 12, ‘09</td>
<td>10:30 A.M.</td>
<td>Dec. 11, ‘09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feb. 26, ‘10</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Newman</td>
<td>Sept. 11, ‘09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
<td>Jan. 19, ‘10</td>
<td>1:30 P.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Waters</td>
<td>Sept. 11, ‘09</td>
<td>10:30 A.M.</td>
<td>Jan. 19, ‘10</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>Sept. 11, ‘09</td>
<td>1:00 P.M.</td>
<td>Dec. 17, ‘09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rizzo</td>
<td>Sept. 12, ‘09</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
<td>Jan. 29, ‘10</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Greenfield</td>
<td>Sept. 12, ‘09</td>
<td>11:00 A.M.</td>
<td>Dec. 17, ‘09</td>
<td>10:45 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Morgan</td>
<td>Sept. 19, ‘09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
<td>Dec. 17, ‘09</td>
<td>1:30 P.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Petersen</td>
<td>Sept. 19, ‘09</td>
<td>10:45 A.M.</td>
<td>Jan. 19, ‘10</td>
<td>10:45 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ryan</td>
<td>Sept. 30, ‘09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
<td>Jan. 29, ‘10</td>
<td>11:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Appendix E

#### Observation Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of meeting</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>July 27, 2009</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>Aug. 12, ’09</td>
<td>9:00 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>Oct. 29, ‘09</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Jan. 26, ‘10</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Feb. 9, ‘10</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Sept. 1, ‘09</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Nov. 16, ‘09</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Dec. 1, ‘09</td>
<td>9:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board</td>
<td>Aug. 20, ‘09</td>
<td>7:00 P.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Union</td>
<td>Nov. 31, ‘09</td>
<td>4:00 P.M.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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